

THE VALDOCCO EXPERIENCE

A CONCRETE EXPERIENCE OF DON BOSCO'S VISION AND MISSION

- a. The *Memoirs of the Oratory*¹ is a book written by Don Bosco himself around 1873-1875. In it he tells **the story of the beginning and development of his oratory vocation, highlighting God's purposes**. These pages are not autobiography in the strict sense since the focal centre is not Don Bosco's life. Here we have the story of his **vision and mission** and how it developed here in Valdocco.
- b. Don Bosco shares with us his followers the basis of the Oratory experience – how it started, its purposes, its approach. He offers us **the charismatic roots**, the course taken in order to understand the spirit and true nature of the oratory experience which was the source of all works of the Salesian Family. The Salesian experience has the oratory as its model.
- c. Don Bosco chose one of the best tools, narration, **he translated his ideas into lively stories**. The *Memoirs of the Oratory* then are a narrative presentation, that is the story of Salesian spirituality.
- d. By reading this unique piece of writing we can:
1. enter into Don Bosco's mind and heart;
 2. recognise the characteristic features of his inner world;
 3. understand the values closest to his heart;
 4. have a concrete idea of the model of educator-pastor that he had in mind;
 5. know the purpose, relational style and the most original and qualifying activities of his Oratory.
- e. Don Bosco wants his disciples to understand that they are **part of a living story**: had it been a different kind we would not be here today, and our lives would have followed other paths. God has called us to be part of this Salesian adventure, he has anchored us in it.
- f. The **high point** of this strategy of drawing his readers into the events he tells us about is reached in **the dream involving the Shepherdess**, that is at the point of transition from his earlier experiences, of a mostly personal nature, to the setting up of the Oratory.
- g. The **metaphor he employs in the dream at 9 years of age**, the wild animals changing into lambs, is taken up again and enriched. Now some of these lambs become shepherds: "As the number of shepherds became great, they split up and went to other places to gather other strange animals and guide them into other folds". **We are being led to recognise ourselves in these shepherds**: we are in fact the result of the educative and transforming activity of the Oratory and the ones who will continue his God-given mission.

¹ Adapted from an essay Aldo Giraud: "Presenting the *Memoirs of the Oratory*. A handbook of pedagogy and spirituality in narrative form." The text of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* can be found in http://www.salesianym.com/uploads/3/0/0/6/30065457/st._john_bosco_-_memoirs_of_the_oratory.pdf

DON BOSCO'S EXPERIENCE HERE IN VALDOCCO²

1. LISTENING TO GOD'S CALL

- ⇒ Fr Cafasso, who for six years had been my guide, was also my spiritual director. 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.
- ⇒ The first thing he did was to begin to take me to the prisons, where I soon learned how great was the malice and misery of mankind.

2. KNOWING THE WAY

- ⇒ I saw large numbers of young lads aged from 12 to 18, fine healthy youngsters, alert of mind, but seeing them idle there, infested with lice, lacking food for body and soul, horrified me. Public disgrace, family dishonour, and personal shame were personified in those unfortunates. What shocked me most was to see that many of them were released full of good resolutions to go straight, and yet in a short time they landed back in prison, within a few days of their release.
- ⇒ On such occasions I found out how quite a few were brought back to that place; it was because they were abandoned to their own resources. "Who knows?" I thought to myself, "if these youngsters had a friend outside who would take care of them, help them, teach them religion on feast days ... Who knows but they could be steered away from ruin, or at least the number of those who return to prison could be lessened?"
- ⇒ I talked this idea over with Fr Cafasso. With his encouragement and inspiration I began to work out in my mind how to put the idea into practice, leaving to the Lord's grace what the outcome would be. Without God's grace, all human effort is vain.

3. LIVING THE WAY

On the second Sunday in October 1844 (Sunday 13th October), I had to tell my boys that the Oratory would be moving to Valdocco. But the uncertainty of place, means, and personnel had me really worried. The previous evening I had gone to bed with an uneasy heart. **That night I had another dream, which seems to be an appendix to the one I had at Becchi when I was nine years old.** I think it advisable to relate it literally.

