

# The Dreams of Don Bosco: An Introduction to Their Study

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This essay was composed in 1998-1999 as the introduction for a completely new edition of *Dreams, Visions and Prophecies of Don Bosco* (first edition edited by Eugene Brown: New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1986). That new edition still exists only in manuscript. Hence the introduction is offered, with some appropriate modifications, to the readers of this journal in the hope that it will be of interest to them.

## 1. A Saint's Charism

It would be difficult to exaggerate the attractiveness of the character, the spirituality, the educational methodology of Saint John Bosco, priest, educator, director of souls, and founder of two religious congregations in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> If it would be difficult to exaggerate his attractiveness, it would be even more difficult to exaggerate the interest—the fascination—that his charismatic gifts held for his contemporaries and still hold for modern Christians: gifts that included amazing predictions of the future of individuals, strikingly accurate knowledge of consciences, miraculous healings, the multiplication on various occasions of Eucharistic hosts, chestnuts, and breakfast rolls, and an alleged temporary raising of a dead youth in order to hear his confession and save his soul. I say “alleged” because, while every Salesian would like to believe this story (and, probably, most do), we have to say honestly that Don Bosco himself, while giving us tantalizing hints of its authenticity, made it impossible for scholars to verify as historical fact, which some have tried painstakingly to do.<sup>2</sup> The other charismatic gifts are amply verified by credible eyewitnesses.

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<sup>1</sup> I omit a summary of Don Bosco's life and the development of his apostolic work. Readers who desire one may consult my foreword to Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco's Dreams: A Historico-documentary Analysis of Selected Samples*, trans. John Drury (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1996), x-xii. This section on his dreams in general is adapted from that same foreword, xii-xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Most notably Pietro Stella in “*Carlo il risuscitato da Don Bosco*,” the appendix to *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol. 1: *Vita e opere*, 2nd ed. (Rome: LAS, 1979), 257-93; Eng. trans. *Don Bosco and the Death of Charles*, trans. John Drury (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1985).

At the turn of the twentieth century into the twenty-first, the most interesting of Don Bosco's charisms is probably his prophetic dreams, taking *prophetic* in a broad sense, meaning "revealing something of God and his truth."

In the book of Numbers, God tells the Hebrews, "Should there be a prophet among you, in visions will I reveal myself to him, in dreams will I speak to him" (12:6). We think immediately of the dreams of the patriarch Joseph in the Old Testament and of Joseph the husband of Mary in the New Testament. We may also recall the role of dreams in the story of Daniel. In a dream Saint Paul received instructions to begin preaching the Gospel in Europe. The Irish are familiar with the dreams that led to Saint Patrick's escape from slavery and his return to Ireland as a missionary. Many more instances of dreams in Judaism and Christianity could be brought forward; dreams hold an honored place in our tradition.<sup>3</sup>

By one count the *Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*<sup>4</sup> reports 153 dreams that the Saint wrote down, narrated, or merely mentioned.<sup>5</sup> Don Bosco's biographers, like his immediate listeners, generally take for granted that most of these dreams, if not all of them, were more than ordinary. Although there are many collections of the dreams, culled from the *Biographical Memoirs*, to my knowledge no one has made a systematic study of their nature, kinds, and meaning.<sup>6</sup> The distinguished Salesian historian Pietro Stella notes that the extraordinary phenomena—miracles, dreams, predictions—which pervade Don Bosco's life must be viewed in the larger context of his own religious

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<sup>3</sup> See Morton T. Kelsey, "Foreword" to *Dreams, Visions and Prophecies of Don Bosco*, ed. Eugene M. Brown (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1986), especially xviii-xxxii.

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Angelo Amadei, and Eugenio Ceria, *Memorie biografiche di S. Giovanni Bosco*, 20 vols. (S. Benigno Canavese and Turin: SEI, 1898-1948). Eng. trans. (19 vols. completed): *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, ed. Diego Borgatello, SDB, et al. (New Rochelle: Salesiana, 1964-2003). Abbreviated below as *BM*. This massive work is discussed at length below.

<sup>5</sup> Rodolfo Fierro, introduction to *Los sueños de Don Bosco*, trans. Francisco Villanueva, 2nd ed. (Madrid: SEI, 1961), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the first scholar to begin doing so is Fr. Arthur Lenti of the Institute of Salesian Spirituality at Berkeley, where he has taught since the Institute's inception in 1984 (originally as the Institute of Salesian Studies). He has published articles regularly in several publications in the U.S. and abroad on many aspects of the life of Don Bosco. Of immediate interest to the Saint's dreams, see his fine introduction to the 1<sup>st</sup> printing of Brown, ed. *Dreams, Visions & Prophecies of Don Bosco*, cited already in note 3, xli-iii; "Don Bosco's Vocation-Mission Dreams," *Journal of Salesian Studies* [JSS] 2:1 (Spring 1991), 45-156; "Don Bosco's Missionary Dreams," Part I, JSS 3:2 (Fall 1992), 23-92; Part II, JSS 4:1 (Spring 1993), 1-60.

formation, his religious outlook, and the way in which he interacted with his social and cultural environment.<sup>7</sup>

John was about nine when he experienced his first extraordinary dream. This first dream, the most important one, set the course for his whole life. He tells us of it in his autobiographical *Memoirs of the Oratory*.<sup>8</sup> John saw himself playing with a crowd of neighborhood boys; many of them were fighting and swearing. He told them to stop, then leapt in with both fists when they did not. Suddenly a stranger, a noble and radiant gentleman, appeared. He told John that he needed to use kindness, not blows, to win over these children. John did not understand. The man said he would give him a teacher, and a majestic Lady showed up. She instructed John to watch, and the boys turned into wild animals—bears, goats, dogs, cats, etc. “This,” she told him, “is your field of work. Make yourself humble, strong, and energetic, so that you’ll be able to do for my children what you’ll see now.” And the beasts turned into gentle lambs. In his confusion, John began to cry. The Lady assured him that in due time he would understand. And he woke up.

Evidently John realized this was no ordinary dream, even if he did not understand it. Yet he was quite skeptical about it: “I wasted no time in telling [my family] all about my dream... Each one gave his own interpretation... But my grandmother, though she could not read or write, knew enough theology and made the final judgment, saying ‘Pay no attention to dreams.’ I agreed with my grandmother.”<sup>9</sup>

But he could not forget the dream. With variations it apparently recurred in subsequent years and was followed by others that seemed to point out his calling from God or the future of his work. He remained skeptical until his confessor and spiritual director, Father Joseph Cafasso,<sup>10</sup> advised him, around 1846: “Go ahead. You may quite safely give special significance to these dreams. I am convinced they are for God’s greater glory and the welfare of

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<sup>7</sup> *Don Bosco: Religious Outlook and Spirituality*, trans. John Drury (New Rochelle: Salesiana, 1996), xvi.

<sup>8</sup> *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855*, trans. Daniel Lyons (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1989), 18-19.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20. Italics in the original.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Cafasso (1811-1860), canonized in 1947, is known as “the pearl of the Piedmontese clergy.” Through the pastoral institute at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* in Turin, where he lectured for over a quarter century and was also rector for 12 years, he shaped the pastoral practice of hundreds of young priests—as catechists, preachers, confessors, and examples of virtue. He was particularly devoted to prison ministry, especially to the condemned, and it was he who introduced Don Bosco to the prisons and the needs of abandoned youngsters.

souls.”<sup>11</sup> Even then Don Bosco remained ill at ease, especially with those dreams that seemed to predict deaths. Years later he confided to Father John Baptist Lemoyne, who would become his most important biographer:

At first I was hesitant about giving these dreams the importance that they deserved. I often regarded them as mere flights of fancy. As I was narrating these dreams and predicting deaths and other future events, several times I wondered if I had rightly understood things, and I became fearful that what I said might actually be untrue. Occasionally, after narrating a dream, I could no longer remember what I had said. Therefore, in confessing to Father Cafasso, I sometimes accused myself of having spoken perhaps rashly. The saintly priest would listen to me, think the matter over, and then say: “Since your predictions come true, you need not worry. You may continue to make them.” It was only a few years later, though, that I firmly came to believe that those dreams were from God. That was when the young boy Casalegno [*sic*] died and—exactly as I had seen in my dream—his coffin was placed on two chairs on the portico, notwithstanding Father Cagliero’s efforts to have it moved to the usual place.<sup>12</sup>

In allegorical form Don Bosco’s dreams enabled him to perceive hidden facts or future events: sometimes in general terms, sometimes in very specific terms; sometimes with a feeling of certainty about the meaning of symbols, sometimes uncertain about his own interpretive capabilities. Don Bosco then waited to see how things would turn out in reality. He, like others, waited for verification of something that had seemed to him to be a prophecy but that he chose out of prudence to present merely as a parable.<sup>13</sup>

Don Bosco was reluctant to talk about the charism he exercised: “To those who asked him how he could reveal hidden things Don Bosco was wont to give a jocular reply. He said that he used a magical formula: *otis botis pia tutis*. In short, he evaded the question and thus invited the curious to halt at the threshold of mystery.”<sup>14</sup> This “magical formula” was nothing but semi-Latinate gibberish.

