

Strenna 2024

"The dream that makes you dream"

A heart that transforms 'wolves' into 'lambs'

"Il sogno che fa sognare"

Un cuore che trasforma i 'lupi' in 'agnelli'

"El sueño que hace soñar"

Un corazón que transforma los 'lobos' en 'corderos'

"Le rêve qui fait rêver"

Un cœur qui transforme les "loups" en "agneaux"

"O sonho que vos faz sonhar"

Um coração que transforma "lobos" em "cordeiros"

This year, 2024, marks the 200th year since young John Bosco, our Don Bosco, had the dream that we have very familiarly come to know in the Salesian Family throughout the world as the *dream at nine years of age*. And it seems to me that this 200th anniversary of a dream that “conditioned Don Bosco’s whole way of living and thinking. And in particular, the way he felt God’s presence in each person’s life and in the history of the world”,¹ deserves to be the central theme of this year’s Strenna, and the theme that will guide the pastoral year throughout the Salesian Family, as well as so many educational interventions and so many social and evangelising activities in every part of the Salesian world for this great family that the Spirit has inspired in our father.

As I do every year at this time, what I am offering here is only a rough outline, a first draft of what will be the direction taken by the Strenna to be presented at the end of the year. I need to do it over these days since the academic and educational and pastoral year in the northern hemisphere starts in September, and

¹ PST1, 31ff., Quoted in BOZZOLO, Andrea (ed.), *I SOGNI DI DON BOSCO. Esperienza spirituale e sapienza educativa*. LAS, Roma, 2017, 211.

knowing the focus that the Strenna will have will undoubtedly be of help to more than just a few of us. I would like to thank the group of confreres and sisters who have helped me to think about both the motto and the potential direction of this reflection. I am also grateful, as I am every year, for the contribution I receive from the World Advisory Council of the Salesian Family, held in Valdocco on the feast of Mary Help of Christians, where we agreed fully on the timeliness of this topic, 200 years after the dream at 9 years of age.

▪ **1. AND HE HAD A DREAM... A VERY SPECIAL ONE**

That's right. 200 years ago, a very young John Bosco had a dream that would "remain with him" for the rest of his life, a dream that would leave an indelible mark on him, to the point that only at the end of his life would he understand what that dream meant.

There are several accounts of the dream in Don Bosco's lifetime. I am going to refer to a very significant one, and several of the confreres and sisters who are experts in Salesianity value it in a very particular way; don Bosco narrates the dream in a particular way to Don Barberis, but in 1875, when he was already 60 years old, and when he had seen the birth of the Salesian Congregation (**18 December 1859**), the Archconfraternity of Mary Help of Christians (**18 April 1869**), the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (**5 August 1872**), and when the Pious Society of Salesian Cooperators – according to the original name given by Don Bosco – was about to see the light of day, on **9 May 1876**.

The dream, with its narrative context, is described as follows:

Strange dreams, lasting through the night, came to comfort Don Bosco, as he confided once and only once to Father Julius Barberis and to us on February 2, 1875. In these mysterious visions a series of interlaced scenes kept recurring along with various new ones. But the previous scenes never wholly faded from view. They blended with the marvels of new dreams, all seeming to converge on one point only: the future of the oratory..

This is what Don Bosco told us:

"I seemed to be in a vast meadow with a huge crowd of boys who were fighting, swearing, stealing, and doing other blameable things. The air was thick with flying stones, hurled by youngsters who were fighting. They were all abandoned boys, devoid of moral principles. I was about to tum away when I saw a Lady beside me. 'Go among those boys,' She said, 'and work.'

I approached them, but what could I do? I had no place to gather them, but I wanted to help them. I kept turning to some people who were watching from a distance, and who could have come to my aid, but no one paid attention or gave me any assistance. I then turned to the Lady. 'Here is a place,' She said, and pointed to a meadow.

‘That's only a meadow,’ I said.

She replied: ‘My Son and His Apostles did not even have a place to lay their heads.’ I began to work in that meadow, counseling, preaching, hearing confessions, but I saw that almost all my efforts were in vain. I had to have some building where I could gather and house those abandoned by their parents and those despised and rejected by society. Then the Lady led me a little further to the north and said: ‘Look!’

