

Education as Spiritual Life – Experience of John Bosco

Received March 10, 2017

Revised March 31, 2017

Accepted April 4, 2017

Key words

John Bosco, unknown
apparition, spiritual
experience, education

In this paper, we analyze origins of spiritual life of John Bosco, in particular a story called “a dream” – a story considered by John Bosco himself an interpretative key to his whole life. The story is archived in *Memoirs of the Oratory* – an autobiographical, spiritual, and pedagogical text of Don Bosco. It is clear from the text that there is a direct and essential dependence between fulfilling the mission and recognizing God in the Salesian spirituality. Education is not only social or cultural activity, but a space where Johnny Bosco meets God – a spiritual space as such.



1 Introduction

John Bosco (1815–1888) is a founder of the specific spiritual way, the so-called Salesian’s spirituality (Viganò 1995). This priest of the Catholic Church founded several religious orders and the inspiration of a wide movement of various clusters. The main mission of John Bosco’s life was the education of youngsters, especially the poorest ones (*Saleziánska pastorácia mládeže* 2014). The education wasn’t only just any social or relational activity for John Bosco. It was a principle, source and in the same time consequence of a spiritual experience. In general, it is possible to say, that through the education John Bosco experiencing God (Chavez 2014). In this paper, we examine the key story of John Bosco’s life. In this story merge two meaning of the education. The first one is education as activity and mission. The second one is education as an expression of the own spiritual experience. This story is archived in *Memoirs of the Oratory*. It is considered to be one of the most important autobiographical, spiritual, and pedagogical text of John Bosco (Giraud 2011). John Bosco himself considered this story an interpretative key to his whole life. He named it simply “a dream”.

About the author

Marek Wiesenganger, PhD. (1980) is an assistant professor of ethics. His research interests are focused on philosophical reflection of culture, human dignity, and education. He is a member of the Central European Philosophy of Education Society (Czech Republic) and Towarzystwo Pedagogiki Filozoficznej (Poland). He is also a co-author of *The Roads of Maturity*, which provides an educational program for the youths in the spirit of Salesian spirituality. His email is lukochod@gmail.com.

2 “A Dream”

Here is the very text: “In this dream, I seemed to be near my home in a fairly large yard. A crowd of children was playing there. Some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing. When I heard these evil words, I jumped immediately amongst them and tried to stop them by using my words and my fists. At that moment, a dignified man appeared a nobly dressed adult. He wore a white cloak, and his face shone so that I could not look directly at him. He called me by name, told me to take charge of these children, and added these words: ‘You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love. Start right away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue.’

Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor, ignorant child. I was unable to talk to those youngsters about religion. At that moment, the kids stopped their fighting, shouting, and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking.

Hardly knowing what I was saying, I asked, ‘Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?’ ‘Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge.’

‘Where, by what means, can I acquire knowledge?’

‘I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance, you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness.’

‘But who are you that speak so?’

‘I am the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day.’

‘My mother tells me not to mix with people I don’t know unless I have her permission. So tell me your name.’

‘Ask my mother what my name is.’ At that moment, I saw a lady of stately appearance standing beside him. She was wearing a mantle that sparkled all over as though covered with bright stars. Seeing from my questions and answers that I was more confused than ever, she beckoned me to approach her. She took me kindly by the hand and said, ‘Look’. Glancing round, I realized that the youngsters had all apparently run away. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears, and other animals had taken their place. ‘This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong, and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children.’

I looked round again, and where before I had seen wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs. They were all jumping and bleating as if to welcome that man and lady.

At that point, still dreaming, I began crying. I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her because I did not know what all this could mean. She then placed her hand on my head and said, ‘In good time you will understand everything.’” (Bosco 2011, 4).

3 Textual Analysis of “A Dream”

For a better understanding of this story, it is important to distinguish several successive scenes, from which is the whole story composed, that is:

1. Introduction;
2. Apparition, mission, and prophecy;
3. Confusion and problem of identity;
4. Apparition, prophecy, and mission;
5. Confusion.

3.1 Introduction – Known, Old World

The story begins with a description of the scene which is known for John Bosco and ends with a description of his reaction which he considered right. Everything in the description is the same as a boy Johnny Bosco knows: house, yard, boys, even the response of small Johnny to the behavior of the boys. Johnny acts like he accustomed and like he was educated. He wants to finish immoral behavior – fight and profanity – by the way which he was known: power and silencing. Johnny’s response expresses his justice: immoral behavior must be punished, it is necessary to discontinue commit evil. This situation is a basic context for following scenes which express absolutely different understanding of introductory scene of the story.

3.2 The Apparition, Mission, and Prophecy

The second scene begins with an apparition of a noble man. It is created by three relate moments, which are disturbing the acquaintance of material, personnel and cultural environment. Firstly, it goes about an unexplained and mysterious presence of a man, whose identity Johnny isn’t able to identify. The only thing what he can identify is two attributes: dignified white coat and shiny face. Although both attributes refer to the typical characteristics of divine revelation the Jewish-Christian tradition, small Johnny is not able to identify who the man is.

The second moment which distorts the world known to Johnny is the moment of a new and incomprehensible mission: “You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by

gentleness (It. mansuetudine) and love. Start right away to teach them the ugliness (It. brutezza) of sin and the value (It. preziosità) of virtue.” (Bosco 2011, 4).

The third moment which disturbs known world view is a prophetic sign. This sign is acting of the boys who “*stopped their fighting, shouting, and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking*” (Bosco 2011, 4).