### 1. Sources for Our Knowledge of the Dreams

We find the recorded dreams of Don Bosco scattered throughout the *Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, the huge biography published in Italian between 1898 and 1939. Father John Baptist Lemoyne (1839-1916)

<sup>11</sup> BM 2:322.

<sup>12</sup> BM 5:242-43. Apparently Don Bosco has confused the name of the boy who died, for the description fits the details of the death of Victor Maestro; see BM 7:80-83.

<sup>13</sup> Stella, *Don Bosco: Religious Outlook*, 512-13.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 513; cf. BM 11:243.

between 1883 and 1916 composed the first nine volumes of this ambitious undertaking, covering 1815-1870, and he laid out the fundamental work for volumes 10-18, which cover the rest of the Saint's life and were completed by Fathers Angelo Amadei (1868-1945) and Eugene Ceria (1870-1957). Volume 19 covers the canonization process, 1888-1934. An index (volume 20) was published in 1948.

The sources for the estimated 153 dreams found in the *Biographical Memoirs* include Don Bosco's written accounts, the chronicles of the first Salesians,<sup>15</sup> the notes, memoirs, and testimony of various contemporaries, and Don Bosco's many conversations with Lemoyne. Don Bosco wrote down two dreams at some length and alluded to a few others in his own *Memoirs of the Oratory*; he wrote out or had a secretary transcribe ten others, basically as memoranda for their future communication to others.<sup>16</sup> That means, obviously, that the great majority have come to us based on their oral narration. Often he would narrate them to all the Oratory residents, sometimes just to some of the Salesians. Whenever Don Bosco related his dreams, they utterly fascinated his listeners; not only was there usually an interesting story line—and Don Bosco was a captivating storyteller—but from experience they also knew that these dreams revealed truths about themselves or about the future. There were, of course, no tape recorders. Several of the first Salesians and other witnesses made it their business to write down afterward what Don Bosco had said.<sup>17</sup> But the fact that these dreams came from Don Bosco's mouth and not from his pen at once creates problems for us: What exactly did he say? How accurately did the scribes remember the details by the time they were able to write them down?

For more than ninety per cent of Don Bosco's reported dreams, we do not have an autograph text. We have only what various listeners recorded or reported, hours, days, even years later: e.g., in their private journals, in the house chronicles, in letters to Salesians who were not in the house, and in the canonical

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<sup>15</sup> The principal chronicles and diaries are those of three early Salesians who were leaders in the nascent Congregation: Frs. John Bonetti (1838-1891), Dominic Ruffino (1840-1865), and Julius Barberis (1847-1927); and of two of Don Bosco's personal secretaries, Frs. Joachim Berto (1847-1914) and Charles Viglietti (1864-1915).

<sup>16</sup> *Memoirs of the Oratory* records six dreams (two in detail, one in outline). A critical edition by Cecilia Romero, *I sogni di Don Bosco* (Turin: LDC, 1978), presents ten others, either autograph manuscripts or allograph manuscripts annotated by the Saint.

<sup>17</sup> For the formation and activity of the "historical committee" of 1861, see *BM* 6:505-07.

investigation of Don Bosco's holiness.<sup>18</sup> Now and then this difficulty of relying upon these sources is brought home in the *Biographical Memoirs*:

Father Berto, his secretary, who took down this dream ["The Land of Trial"], wrote that he could not remember many things that Don Bosco narrated and explained at length. The next morning, May 7, when he was with Don Bosco, he asked him, "How can you possibly remember all the boys you saw in your dream and tell each one the state he was in and pinpoint his faults?"

"Oh," Don Bosco answered, "by means of *Otis Botis Pia Tutis*." This was a meaningless phrase that he often used to evade embarrassing questions.<sup>19</sup>

We must suppose that Berto's case—difficulty remembering, just a few hours later, the details of a dream as recounted by Don Bosco—is not unique.

## 2. The *Biographical Memoirs*: Value and Limitations

Except for those few dreams of which critical editions have been published, we must either have recourse to the primary sources preserved in the Salesian Central Archives in Rome,<sup>20</sup> or must rely upon the edited texts provided by Father Lemoyne, "the first great biographer of Don Bosco"<sup>21</sup> and the principal author of the *Biographical Memoirs*.

Lemoyne was an honest and a scholarly man, a talented writer of popular biographies, stories, dramas, and poetry. He was also a holy priest.<sup>22</sup> But he was not a historian, did not use a historian's methods in gathering and ordering his material and assessing the value of his sources, and certainly did not look at Don Bosco with an objective eye. His intended audience—the only one foreseen—was the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

<sup>18</sup> The canonical investigation, the first step in the process of canonization, took place in Turin in the 1890s. For details, see Arthur J. Lenti, "Don Bosco's Beatification and Canonization: Story, Highlights and Sidelights," in *JSS* 10 (1999), 65-144, at 69-78.

<sup>19</sup> *BM* 11:243.

<sup>20</sup> Salesian Central Archives (ASC) 111, published on microfiche: *Fondo Don Bosco*, 1254 E5 to 1347 D3. A complete set of the *Fondo* is available in the United States at the Institute of Salesian Spirituality in Berkeley, Calif.

<sup>21</sup> The subtitle of Guido Favini's pamphlet on his life and work: "D. Giovanni Battista Lemoyne: *Primo grande biografo di don Bosco*" (Turin, 1974).

<sup>22</sup> Francis Desramaut, "The Methods Adopted by the Authors of the 'Memorie biografiche,'" in *Don Bosco's Place in History: Acts of the First International Congress of Don Bosco Studies*, ed. Patrick Egan and Mario Midali (Rome: LAS, 1993), 39-68, at 40.

Hence, in general, his work seeks to edify and tends toward hagiography,<sup>23</sup> the fruit of his "legendary personal attachment to Don Bosco."<sup>24</sup>

Conscientiously, Lemoyne collected every scrap of information he could find about his hero, and he put it all meticulously in chronological order as best he could judge that order, omitting not the slightest detail, but, rather, piling detail upon detail into his narrative—and treating them all as of equal value.<sup>25</sup> For him "the important thing was to collect documents and present them in legible form"<sup>26</sup>—and collecting documents is something which he and his two successors did with admirable diligence, so that what they amassed is still the fundamental starting point for any serious biography of Saint John Bosco.<sup>27</sup> Father Lemoyne aimed to tell the story of Don Bosco,<sup>28</sup> and what he produced is "a huge collection of mosaics of biographical documents cut into various pieces and inserted into a run of stories that are divided in turn into chapters and volumes that are more or less homogeneous."<sup>29</sup>

Hence, the contents of the *Biographical Memoirs* present us with three historiographical problems:

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<sup>23</sup> See Pietro Stella, "An Assessment of Our Knowledge of Don Bosco and of the Works about Him," in *Don Bosco's Place in History*, 21-37, at 24-25 and 30-31. Tellingly, Stella writes, "Things which Don Bosco narrated as parables, dreams or day-dreams, depending on the interpretation put upon them by his audience, were, for Don Lemoyne, a faithful account of divine revelation" (30). This remark is balanced by another: "[The *Biographical Memoirs* are] a fundamental reference source. Their importance is irrefutable containing, as they do, the impressions of those who saw and heard Don Bosco first-hand" (31).