I did so and saw a small church with a low roof, a small courtyard, and a great number of boys. I resumed my work, but since the church was becoming too small, I again appealed to the Lady and She pointed out another church, much larger, and a house adjacent to it. Then She took me closer, to a field that was tilled and that lay almost opposite the facade of this new church. ‘In this place,’ She added, ‘where the glorious martyrs of Turin, Adventor and Octavius, suffered martyrdom, on these clods soaked and sanctified by their blood, I wish that God be honored in a very special manner.’ So saying, She put out Her foot and pointed to the exact spot where the martyrs had fallen. I wanted to leave a marker there so as to find the place again when I returned, but I could not see a single stick or stone. Nevertheless, I kept the place clearly in mind. It coincides exactly with the inner corner of the chapel of the Holy Martyrs, previously known as St. Anne's Chapel; it is the front left corner as one faces the main altar of the church of Mary Help of Christians.

In the meantime, I found myself being surrounded by a very vast and ever increasing number of boys, but, as I kept looking to the Lady, the premises and the means were also growing accordingly. I saw then a very grand church on the very spot She had pointed out as the place where the soldiers of the Theban legion had been martyred. There were a great many buildings all around, and in the center stood a beautiful monument.

While these things were taking place and I was still dreaming, I saw that priests and clerics were helping me, but after a while, they left. I tried everything to get others to stay, but after a while they too left me alone. Then I turned once more to the Lady for help. ‘Do you want to know what to do to keep them?’ She asked. ‘Take this ribbon and bind their foreheads with it.’ Reverently I took the white ribbon from Her hand and noticed the word Obedience written on it. I immediately gave it a try and began to bind the foreheads of these volunteers. The ribbon worked wonders, as I went ahead with the mission entrusted to me. All my helpers gave up the idea of leaving me, and stayed on. Thus was our Congregation born.

I saw a great many other things, but there is no need to relate them now. (Maybe he was referring to important future events.) Suffice it to say that ever since, I have walked on sure ground as regards the oratories, the Congregation, and the manner of dealing with outsiders, irrespective of their position. I have already foreseen all the difficulties that will arise and I know how to overcome them. I can see perfectly, bit by bit, what is to take place, and I go forward without hesitation. It was only after I had seen churches, schools, playgrounds, boys, clerics and priests helping me, and I had learned how to advance the entire apostolate, that I began to mention it to others and speak of it as a reality. That is why so many people thought that I was talking foolishly and believed I was insane.”

Hence the origin of that unshakeable faith in the success of his mission, that confidence that resembled fearlessness in facing all sorts of obstacles, that undertaking of colossal feats beyond human strength and yet bringing them all to a successful conclusion.

(Source: *Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco* Vol II, pp. 232-233)

When this dream takes place Don Bosco is, as I have already said, a mature adult. He has already lived through so many things, has faced so many difficulties, has seen for himself what Grace and the Love of the Virgin Mary worked in his boys. He has seen so many miracles of Providence, and he has suffered not a little. We know this well.

The dream he had when he was 9 years old, written down by Don Bosco himself in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*² (which he began writing in 1873 and would continue until 1875), was preceded by the death of his father and the great famine which the family had been going through. It was almost as if he was telling us, right at the beginning, that we must not let ourselves be discouraged by life's dramas, because they can be many, and John Bosco lived through many, but it is possible to have a dream, an ideal to follow, a compass point to aim at. In the first lines of this manuscript, Don Bosco himself writes: "Now what purpose can this chronicle serve? It will be a record to help overcome problems that may come in the future by learning from the past; it will serve to make known how God himself has always been our guide. It will give my sons some entertainment to be able to read about their father's adventures. Doubtless they will be read much more avidly when I have been called by God to render my account when I am no longer among them."³

▪ **2. A YEAR and a STRENNA FOR STUDYING AND EXPLORING THE MEMOIRS OF THE ORATORY AND THE DREAM AT NINE YEARS OF AGE**

It may come as a surprise to some that in these few pages, in which I wish to offer a few brief notes on what I will write more extensively later, I should be allowed to make this invitation: that of taking advantage of this bicentenary year of the dream to *study and explore the Memoirs of the Oratory and the dream at 9 years of age*, but it is with deep conviction that I make this invitation. I myself enjoyed reading several pages before writing these notes and realising, once again, that in this area of Salesianity, of our history and the foundations of our charism, we run the risk of merely uttering a few very simplified clichés and repeating a few things of a general nature. A great service that we can offer ourselves and many others, the Salesian Family around the world, and so many lay people and young

² Cf. *Memorias del Oratorio de san Francisco de Sales de 1815 a 1855*. Translation and historical bibliographical notes by José Manuel Pallezo García. Introductory study by Aldo Giraudó, Madrid, Editorial CCS, 2003. [Tr note: quotations from the MO in English, however, are taken from the English translation of the MO by Daniel Lyons, Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, New York, 2010].