I dreamt that I was standing in the middle of a multitude of wolves, goats and kids, lambs, ewes, rams, dogs, even birds.

All together they made a din, a racket, or better, a bedlam to frighten the stoutest heart. I wanted to run away, when a lady very handsomely dressed as a shepherdess signalled me to follow her and accompany that strange flock while she went ahead. We wandered from place to place, making three stations or stops.

² The following text is taken from the *Memoirs of the Oratory*.

Each time we stopped, many of the animals were turned into lambs, and their number continually grew. After we had walked a long way, I found myself in a field where all the animals grazed and gambolled together and none made attacks on the others.

Worn out, I wanted to sit down beside a nearby road, but the shepherdess invited me to continue the trip.

After another short journey, I found myself in a large courtyard with porticoes all round. At one end was a church.

I then saw that four-fifths of the animals had been changed into lambs and their number greatly increased.

Just then, several shepherds came along to take care of the flock; but they stayed only a very short time and promptly went away.

Then something wonderful happened. Many of the lambs were transformed into shepherds, who as they grew took care of the others. As the number of shepherds became great, they split up and went to other places to gather other strange animals and guide them into other folds.

I wanted to be off because it seemed to me time to celebrate Mass; but the shepherdess invited me to look to the south. I looked and saw a field sown with maize, potatoes, cabbages, beetroot, lettuce, and many other vegetables.

"Look again," she said to me.

I looked again and saw a wondrously big church. An orchestra and music, both instrumental and vocal, were inviting me to sing Mass. Inside the church hung a white banner on which was written in huge letters, *Hic domus mea, inde gloria mea.*

As my dream continued, I wanted to ask the shepherdess where I was. And I wanted to know the meaning of that journey with its halts, the house, the church, then the other church.

"You will understand everything when you see in fact with your bodily eyes what you are looking at now with the eyes of your mind."

Thinking that I was awake, I said, "I see clearly, and I see with my bodily eyes. I know where I'm going and what I'm doing." But at that moment the bell of the Church of St Francis sounded the *Ave Maria*, and I woke up.

This dream lasted most of the night. I saw it all in great detail.

But at the time I understood little of its meaning since I put little faith in it.

But I understood little by little as the dream began to come true. Later, together with another dream, it served as a blueprint for my decisions.

PERSONAL TIME:

- ❑ Don Bosco as a newly ordained priest, continues to be accompanied by his spiritual guide. This has been a constant choice in his life. He is humble and wise to allow himself to be helped and challenged to listen to what God is saying to him in this new situation. His humility allowed him to let God be present in his heart and mind accepting the challenges that came his way. Don Bosco understood that choosing is not a matter of once in life-time, but it was an everyday challenge!
 - Am I ready to embark on this journey of being accompanied and challenged?
 - Do I desire to have a spiritual guide so as to discover the road I should take? What are the fears that I may have?

- ❑ Don Cafasso proposed to Don Bosco to continue his education and at the same time to reflect on the events that were taking place. He helped Don Bosco explore and discover the road ahead of him, the road of charity, of dedication to the young especially the poorest among them: the road of the Gospel.
 - Am I ready to let the Gospel of Jesus be the source of my hope? Do I desire to have a heart where Jesus is alive, a mind where Jesus is the guiding light? What are the difficulties and resistances that I experience?

- ❑ Don Bosco was aware of the difficult situation of the prisoners he was visiting, the abandoned young people from the villages around Turin that he was meeting everyday. He felt challenged by their story, their hardships, their needs. He was ready to get involved in their story and gave his contribution for a better future. Don Bosco was not a passive spectator, but an active agent.
 - What type of choice am I making in my life – am I a passive spectator? Or am I an active agent ready to give my contribution for a better future? How can I be an active agent?