<sup>24</sup> Arthur J. Lenti, "Don Bosco's Boswell: John Baptist Lemoyne—The Man and His Work," *JSS* 1 (1990), 2, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Desramaut, 47-48, 54. Lemoyne understood his commission from Fr. Rua to have been "to overlook nothing that should come to my knowledge, even though at the moment I might consider it inconsequential" (*BM* 1:xii). Perhaps he ought more often to have distinguished between preserving the information he had collected and publishing it. ...Fr. Desramaut for many years was professor of Church history at the University of Lyons. Now retired, he continues to write on Salesian spirituality.

<sup>26</sup> Desramaut, 53.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.

<sup>28</sup> Note the title he gave his collection of material: *Documenti per scrivere la storia di D. Giovanni Bosco, dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales e della Congregazione Salesiana*: "Documents for writing the story of Fr. John Bosco...." These are 45 large, unpublished volumes wherein Lemoyne gathered all his documents and organized them chronologically. He had one set printed at one of the Salesian print shops and continued to insert material as he gathered it. They are kept in ASC 110 Lemoyne.

<sup>29</sup> Desramaut, 44.



1. Since Lemoyne did not meet Don Bosco until 1864, naturally he had no first-hand knowledge of what happened before then; from 1865 to 1883 he was assigned outside Turin. Only from 1864 to 1865 and 1883 to 1888 was he at the Saint's side. So, generally, Lemoyne is not a first-hand witness.
2. We have to deal with how Lemoyne edited his primary sources, especially when there was more than one version of an event. The existence of more than one version offers stronger evidence than a single account, obviously, but it also inevitably means there are variations in the details. It is not unlike comparing the Synoptic Gospels with each other,<sup>30</sup> e.g. Matthew's and Luke's differing versions of the Parable of the Talents, and then asking what Jesus actually said.
3. Sometimes Lemoyne inserts details that are not found in the primary sources or alters those that are; while it is probable that in some cases he had other sources—conversations, for instance—that he did not record, we have no way to ascertain that; he did not always document his work. Yet we also have to acknowledge that in Don Bosco's last years Lemoyne was for him a unique confidant; their relationship "was so close that there developed deep mutual understanding and affection, and perfect mutual communication, as between two kindred souls."<sup>31</sup> Lemoyne was in a position to know the Founder's thoughts, feelings, and spirit better than almost any other Salesian. "He became Don Bosco's perfect interpreter."<sup>32</sup>

Lemoyne explains his purpose and method, referring here particularly to the Saint's "Good Night" talks:

We have faithfully recorded what we ourselves heard at length from Don Bosco or what was testified to us orally or in writing by various priests after coordinating it into one single narrative. It was a difficult task because we wished to record most accurately every word, every link between scenes, and the sequence of incidents, warnings, reproaches, and whatever else he said but did not explain and was perhaps misunderstood. Did we achieve our aim? We can assure our readers that we most diligently sought one thing only: to expound as faithfully as possible Don Bosco's long talks.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Desramaut makes the same comparison, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Lenti, "Don Bosco's Boswell," 17.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>33</sup> *BM* 9:100.



Stella summarizes the point thus: "Rather than a concern for complete fidelity to Don Bosco's oral exposition, a desire to compose a text for public reading seems to have prevailed."<sup>34</sup> It has never been demonstrated that Lemoyne invented anything of substance in his monumental biography, but he has added his own connectives and gap-fillers.

All of the material which he amassed Lemoyne accepted at face value: the memories of John Bosco's boyhood friends as well as of his closest collaborators in running the Salesian Society; house chronicles and the minutes of meetings; rough notes and official reports; sermons, good nights, and relaxed conversation. Often he fails to distinguish the different genres, the different witnesses, and their relative value.<sup>35</sup> "For Don Lemoyne all that mattered was the 'honesty' of the witnesses, a quality that he esteemed because of its moral connotations."<sup>36</sup> Therefore Lemoyne gives no consideration to a witness's point of view or personal limitations, the length of time since certain events had occurred, the influence of emotion, the context in which events occurred and the context in which they were later recalled, or the way that people alter a narrative to make themselves better understood. In short, he did not exercise a historian's critical judgment over his sources, did not question them, did not use the empirical sciences to check and evaluate his data, frame and test hypotheses, or verify his suppositions on the basis of hard evidence.<sup>37</sup> He ignored, moreover, many documents of historical significance which, he apparently believed, would not contribute to his narrative purpose: documents such as blueprints, ledgers, school records, photographs, etc.<sup>38</sup> He did not leave the Oratory to consult persons, archives, and sites that would have shed light on his subject, although he did sometimes enlist others to do so.

But the author was aware of his shortcomings as a historian, confessing in his preface to the *Documenti*: "Some passages will have to be judged critically, especially those where Don Bosco relates his own experiences or dreams, or predictions of the future; for it appears that his humility has imparted to them a certain slant; or they may not have been rightly understood by those who kept a record or memory of them." Immediately he adds a qualification concerning himself: "For my part, I recorded faithfully what many boys, priests and clerics of the Oratory handed down in writing, and what I myself saw or

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<sup>34</sup> Stella, *Don Bosco's Dreams*, 16, with immediate reference to the Lanzo (Savio) dream of 1876.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Desramaut, 45.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51, 53.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

heard from Don Bosco's own lips."<sup>39</sup> From time to time he reiterates this idea in the *Biographical Memoirs*.<sup>40</sup>

Father Lemoyne was also prone to use short cuts in his writing: to insert details into a general framework, to alter a word here or there, and so forth, while presenting the whole as a direct quotation from a single source and omitting any reference to other sources. As Father Arthur Lenti puts it, "Not only does he transcribe documents so as to make them readable; he also manipulates them and adds to them... He fleshes out his document in accordance with what might have happened, usually deriving his material from other documents and contexts."<sup>41</sup> Father Francis Desramaut gives a fine example of this in volume one's account of Don Bosco's first Mass, where the biographer claims to be quoting only from the Saint's memoirs.<sup>42</sup> A comparison, however, shows that Lemoyne has more than doubled in length the material he claims to be quoting. All the additional details are factual, gathered elsewhere but unattributed in the final tale and somewhat misrepresenting the alleged source.<sup>43</sup>

In other cases, Lemoyne simply conflated his sources, as in his report of the dream "Hiking to Heaven." He begins: "We shall report it here as detailed in Bonetti's and Ruffino's chronicles. 'After night prayers on April 7,' they wrote, 'Don Bosco mounted the little rostrum to give the Good Night and spoke as follows....'"<sup>44</sup> Without consulting their originals in the Salesian archives, we may be fairly sure that Bonetti and Ruffino used somewhat different words to introduce their reports and that neither recorded Don Bosco verbatim—especially as this is a very long narrative. No historian could accurately say, "they wrote." From Lemoyne's published version it is impossible to determine which details of the dream, which words, which phrasing show in both chronicles and hence may more certainly be judged to have come from Don Bosco, and which appear in only one or the other chronicle and might possibly come more from the scribe than from Don Bosco—or which material is Lemoyne's own construction based on Bonetti and/or Ruffino.<sup>45</sup>

Despite his shortcomings as a historian, Lemoyne's desire to be a faithful narrator of his spiritual hero's achievements and spirit "could reproduce Don Bosco's very words and reflect the founder's spirit...Don Lemoyne had

<sup>39</sup> *Documenti*, vol. 1, 1, cited and translated by Lenti, "Don Bosco's Boswell," 30.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., the passage quoted above from *BM* 9:100.

<sup>41</sup> Lenti, "Don Bosco's Boswell," 39.

<sup>42</sup> *BM* 1:385-86; *Memoirs of the Oratory*, 166.

<sup>43</sup> Desramaut, 55-57.

<sup>44</sup> *BM* 6:508.