³ MO 30. Quoted in BOZZOLO, Andrea (ed.), *I SOGNI DI DON BOSCO*, op. cit., 215.

people, boys and girls, is precisely being able to offer something solid when we present any reflection on this dream.

And I emphasise this because, as we know, the *Memoirs of the Oratory* are an autobiographical text in which Don Bosco has brought together in narrative form the history of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales, as well as his personal experiences of what happened, with the desire to leave his spiritual heirs with a precious teaching for the future, together with the most essential and profound of those experiences, and of the educational and spiritual work that gave rise to the birth of the Oratory and of a whole history destined to be continued.⁴

“This trait was effectively highlighted by Pietro Braido, who coined the felicitous expression *memoirs of the future* to highlight its character as a testament, even before being a document, that characterises Don Bosco’s narrative.”⁵

At the same time, we perceive that this dream, which is placed within the architecture of the *Memoirs* as a pillar that supports and gives foundation to many other elements of the narration of Don Bosco’s life, also signifies that “Rereading it *a posteriori*, in retrospect from his position as priest and founder, he cannot but understand it as an anticipatory and prophetic manifestation.”⁶

At this point I will not refer to the characters in the dream and its structure, nor to the narrative tension and the various movements that occur in the development of the dream as it was given to us by Don Bosco. This can be studied in depth in various very profound and serious studies by our authors on Salesianity, some of which have already been cited.

I am only making a small list of some features that will undoubtedly be developed (albeit in an agile way, not as a scientific study but as an invitation to translate it into the life and charism of the Congregation and the Salesian Family today). I refer to aspects such as the following:⁷

- The Oratorian mission that is already evident in the dream at 9 years of age: The scene is full of youngsters. Ones who take on a very real appearance in the course of the dream.
- A call that seems impossible, unattainable. Young John Bosco wakes up tired, and has even been crying, because when it comes to God’s call (the Lord Jesus in the dream), the direction it can take is unpredictable and bewildering.
- The maternal mediation of the Lady in the dream (linked to the mystery of the name). For the very young John Bosco, his mother and the Mother of the one he greets three times a day, will be a human and humane place in which to rest, find security and shelter in the most difficult moments.
- And finally the power of meekness and docility (to the Spirit of God, we would say today). The power of the message in the dream, for him to make himself *strong, humble and energetic*.

⁴ Cf. BOZZOLO, Andrea (ed.), *op. cit.*, 214-215.

⁵ P. BRAIDO, *Scrivere “memorie” del futuro*, RSS 11 (1992) 97-127, in BOZZOLO, Andrea (ed.), *op. cit.*, 215.

⁶ BOZZOLO, Andrea (ed.), *op. cit.*, 216.

⁷ Cf. BOZZOLO, Andrea (ed.), *op. cit.*, 251-268.

▪ **3. MORE ELEMENTS THAT WILL BE FOUND IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE STRENNA**

I would like to bring together here other elements and contributions that I have received both from the reflection of the Salesian Family Advisory Council meeting in 2023 and from our working group. These are undoubtedly aspects that will be found in the final draft in one way or another:

- Above all, we must be careful not to present Don Bosco as an unattainable ideal. Don Bosco is real and concrete with the difficulties he faced step by step, with his trust and hope in the Risen Lord and in Mary Help of Christians.
- Surely we should see the dream at nine years of age as a prophecy that needs to be clarified and seen in today's context; it is undoubtedly an example of how the Word of God should be accepted with humility and trust, without rushing to achieve who knows what results immediately.
- It is more than evident that to accompany Don Bosco in his reflection on the dream he had when he was nine, is also to emphasise Don Bosco's entrustment to Providence – "in good time you will understand everything."
- Or, as the Rector Major Fr Pascual Chávez once declared in the 2012 Strenna, no doubt we will have to "face the wolves" that seek to devour the flock: indifference, ethical relativism, consumerism that destroys the value of things and experiences, false ideologies...
- The dream transports us to a present day that is as real as ever. The '*not by blows*' of the dream challenges us and makes it more necessary than ever for us to reach out to young boys and girls, because hate speech and violence are on the increase. Our world is becoming increasingly violent and we educators and evangelisers of young people have to be an alternative to that which so distressed young John in his dream and which hurts us so much today.
- And the Lady is presented as Teacher and Mother. She is the mother of both the majestic Lord of the dream and of young John himself; a mother – let me paraphrase it – who, taking him by the hand, says to him:
 - '*Look*': How important it is for us to know how to look, and how serious it is when we are not able to 'see' young people in their reality, for who they are (the most authentic and beautiful and the most tragic and painful).
 - '*Learn*', or in other words, make yourself humble, strong and energetic, because you will need humility and simplicity (in the face of so much arrogance), and strength (in the face of so much that has to be faced in life), and it is energy and robustness that is resilience (or the capacity not to let yourself be discouraged, not to drop your arms as a sign that nothing can be done).
 - '*And be patient*', that is, let us give everything time, and let God be God.

4. AND IT IS A DREAM THAT MAKES YOU DREAM because the underlying perspective is this – of not only looking at the dream as a vocational project handed over to Don Bosco regarding what would happen in the future, but looking backwards, seeing even the tears during his Mass at the Sacred Heart in Rome as a re-reading of his life, seeing how the Lord is the protagonist, how he holds everything in his hands, and how this dream has something that interacts with the dreams of the Salesians, his sons and daughters, the entire Salesian Family and especially the young.

And in this sense the Dream makes us dream and think about who we are and for whom we are today:

→ Each of Don Bosco's choices is part of the larger project: **God's plan for him (dreams)**. So, no choice for Don Bosco was trivial.

→ Many of us are unaware that **God has a dream for each of us**, a plan that is designed, tailor-made for us by God himself. The secret of our much-desired happiness is precisely the meeting and matching of two dreams: ours and God's.

- Understanding what God's dream is for us is first of all realising that the Lord has given us life because *he loves us regardless, just as we are, limitations included*. We must believe, therefore, that God wants to do great things with each one of us! I am precious because, without me, there is something that cannot be achieved; people that only I can love, words that only I can say, moments that only I can experience!

→ God speaks in many ways, **he achieves great things with 'simple instruments'**, including deep within our hearts, through the feelings that move within us, through the Word of God accepted with faith, explored patiently, internalised with love, followed with trust.

- This is why it becomes important to learn to listen to ourselves, to decipher our inner movements, to give voice to what is stirring within us, to recognise which signals or 'dreams' reveal the voice of God to us and which are the result of wrong choices.

→ In life, choosing, dreaming, deciding are all things that involve taking responsibility for the consequences of that choice. All this produces **anxiety, discomfort and even fear**.

- Among the expressions that recur most frequently within the biblical texts is certainly 'do not be afraid'. Predominantly the words of God or one of his messengers, it introduces, in the majority of cases, a call to vocation, that is, the invitation to realise a life project that involves the one receiving it totally. What is interesting is that it often precedes or responds to the feeling of fear that overwhelms the recipient of the message. This stems from the perception of inadequacy with regard to the proposed mission.
- In this regard how powerful that most felicitous expression of Pope Saint John Paul II to young people continues to be: "*do not be afraid.*"

→ The “Make yourself humble, strong and energetic” to which we have already referred, also serves us in overcoming the temptation to easily abandon commitments or to wait for everything to rain down from above without taking the necessary responsibility. This must be warded off with **strength** and disarmed with the **humility** of those who are aware of their limitations but also know that they can count on so much potential and the constant presence of God.

→ Young people are often influenced by the dreams of others: of parents? Of friends? Or by societal conditioning? With the certainty of what has already been said about **God having a dream for each of us**, a plan designed, tailor-made for us by God Himself, **it is then necessary to explore young people’s dreams with them**: life has a reason to be lived and we must believe in the beauty of who they are; we must open ourselves up to desires as great as God’s dream is great for each young person and strive to realise them.

- Young people are called to become who they really are: their identity is the fullness of life that calls them to holiness even now!

→ **We need others to build ourselves and our dream.** We cannot discern on our own; it is necessary to trust and entrust ourselves. As a young boy, Don Bosco entrusted himself trustingly to the guidance of a teacher. This naturally presupposes that there are wise and evangelically inspired guides to whom we can entrust ourselves. We have a good task ahead in this too.