The boy doesn’t understand either of these moments. He can’t address who the man with shiny face and white coat is. He misconceives how he has to fulfil his new mission, which is in the in contrast with the way he was used to acting. He doesn’t understand the change of the boys’ behavior. His inner tension is increasing. His confusion was turned to his own personality in the first step. Subsequently, he directed to the figure of the noble man.

3.3 The Confusion and the Problem of Identity

We can realize that the story Johnny Bosco considers one of the main interpretative keys of his life is in its essence a radically new spiritual experience and specific spiritual differentiation. The boy Johnny is asking for the identity of the man, who gives him special and new life mission, three times. Three times he verifies the origin of the new life objective. He is aware of the fact the receiving mission is not only a marginal activity but it requires an all-out response of the whole person. Feelings he repeatedly expresses are the typical accompanying sign of God’s vocation: the feelings of own inability, unworthiness, a feeling that the task absolutely overcomes him and is not possible to realize it. In such a moment, the only question is basic: who is the one who gives this task.

In this context is special that the boys John didn’t understand the link of the man to the prayerful tradition to which he was led by his mother. Despite many signs, he was given by the man, he didn’t understand who he is. The tension caused by new educational mission together with new spiritual experience wasn’t solved. On the contrary, spiritual revelation continues with a new apparition of a new figure. It goes about a woman, who “*was wearing a mantle that sparkled all over as though covered with bright stars*” (Bosco 2011, 4).

3.4 The Apparition, Prophecy, and Mission

We can see an analogy between the apparition of the man and the noble woman. In both cases, the figures are depicted in a typically religious way. But in either case, Johnny Bosco doesn't recognize the identity of these two persons. Just as in the first apparition as well also here comes to two prophetic signs. Both is concerning the boys, who Johnny Bosco wanted to put to silence in the name of justice at the beginning. The boys are gradually changing into wild animals and then into the tame lambs. He repeatedly receives an educational mission whose objective is the inner conversion of the groups of the boys. The whole story is thus moving towards its fulfillment in the final scene.

3.5 Confusion and Promise (Commitment)

The end of apparition creates two moments. The confusion coming from the misunderstanding of the identity of the woman, prophetic transformation of the boys as well as mission. The second moment is the promise that the understanding will come "in good time". So, the whole story doesn't finish by answering the questions but has an open ending. From this point of view, we can consider the whole story as a prophetic sign whose real God's origin will be proved at the time. It is important the verity of the sign will be shown only through obedient submission to the mission, which was revealed in this story

4 Spiritual Life as an Education – Education as Spiritual Life

According to John Bosco is it showing some essential features of the spiritual way in this story. Firstly, the story described by John Bosco joins two aspects of life, educational activity and creating a community with God. John Bosco has a promise that he will recognize the real identity of the noble man and woman. It will be possible only if he educates young by the way he was given by the man and woman. Between fulfilling the mission and recognizing God thus is the direct and essential dependence. John Bosco is meeting God amidst young. The conversion of the boys is an event where the God's power and presence are revealed. That is why the acting of young has a deep prophetic sense. Their acting is revealing God. And this revelation is intended to be given to the boy Johnny.

The story of "a dream" shows also other specific features of Salesian spiritual experience. Johnny is invited to cease such a relationship to God which is based on the strict compliance of orders. His relationship to God doesn't have to be based on the duties and justice but on the glamorous beauty and gentleness. All in dream evokes the impression of surprising beauty: the noble man dressed in decent clothes with the shiny face, the noble woman who has the brilliant coat as a shiny star, the beauty of virtues to which he should teach the boys. This all is in the sharp contrast to the ugliness of beating boys, wild animals or the ugliness of the sin. The same for the education, which he gets as the mission, is not based on the curd commands. This concept of education caused his distancing to the world of youth. That means not a help but hurting. The education given to Johnny as the mission is aimed at the inner conversion, where the commands cannot penetrate. What are two virtues he should lead them to? So, the style Johnny Bosco educates such should they

become: gentleness and love. The form of education is also its content. Note that educational mission also becomes the way of his personal spiritual conversion. The education by John Bosco becomes the space of permanent searching of God's identity. His shiny presence has two sides: blinds and attracts at the same time. The apparition given to John Bosco is also a prophecy about himself. He should become such a noble man and noble woman.

As it is seen, Johnny recognizes God as somebody absolutely new. It is God, who doesn't command but he attracts via his presence and causes changes. This God is strange by the fact he advocates a boy and involves him in his activities. Thanks to that he recognizes not only the identity of youth but also himself. The education isn't only the correction of deficiencies but mainly by finding such a way of life which enables to be a friend of God even his son – as the noble woman said. According to John, a personal spirituality is fulfilled by education. And at the same time, the education is the concrete way and thanks to it we can perceive God's presence.

Bibliography

Bosco, John. 2011. *Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855*. Accessed March 5, 2017 <http://sdl.sdb.org/>

Chavez, Pascual Villanueva. 2014. *Čerpajme z duchovnej skúsenosti dona Bosca, aby sme napredovali vo svätosti*. Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo don Bosco.

Giraud, Aldo. 2011. "L'importanza storica e pedagogico-spirituale delle Memorie dell'Oratorio." In *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815-1855: saggio introduttivo e note storiche a cura di Aldo Giraud*, Giovanni Bosco, 5-49. Roma: LAS.

Saleziánska pastorácia mládeže. 2014. Roma: Editrice S.D.B.

Viganò, Egidio. 1995. *Come rileggere oggi il carisma del fondatore*. ACG 352. Accessed March 5, 2017. <http://sdl.sdb.org/>