<sup>45</sup> In no way should this statement be taken to disparage either chronicler's substantial reliability. It means only that the fallacies of human memory and their own writing styles need to be considered.

only one general intention, to describe, with the aid of a crowd of witnesses, the life of an extraordinary man." Unfortunately, in the process he "superimposed on Don Bosco an idealised image of his own conceiving."<sup>46</sup> An example of this superimposition is the biographer's interpretation that Don Bosco never lacked for heavenly guidance, especially through dreams, about the steps he was to take and the means he was to use. For example, Don Bosco writes in his *Memoirs* that his original vocational dream "recurred several times more in ever clearer terms."<sup>47</sup> Lemoyne elaborates these recurrences into a series of new supernatural dream-revelations.<sup>48</sup> The interpretation that the Saint knew in advance every concrete step to take in the execution of his divinely appointed mission, however, is not borne out by the Saint's own words and actions and contributes to a false understanding of a genuinely holy and inspired man: a man who, indeed, had to struggle with doubts, mistakes, and setbacks;<sup>49</sup> a man "who is forever reading the signs of the times, forever shifting, adapting, and 'rolling with the punches' of historical events."<sup>50</sup>

Lemoyne's biographical practices are not unique. Scholars have freely criticized the biography of Lincoln by William Herndon, the Great Emancipator's long-time law partner; there is ample evidence that Herndon ignored unflattering opinions, reports, and rumors about his heroic friend. Nevertheless, Lincoln scholar Douglas L. Wilson states:

...we are coming to see how much of the criticism aimed at him has been misguided or misplaced and needs to be reconsidered. It now appears that beginning about midcentury, Lincoln scholarship became so preoccupied with Herndon's supposed weaknesses and shortcomings that it lost sight of the magnitude of his contribution. Although Herndon was far from an ideal biographer, he was an honest and conscientious one, and the biographical resources he gathered and developed are simply indispensable to our knowledge of Lincoln.<sup>51</sup>

Father Lemoyne himself hints at his working method and gives an example of his penchant for interpretation at the end of his account of the dream "To Hell

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<sup>46</sup> Desramaut, 59-60.

<sup>47</sup> *Memoirs of the Oratory*, 110; cf. 209-10.

<sup>48</sup> Lenti, "Don Bosco's Boswell," 43; discussed at length by Desramaut, *Les Mémoires I de Giovanni Battista Lemoyne: Étude d'un ouvrage fondamental sur la jeunesse de saint Jean Bosco* (Lyons, 1962), 250-65.

<sup>49</sup> Desramaut, 60-63.

<sup>50</sup> Lenti, "Don Bosco's Boswell," 42.

<sup>51</sup> *Keeping Lincoln's Secrets* in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 285 no. 5 (May 2000), 78.

and Back” as, he says, Don Bosco told it to the Oratory community on May 3, 1868:

Later, he narrated this dream in a condensed form to the boys of our schools in Mirabello and Lanzo. In the retelling he introduced variations but made no substantial changes. Likewise, when he spoke of it privately to Salesian priests and clerics, with whom he enjoyed greater familiarity, he would add new particulars. Occasionally he omitted details when talking to some people, while revealing them to others. Concerning the devil’s traps, while discussing bad habits, he elaborated on the devil’s tactics for luring victims to hell. Of many scenes he offered no explanation. For instance, he said nothing about the majestic figures he saw in that magnificent hall, which we are inclined to call “the treasure house of God’s mercy for saving boys who would otherwise perish.” Were these persons perhaps the principal dispensers of countless graces?

Some variations in his narration stemmed from the multiplicity of simultaneous scenes. As they flashed back into his mind, he would select what he considered most suited to his audience. After all, meditating on the four last things was a habit with him. Such meditation kindled a most lively compassion in his heart for all sinners threatened by such a frightful eternity. This ardent charity helped him overcome any reticence as he prudently but frankly invited even very prominent people to mend their ways. It also made his words so effective as to work many conversions.<sup>52</sup>

This method of redaction and interpretation Lemoyne applied throughout his nine volumes.

After Lemoyne died in 1916, Father Angelo Amadei saw volume 9 of the *Memoirs* to the press the next year. But at that point—quite possibly because of controversies entailed in the review of Don Bosco’s life by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints—work on the *Biographical Memoirs* was suspended. Only with the Founder’s beatification (1929) did the massive biography come again to mind. The rector major, Father Philip Rinaldi, asked Fathers Amadei and Eugene Ceria to resume work on the *Memoirs*. The former was very busy with multiple projects and completed only one volume, the tenth, by 1939. Ceria, on the other hand, gave himself wholeheartedly to the project and produced a phenomenal nine volumes in ten years: volumes 11-19 (1930-1939).

Since Amadei and Ceria built upon Lemoyne’s foundation, his strengths and weaknesses affect their narratives as well. There is virtually no difference in approach between Lemoyne’s nine volumes and Amadei’s, except

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<sup>52</sup> *BM* 9:99-100.

that the latter organized the material he found in the *Documenti* for 1871-1874 topically rather than chronologically.

Father Ceria was a more careful scholar. While he was not a historian, either,<sup>53</sup> he did document his writing much more than Father Lemoyne or Father Amadei. He "followed faithfully the *Documenti*, which were set out year by year in about 30 registers" for 1875-1888. He did a little bit of research of his own but, in his hurry to conclude the long project, he did not independently evaluate what Lemoyne had gathered.<sup>54</sup> He was more willing to condense narratives, to credit sources, and to give moderate interpretations, "but he made little effort to break free from the pious and portentous explanations favored by Don Lemoyne. He usually followed his sources and gave (though more briefly) the same explanation of Don Bosco as they had done."<sup>55</sup> One does observe, however, that he is less likely to launch into an allegorical or other interpretation of a dream.

Especially as regards Don Bosco's dreams, Ceria remained substantially dependent upon the uniquely personal materials that Lemoyne had collected and organized twenty, thirty, or forty years earlier. He was writing after all of the original Salesians had died; the last, Father Francesia, died in 1930 at the age of 91. The second generation, major witnesses to the events and dreams of which Ceria was writing, was already well advanced in years. So oral history or correspondence, to verify, correct, or interpret what Father Lemoyne had left behind at his death in 1916, was problematic—and, of course, required even men of Ceria's generation who had known Don Bosco when they were boys to recall in the 1930s events and words dating back to the 1870s and '80s.

## 2. Studying Don Bosco's Dreams

Ceria realized the limitations of the *Biographical Memoirs*, namely, that they are in no sense a definitive, critical study of Saint John Bosco. Consequently, there is therein "no guarantee of the authenticity of the elements which people particularly like to glean from them, namely the saint's statements and the observations of the immediate witnesses of his life (such as the house chroniclers). Moreover, certain texts are modified, apocryphal accounts abound and stories become legends with the lumping together of widely differing accounts."<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, in the face of growing awareness of Lemoyne's lack of historical method in the 1950s, Ceria felt compelled to rise to the defense of

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<sup>53</sup> His specialty was the Greek and Latin classics.

<sup>54</sup> Desramaut, 63-64.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-66; quotation at 66.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

his distinguished predecessor. This he did through a long letter "on the authenticity of the *Biographical Memoirs*."<sup>57</sup>

If the *Biographical Memoirs* are not one hundred per cent reliable as history, what can we say about the texts of Don Bosco's dreams as found in them?

Sometimes the text of the *Biographical Memoirs* follows a primary source closely, and at other times it takes multiple sources and weaves them together into what Lemoyne wanted to be a complete and coherent whole. By consulting the unpublished *Documenti*, the scholar may in many cases see how the biographer reworked his source materials.<sup>58</sup> The historian, of course, is bound to consider the primary sources, not Lemoyne's published text, to try to ascertain what went through the Saint's mind and imagination as he dreamt—or, at least, what the Saint reported about his dream.

How accurately did Don Bosco remember the details of what he had dreamt? Even if he had been tape recorded as he narrated any given dream, the text would be open to question. In fact, as we have noted, we have the texts of ten dreams as Don Bosco himself wrote them shortly after experiencing the dreams (plus two other texts recorded many years after the event, in his autobiographical *Memoirs*). But the historian—including the biographer—must recognize the inevitable discrepancy between the words written down or spoken some hours (or even days) after the fact, and the dream as actually experienced. On numerous occasions Don Bosco himself alludes to this problem, either by admitting his inability to describe what he saw, heard, or felt in a dream,<sup>59</sup> by confessing a blank spot in his memory,<sup>60</sup> or by deliberately omitting some particulars.<sup>61</sup> Even when he does not confess to either of these "discrepancies,"

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<sup>57</sup> Dated Mar. 9, 1953, it is addressed to the director and the Salesian students of theology at Bollengo, Italy. The letter is available in English translation from the author of this essay.

<sup>58</sup> One example concerns the "dream" of the two columns in the sea, in which the various primary sources and Lemoyne's *Documenti* refer not to a dream but to a "fable or simile," but which Lemoyne, without explanation, suddenly calls a dream in his published text (*BM* 7:107).

<sup>59</sup> E.g., "I left out other [things] which could be seen but not described" (*BM* 6:516).

<sup>60</sup> E.g., "Then I asked someone (who he was I can't remember) for an explanation..." (*BM* 6:510).

<sup>61</sup> E.g., at the end of the second part of "Hiking to Heaven," he announced to the assembly of boys and Salesians: "I told you only the highlights of my dream—and briefly too—because to narrate it as it was would take too much time. As a matter of fact, last night too I gave you but a hint on what I saw." (*BM* 6:515). And, resuming the next night:

one realizes that a dream that lasted "all night"—which Don Bosco occasionally alleged in introducing one of his narratives—can hardly be recounted fully in the space of one, two, or three Good Night talks. Obviously, the historian is severely limited in what he can reconstruct of the reality of Don Bosco's dreams, as differentiated from the handed-down text, even an autograph text.

We saw above how, when Father Berto had difficulty remembering the details of one dream that he wished to write down, he asked Don Bosco how he could possibly remember all the boys he had seen therein and the specific state of conscience of each, and how Don Bosco had given an evasive reply. Ceria's account continues:

When Father Barberis also broached the same subject, Don Bosco answered gravely, "It was a great deal more than a dream;" and cutting the talk short, he passed on to other things. Father Berto ends his report with these words: "I, too, the writer of this report, asked him about my part in this dream. His answer was so much to the point that I burst into tears and said, 'An angel from heaven could not have hit the truth better.'"<sup>62</sup>

Berto's testimony also shows us that something more than memory alone was at work in Don Bosco when he recalled the salient points of what he had seen.

Trying to ascertain what went through the Saint's mind and imagination as he dreamt is not an easy task. In some cases, Don Bosco did not narrate or write down the dream for a long time after having it. The key truths seem to have been firmly burnished into his mind, as countless people besides Berto have testified in their own regard. The most vivid supporting details, presumably, remained sharp. But other images and details must have been blurred or forgotten; in fact, he says as much here and there in the course of his oral narratives. At other times his remembrance of specifics may have been colored by his immediate concerns—either subconscious concerns, or concerns at hand in the course of narration.

In evaluating the text, one asks how much time elapsed between the dream and its writing down or its public narration. The longer the time, obviously, the more possibility that specific images faded from or were blurred in the saint's memory, as well as (less obviously) the greater possibility that intervening events and concerns might, at least subconsciously, color those images or their interpretation in the course of the writing/narration.

One asks, also, what was Don Bosco's purpose, what were his concerns, at the time of narration. As we have seen, sometimes these concerns

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"...the past two nights I had to cut short many things which were better left unsaid..." (ibid., 516).

<sup>62</sup> BM 11:244.



and purpose—these biases—induced him to omit certain details; he specifically says so. We suppose there were other occasions when he did not say so. His concerns and purposes could also have induced some subtle alterations between what he “saw” and what he recounted. In the words of Lenti, Don Bosco “does not simply relate dream images (as recalled) without meaning or intent; rather he relates a dream story in which he sees allegorical or didactic value. He does not recall and tell the dream as to a psychologist or psychiatrist, but elaborates the dream in order to educate, to warn, to encourage.”<sup>63</sup> Lenti points out a good example of this: “In the Lanzo dream, for instance, in Savio’s description of heavenly bliss there plays an irony on [Don Bosco’s] ignorance of those very subjects which were commonplace in [his] sermons, writings, and catechesis.”<sup>64</sup>

Finally, one must ask who wrote the text or the variant texts. Did he or they witness Don Bosco’s narrative first-hand? How reliable is the person, in terms both of completeness of narrative (remembering and recording all or most of what was told) and of objectivity or accuracy (writing down only what was narrated, without omission or addition)? Did he write it immediately after Don Bosco’s telling, or soon after, or a long time after? For whom did he write it: “for the historical record” (as in a diary or chronicle, for example), for his family or a friend (as in a letter), as part of ecclesiastical testimony (during the canonical inquiry into Don Bosco’s sanctity), and for what purpose?

The historian must inquire next about the context of the dream. When Don Bosco went to bed, what was on his mind? What personages, problems, current events, ideas, images, language, etc., might already have been lurking in his subconscious. Pietro Stella has suggested—and the fragmentary evidence allows no more than a suggestion—that the Saint’s fundamental first dream at age nine or ten<sup>65</sup> might have occurred shortly after the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, when John would have likely heard a sermon or catechism lesson on the Pope as the chief shepherd of Christ’s flock, an image that might in turn have fed the graphic imagery of his dream. We know that when he dreamed his long “missionary tour” of South America in 1883 and asked his guide, “When will we go to Boston?” he had on his desk a request to send Salesians to staff the French-language church in that city. It is no difficulty at all to relate certain dreams to specific political events of the day<sup>66</sup> or to sites that the Saint was

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<sup>63</sup> “Notes of a Psychological, Theological and Pedagogical Nature,” class notes 1986, 1.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Don Bosco is vague about the dating, at different times giving differing ages.

<sup>66</sup> E.g., in “Hiking to Heaven,” in one spot a guide pointed to some dismembered limbs and observed, “These are the remains of those who have recently attacked the Church” (*BM* 6:511).

familiar with.<sup>67</sup> His study of the sacred scriptures and his use of them in his preaching and catechesis are reflected in countless biblical allusions within his dreams.

Don Bosco himself was aware of this ordinary human factor. In the middle of his narration of a series of dreams one evening, he commented, "When one falls asleep with something on his mind, his imagination goes to work and he dreams about it."<sup>68</sup> At the beginning of his relation of "Hiking to Heaven," he mentioned to the Oratory community that he had "passed by the green-clad hills of Moncalieri" a few days previously and been "deeply impressed," and that "this charming scene" might possibly have recurred to his mind as he slept, "stirring a desire to go hiking."<sup>69</sup> Prior to the 1876 dream involving Dominic Savio, Don Bosco had been thinking a lot about his beloved, long deceased pupil and holding him up as an example to the present students in Turin;<sup>70</sup> shortly after the cleric Francis Donnellan died, Don Bosco went to bed with the Irish seminarian much on his mind and then dreamed of him.<sup>71</sup> We could delve indefinitely into what his concerns might have been about the moral state of his pupils and Salesians, his worries about his bills, his anxiety for the evangelization of foreign lands, even theological speculations.<sup>72</sup> "In other words, one should seek to identify both the materials out of which the dream is fashioned and the stimuli (the internal, if not the external ones) that set the dream in motion. This kind of investigation will enable us not only to clarify the elements of the dream by uncovering the precise references, but also to form at least a preliminary judgment as to the nature of the experience itself."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Besides the countless references to the Oratory and its different parts, there are numerous allusions to different parts of Turin, many of them specific. In a dream about purification after death, he describes one locale that suggests the royal palace in Turin: "Left to myself, I went in, walked along a portico, went up a stairway, and entered a truly regal apartment. I passed through spacious halls, richly decorated rooms, and endless corridors.... Each glittered with priceless treasures" (BM 8:368).

<sup>68</sup> BM 9:77.

<sup>69</sup> BM 6:508-09.

<sup>70</sup> BM 12:418-22.

<sup>71</sup> *Memorie biografiche*, 17:505 (Turin: SEI, 1936).

<sup>72</sup> Had he been in a learned discussion with someone before the dream "Purification after Life"? He introduced his account thus: "When I went to bed last night I could not fall asleep directly, and so I began thinking about the soul: its nature, mode of existence, structure, activities after its separation from the body, and mobility. I wondered too how we might be able to recognize others after death, since we would all be pure spirits. The more I thought about it, the less I knew." (BM 12:368)

<sup>73</sup> Arthur J. Lenti, "Introductory Essay" to the first printing of *Dreams, Visions and Prophecies of Don Bosco*, ed. Eugene M. Brown (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1986), xlviii.

The student of Don Bosco's dreams must consider their contents. Their theology (ecclesiology, Mariology, Christology, morals, pastoral practice) echoes what he had learned in his seminary training, what he was reading, what he was doing as a priest in nineteenth-century Italy. The imagery, scenes, plots, and persons may reflect at one juncture theological issues; at another, daily commonplaces; at a third, childhood remembrances.<sup>74</sup>

When a dream seems to deal with predictions or visions of the future, one must determine carefully exactly what was foreseen and how it may or may not have been fulfilled. The language employed "is often stereotyped, indefinite and highly symbolic." Sometimes the prophecy is conditional, whether or not that is explicitly stated.<sup>75</sup>

As for the meaning of his dreams, so prudent was this friend of the young that he often cautioned his auditors not to take his dreams too seriously. For example, on one occasion in 1876 he prefaced a narration thus:

I will tell things just as I saw them and let each one take what pertains to him. Before I begin, just remember that dreams happen during sleep when we have no control over our minds. If you find anything good in this dream, a warning or anything at all, take heed, but do not become ill at ease because of it. I said that I dreamed while I was sleeping because some boys dream while they are awake, much to their teachers' annoyance.<sup>76</sup>

Another time in that same year, he repeated the same thought and then went on to draw a moral from the dream he had just narrated:

As I said, this is only a dream. I do not want you to give it any more importance. Think of it only as a dream, no more... Let each of us draw from this dream whatever applies. Just now I will not give you any explanations because all of you can easily understand the dream. I only recommend very strongly that you revive your faith, which is safeguarded particularly by being temperate and avoiding idleness. Let temperance be a friend and sloth an enemy. Some other evening I will return to this subject.<sup>77</sup>

Or again:

Honestly, I would like all of you to remember this: This was a dream, and no one is obliged to believe it. I have noticed, however, that those who have asked

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<sup>74</sup> Arthur J. Lenti, "Methodological Points for a Critical Study of a Dream of Don Bosco," class notes 1986, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Lenti, "Introductory Essay," xlviii.

<sup>76</sup> *BM* 12:29.

<sup>77</sup> *BM* 12:254-55.

me for explanations have accepted my suggestions in good part. Nevertheless, do as Saint Paul says: "Test everything; retain what is good" [1 Thess. 5:21].<sup>78</sup>

He could even be funny about it:

I tell you [his beloved boys] everything I know, and even, sometimes, things I don't know.<sup>79</sup>

So cautious was he that when he had been shown the consciences of several or many youths, he was wont to hesitate to reveal what he had learned. He would question a few prudently, and, assured as to the accuracy of the messages he had received, proceed to speak to the others.<sup>80</sup>

This leads us to consider how Don Bosco himself regarded his dreams and how the people around him regarded what he related to them. Sometimes he was convinced that God or the Virgin Mary was communicating with him. At other times he passed off his remarks as "a parable." The early Salesians and the pupils seem to have been less discerning. They "lived in the expectation of the extraordinary and in a climate 'of legend', and were therefore prone to accept more readily a 'supernatural' interpretation."<sup>81</sup>

Having come as close to an authentic text as may be possible—an autograph text or a carefully constructed text based on other primary sources—and having studied carefully the content of the dream within its personal, historical, religious, and educational context, the historian or biographer proceeds to inquire into the nature of the experience behind the text. Does the text represent a genuine but ordinary dream, an extraordinary, revelatory dream, or perhaps an edifying parable "created by Don Bosco out of his ever-present preoccupation with his children's spiritual welfare"?<sup>82</sup> Father Albert Caviglia, a highly respected Salesian scholar, wrote: "A good number [of the dreams] may be regarded simply as edifying and didactic parables. They are an attempt to express symbolically ideas, tendencies, hopes that were part of Don Bosco's spiritual and educational world."<sup>83</sup> One of his best known "dreams," the so-

<sup>78</sup> *BM* 11:246.

<sup>79</sup> *BM* 12:432, which notes that his audience laughed.

<sup>80</sup> E.g., in the aftermath of what Dominic Savio showed him: *BM* 12:441.

<sup>81</sup> Lenti, "Methodological Points," 1.

<sup>82</sup> Lenti, "Introductory Essay," xlii.

<sup>83</sup> *Don Bosco* (Turin: LICE, 1934), 35. Fr. Caviglia (1868-1943) was, especially, a master of Salesian spirituality. He was the first to undertake a critical study of Don Bosco's major writings, eventually published in 6 volumes as *Opere e scritti editi e*

called "Dream of the Two Columns," he presented as a fable, according to the primary sources, although Father Lemoyne ignored that in the *Biographical Memoirs*.<sup>84</sup> Caviglia also opined, "How many predictions and revelations of hidden things are credited to Don Bosco that were nothing else but perceptions (keen and clever, if you will) achieved through observation!"<sup>85</sup> It is difficult to sort out didactic parables from authentic dreams. Lenti observes, justly, that "any judgment in this matter can only be tentative. It may be assumed that in most cases we are confronted with true, if not with extraordinary, dream experiences."<sup>86</sup>

Desramaut, however, is reluctant to speak of the supernatural:

Instead of systematically attributing a miraculous origin to the dreams told by Don Bosco, it is better to see them, as long as they have some moral or spiritual value, as documents of his thought, written surely not without the help of the grace of the Lord. In this way they will not delude us. Let us leave to psychologists and to experts in mystical theology the task of determining the extent of the intervention of God in their unfolding. This undertaking is infinitely delicate and it is understandable that several have made futile attempts in this matter.<sup>87</sup>

Inquiries might lead a psychologist or an expert in the science of dreams to be able to distinguish in Don Bosco's experience between an ordinary dream (or a daydream) suggested by perfectly normal factors of the day and with no unusual content (as ordinary dreams go), and a dream or vision of a supernatural character, of a revelatory nature. Of course, one comes quickly up against facts presented in certain dreams—most notably, accurate predictions of the future, or

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*inediti di "Don Bosco"* (Turin, 1929-1964); vols. 5-6 were posthumous; his premature death scuttled the project.

<sup>84</sup> See Stella, *Don Bosco's Dreams*, "The 'Dream' of the Two Columns," 54-63.

<sup>85</sup> "Il 'Magone Michele': Una classica esperienza educativa," in *Salesianum* 11 (1949), 592; Lenti's translation. But the Saint also demonstrated perceptive powers that were far from natural, and at times claimed as much. E.g.: "Show me a young man who is a total stranger to me, and I will look him straight in the eye and divine his sins, beginning with those committed in his earliest youth" (Lemoyne, *Vita di San Giovanni Bosco*, Father Angelo Amadei [Turin: SEI, 1939], 2:429; Lenti's translation.).

<sup>86</sup> Lenti, "Introductory Essay," xliii.

<sup>87</sup> Francis Desramaut, *Don Bosco and the Spiritual Life*, trans. Roger Luna (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1979), 35. He cites two attempts by Ceria as "probably the best" at determining the extent of divine intervention in the unfolding of the Saint's dreams: *Memorie biografiche* 17:7-13 and *San Giovanni Bosco nella vita e nelle opere*, 2d ed. (Turin: SEI, 1949), 285-92.

knowledge about persons he had never met or about long buried secrets—that could not possibly have been suggested by even such an astute observer of life as Don Bosco.

Beyond trying to understand what was going on in Don Bosco's head, one needs to take into account how it affected his other senses.

At the end of my dream-trip to the outer walls of hell, my guide seized my hand, forced it open, and pressed it against the first of the thousand walls. The sensation was so utterly excruciating that I leaped back with a scream and found myself sitting up in bed. My hand was stinging, and I kept rubbing it to ease the pain. When I got up that morning I noticed that it was swollen. Having my hand pressed against the wall, though only in a dream, felt so real that, later, the skin of my palm peeled off.<sup>88</sup>

In the Lanzo dream, Dominic Savio gave him a note with a list of the students in mortal sin.

As I opened that note, an unbearable stench emanated from it. An atrocious headache immediately seized me, and I felt so sick to my stomach that I thought I would die... That stench penetrated the very walls and got into all my clothing, so much so that for days afterward I could still detect its foulness. Even the name of the sinner is truly foul in God's eyes. Even now, no sooner do I recall that stench than I begin to shudder and choke, and my stomach turns over with retching.<sup>89</sup>

It appears that more than imagination is at work here. Ceria argued that many of the Salesian Founder's dreams were, quite evidently, divine revelations:

...from the fact that they show a logical and purposeful plan and development (which is not the case in common dreams); from the fact that the predictions contained in them were later fulfilled; from the fact of knowledge transcending human insight; and from the fact that Don Bosco himself attached great importance to these dreams, was guided by them, and did not object when the word "vision" was used to describe them.<sup>90</sup>

Lenti cautions that a supernatural origin is difficult to verify, even when merely human insight and Don Bosco's deep personal convictions appear insufficient to explain a particular dream; hence one ought to be slow to approach any given dream with "a preconceived notion about the nature of the experience, but rather

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<sup>88</sup> BM 9:99.

<sup>89</sup> BM 12:441.

<sup>90</sup> Lenti, "Introductory Essay," xlv, citing *Memorie biografiche* 17:12; for the full context of Ceria's opinion, see BM 17:7-13.

to accept it as it stands, seeking to illuminate it with all the critical tools at one's disposal. If, after a thorough study of the dream narrative, it seems appropriate or useful to pass judgment on the nature of the experience, one might then prudently do so."<sup>91</sup>

Having taken all such steps, having identified certain "dreams" as fables invented for didactic purposes, having identified other "visions" as instances of unusually keen human perception, the "ordinary reader" and the critical scholar alike will be left with a great many of Don Bosco's experiences that defy rational explanation and will be left to wonder whether the finger of God is at work here,<sup>92</sup> if not actually to affirm it.

### 3. Purposes and Value of the Dreams

If the texts of Don Bosco's dreams as we have them, whether in his own autograph or as they have been published, are not one hundred per cent reliable—in terms of this charismatic man's real experiences—and if he himself was extremely cautious about relying on them, we ask ourselves whether they have any value.

Without a doubt. In the first place, *he* thought they had great value, and this after his initial skepticism, discussed with his spiritual director. He believed it was his duty to pass along what he heard and saw:

I would rather not tell you my dreams. In fact, the night before last I had no sooner started my narration than I regretted my promise [to tell the dream "Hiking to Heaven"]. I truly wished I had never said a word at all. However, I must confess that if I kept these things to myself I would feel very uneasy. Narrating them, in fact, is a great relief.<sup>93</sup>

On another occasion, he explained to the assembled students and Salesians:

I realized that God willed I should reveal what I had seen. For this reason, and to rid myself of these nightmares, I have decided to tell you everything. Let us thank the Lord for his mercy. Meanwhile, let us strive to carry out his admonitions, no matter what way he may choose to make them known to us,

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>93</sup> *BM* 6:516. One is reminded of the prophet Jeremiah: God's word "becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it" (Jer. 20:9).



and let us use the means he sends to enable us to save our souls... Well then, here are the dreams which I would rather forget but must reveal.<sup>94</sup>

His biographer states, "In narrating to his boys his various dreams... Don Bosco told them only what was best for them, since this was the intent of Him who gave these mysterious revelations."<sup>95</sup> Passing along the messages he received in the night was for the apostle of the young just one more means of seeking souls. He told Father Julius Barberis,

These dreams help a lot, and the boys are eager to hear them. My only trouble is that I need lungs of steel.<sup>96</sup> Truthfully, these dreams do shake people up because almost always they touch everybody, and each one asks in what condition I saw him, what he is to do, and how he should understand the different facets of the dream. They pester me day and night. All I need do to urge them to make a general confession is tell them one of my dreams.<sup>97</sup>

In the second place, these dreams are valuable—indeed, indispensable—for understanding Saint John Bosco. While they do not tell us everything there is to know and grasp about him—far from it!—they are part and parcel of who he was as an apostle, a founder, a spiritual guide. In purely exterior terms, they are part of the historical record, part of his life, and merit inclusion in any account of it. In interior terms, even though we grant that a fuller text of this dream or that, without Don Bosco's self-editing, would be more valuable, or that a study of the original sources in the Salesian archives might be more helpful than the edited versions of the *Biographical Memoirs*,<sup>98</sup> nevertheless these texts—individually, and all the more in their sheer volume—offer us priceless insights into the psyche of a spiritual and apostolic giant of the nineteenth century. Since Don Bosco was not otherwise much given to self-revelation—he has left us no *Confessions*, no *Story of a Soul*, no *Seven Storey Mountain*—his dreams may be the closest we can come to knowing the innermost soul of the man. For Don Bosco, his dreams are mystical experiences revelatory of his inner life and his relationship with God. His all-consuming hunger for souls many times is explicit; in at least one instance, the Salesian motto is echoed to him: "Tell your

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<sup>94</sup> BM 9:76.

<sup>95</sup> BM 6:518-19.

<sup>96</sup> Probably meaning that by this time—when he was past 60 years of age—he found it difficult to make himself heard for the long periods required by his narratives, addressing a crowd of 600 or 700 men and boys without a microphone.

<sup>97</sup> BM 12:28.

<sup>98</sup> This kind of work is just beginning, with the research of scholars like Desramaut, Stella, and Lenti.

boys to save their souls because that's all that matters. The rest counts for nothing."<sup>99</sup>

Using the dreams to study Don Bosco's psyche has its own dangers, as Stella warns.<sup>100</sup> Certainly the texts of the *Biographical Memoirs* have been redacted by Lemoyne and others. But even the documents behind the texts of the *Memoirs* "reflect differing preoccupations of Don Bosco: sometimes the state of mind of a man talking to a community of young people; sometimes the state of mind of a man writing a text for people who will read it later on."<sup>101</sup> Still, "the interplay of religious and ethical elements in Don Bosco's dreams might well manifest the kind of dream phenomena that occur in people of profound and operative Christian convictions."<sup>102</sup>

Nevertheless, in view of the Saint's reticence about his own interior life, his dreams, read in the context of his contemporaneous writings, sermons, etc., are important elements for studying his life and work.<sup>103</sup>

In the third place, Saint John Bosco's dreams are an element of his pedagogy. Some, like the one when he was about nine years old, offer him personal guidance by presenting him with teachers or pointing out qualities that he must develop in himself. Others point out the virtues to be instilled in the young or, like the dream written up in the crucial Letter of 1884 from Rome, the method to be used in educating the young. Finally, a whole class of dreams aimed to prepare people to die "a happy death."

In the fourth place, many of these dreams have a moral value also for the modern reader, as much as for the boys of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales. Love for virtue and hatred for sin; the four last things; the role of the Mother of God in the life of the Christian; the spiritual power of the Holy Eucharist—these are timeless matters.

But as we read Don Bosco's dreams more than one hundred years later, we have to keep them in their own context. With only a handful of exceptions, Don Bosco's dreams concerned his boys and his Salesians. He usually encouraged his listeners to discuss among themselves his words and their meaning as much as they wanted, yet very often he explicitly cautioned them not to repeat what he was about to say to anyone outside the house; outsiders did not know the intimate, fatherly atmosphere that reigned in the Salesian family, might misinterpret his words, might hold the Oratory up to ridicule. For example, at the end of "Hiking to Heaven" in 1861, he cautioned: "Don't tell

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<sup>99</sup> *BM* 12:370.

<sup>100</sup> *Don Bosco's Dreams*, 71-73.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>103</sup> Lenti, "Introductory Essay," xlii.

[this dream] to outsiders, because they would only make fun of it. I tell you these things just to please you. Talk about this dream among yourselves all you want, but remember that it is only a dream."<sup>104</sup> When outsiders were present, he "was not able to say everything because... these things must be kept among us."<sup>105</sup> In 1876, he tells the boys, "I would not like you to write home about [this dream] or tell outsiders who know nothing of the Oratory, lest they say, as they have already, that Don Bosco fills his boys with dreams."<sup>106</sup> On another occasion, he explained: "Dreams are to be given the importance they deserve. Those who do not know how close we are to each other might well misjudge the whole thing."<sup>107</sup> And, as he began to recount the dream "The Mysterious Vine":

I wish, though, that you keep within these walls what I am going to disclose to you. I beg you not to write about it or talk about it outside the house because such things are not to be ridiculed, as some people might do, and also because I want to avoid possible unpleasant complications. I tell you these things confidentially as a father to his beloved sons, and you should listen as though it were your own father telling them to you.<sup>108</sup>

The type of dream did not seem to matter: whether he was predicting that some pupil would die before a certain date or was telling of some mystical journey with his beloved sons that somehow revealed their hearts, these dreams were "not for external consumption." Hence if we seek to interpret what Don Bosco says, our interpretations must look to his context, the Oratory-Salesian context of 1841-1888, and not to our own time and place. Having discerned his spiritual message for his time and place in its general terms, we may apply it to ourselves, again in general terms.

Some readers have attempted to turn Don Bosco into a twentieth- or twenty-first-century prophet. But we find in his words and writings no comprehensive "prophecies" for events beyond his own time; we run into only limited, specific predictions for individuals to whom he revealed their individual futures, a few predictions concerning religious congregations, and some generalities applied to the Salesian Congregation, as for example in the dream of the Ten Diamonds<sup>109</sup> and in the missionary dreams.<sup>110</sup> A vague prediction

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<sup>104</sup> *BM* 6:517-18.

<sup>105</sup> *BM* 11:243.

<sup>106</sup> *BM* 12:254-55.

<sup>107</sup> *BM* 12:432.

<sup>108</sup> *BM* 9:76.

<sup>109</sup> *BM* 15:147-52.

concerning a great triumph of the Madonna sometime in the twentieth century is so poorly attested as to be questionable.<sup>111</sup>

A caution from the Saint himself is in order, therefore. As he was warning the students of the Oratory and the Salesian confreres to keep among themselves the dream in which Dominic Savio figured so prominently, he said:

Dreams are to be given the importance they deserve. Those who do not know how close we are to each other might well misjudge the whole thing... Whatever a father tells his beloved sons for their own good should stay between them and go no further. There is another reason, too. If the dream were to be told to outsiders, more often than not the facts could be twisted or presented out of context. This could be harmful and lead people to regard as worthless what, instead, is important.<sup>112</sup>

From the perspective of 1876 (the date of that dream), we reading it now—as well as any of the other dreams—are “outsiders.” We are not in the Oratory at that time. We run the risk of taking the facts out of context and twisting them, emphasizing what is trivial and passing over “as worthless what, instead, is important”: for example, if we were to be more concerned about the nature of heaven than about Savio’s advice on how to get there.

Father Lenti highlights the interrelationship between our Saint’s dreams and his life. His dreams, writes Lenti, yield valuable insights into Don Bosco’s spiritual life, his educational and apostolic experiences and concerns, his fears and hopes for Church and society, and generally his thought and convictions... His dreams, read in continuity and in conjunction with his writings and recorded words of the same period, constitute a valuable source for a study and an understanding of his life and work.<sup>113</sup>

In other words, his dreams illuminate his life, spirituality, and apostolate; likewise, the dreams are to be interpreted only in the light of his life, spirituality, and apostolate.

#### 4. Types of Dreams

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<sup>110</sup> An exception may be a more specific prediction made to Fr. Philip Rinaldi in 1887 that concerned the Salesians and the Spanish Civil War: see *Memorie biografiche*, 18:378 (Turin: SEI, 1937).

<sup>111</sup> *BM* 9:276.

<sup>112</sup> *BM* 12:432.

<sup>113</sup> “Introductory Essay,” xlii. Also to be consulted on this topic is Fr. Ceria’s preface to the *Memorie biografiche*, vol. 17, already referred to.

Based on what we are able to learn about the original experience or event, we can distinguish between visions, dreams, and parables in Don Bosco's life. Several times, at least, he experienced visions or trances of a revelatory character while fully awake, as when Louis Colle appeared to him on several occasions.<sup>114</sup> Somehow he was able at times to know the soul of a person in his presence—a phenomenon that caused some Oratory boys with guilty consciences to try to shield their foreheads from him if they saw him coming.<sup>115</sup> In the vast majority of cases, the Saint tells us in the course of narration that he had gone to bed and begun to dream, and at the end he woke up. In a few instances he expresses his uncertainty about whether he was awake or asleep.<sup>116</sup> Finally, there are the parables, mentioned above.

In his preliminary study, Father Stella points out several ways in which the dreams could be classified.<sup>117</sup>

1. Many dreams concern Don Bosco himself and his mission. Also grouped here might be those concerning deaths, individual or group conduct, and the development of the Salesian Society.
2. Some dreams are of a "public" nature, concerning local or general political or religious events.
3. One could discern between dreams in which Don Bosco himself is the principal actor, and those in which some noble personage (named or not) takes the lead.
4. Many dreams are loaded with imagery, offering the possibility of dividing dreams into those about rural, domestic, or civic life. The imagery may be of the Piedmontese countryside or of the Oratory and its ambience.
5. The dreams could be classed according to whether or not there is written documentation, and whether existing documentation originates with one or more of the persons who heard Don Bosco narrate them, or with Don Bosco himself.
6. The dreams could be grouped concerning what they revealed: past or present hidden facts or future events.
7. Finally, one could consider Don Bosco's state of mind at the time of particular dreams: calmness, euphoria, depression, anxiety, etc.

Lenti, also, demonstrates several ways in which the dreams might be categorized.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> *BM* 15: 61-70.

<sup>115</sup> Deposition of Fr. Ascanio Savio during the canonical process, as cited by *BM* 4:213; he frequented the Oratory in the early 1850s.

<sup>116</sup> E.g., concerning the Lanzo dream of Dominic Savio: "During the night hours of December 6, while I was in my room—whether reading or pacing back and forth or resting in bed, I am not sure—I began dreaming" (*BM* 12:432).

<sup>117</sup> *Don Bosco's Dreams*, 3-4.

- 1 By content: vocation dreams, educational dreams, prophetic warnings; dreams about the Salesian Society; dreams of a composite type.
- 2 By the authority of the text and tradition: autograph or allograph manuscript; reports by auditors, written soon after the oral dream narration; some few dreams "for which there is extant no early report."

Published collections of Don Bosco's dreams sometimes divide them into categories regarding their subject matter; e.g., his personal mission and that of the Salesian Society, future events, the Oratory boys, and the afterlife. Father Amadei categorized the Saint's "visions" of 1871-1874 into predictions of death, revelations of consciences, catechetical illustrations, a description of the Salesians' first mission field, and dreams concerning public events.<sup>119</sup>

Dreams about himself guided John Bosco's vocation, e.g., the decisive first dream and one during his late teen years that advised against entering a certain Franciscan monastery. Those about his mission and the Salesians pointed out future steps (e.g., the site of his work in Turin; the kind of candidates to admit) or the development of the Society in various places (e.g., the foreign missions) or advice about the Society's guidance (e.g., virtues to be cultivated and vices to be avoided; the practice of the preventive system at the Oratory). Dreams of future events concerned affairs both public and private. For instance, concerning public affairs, late in 1854, when Piedmont was about to pass a law suppressing monastic orders, on the basis of a dream Don Bosco predicted "great funerals at court," fulfilled amply within weeks. Concerning private affairs there was, for example, a vision of the unexpected recovery of John Cagliero, about to die from typhoid, and his future as a missionary bishop—realized thirty years later—and there were dreams of the deaths of various pupils. Other dreams revealed to him the states of conscience of his boys, sometimes in symbolic form and sometimes quite explicitly, and still others allegorically promoted the sacraments, virtue, or devotion to Mary. Finally, those about heaven, often featuring a venerated personage like Dominic Savio, presented the beauty and glory of the reward destined by God for the faithful, while those about hell attempted to instill a disgust and horror for sin and its consequences.

However one divides up or categorizes Saint John Bosco's dreams, visions, and prophecies, they never fail to fascinate the student of spirituality or of the human mind, and they always offer moral and religious instruction.

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<sup>118</sup> "Introductory Essay," xlvii-vii.

<sup>119</sup> *BM* 10:34-35.