

# ST. JOHN BOSCO

part one





*St. John Bosco or Don Bosco (Don is an Italian form of address used for priests and noblemen) was a priest who lived in northern Italy in the second half of the last century. Consumed by a burning desire to devote his life to young people and to bring to Jesus as many souls as possible, he began with the boys he found in the jails and at the construction sites in Turin. Many had left small country villages in search of work which they hoped to find in the big city, and most were stranded there without homes, jobs, schooling or skills. Don Bosco and his followers tried to help in every way they could—and this is what the following story is all about.*

*Gradually Don Bosco and his helpers extended their work of formative Christian education to other parts of Italy and eventually throughout the world. They had formed a society which they called the Salesian Society after St. Francis de Sales who was their model.*

*Today some 35,000 priests, brothers and nuns, as well as many lay members associated with the Society continue Don Bosco's work for the young all over the world.*

*John Bosco was born on the 16th of August in 1815 in a small hamlet near the city of Turin. His father, a farmer, died when John was three years old. His mother, a very pious Christian woman, had to struggle in order to support her three sons and her old mother-in-law.*

*This picture biography of St. John Bosco begins with a mysterious dream that he had when he was about nine years old and which determined the course of his life. Part one ends with his ordination for the priesthood and the start of his work on behalf of poor and abandoned boys. Part two deals with the years from 1841 until his death on the 31st of January 1888.*





John Bosco is only 9 years old. He is a fine, healthy lad who is extremely fond of the outdoors. His parents' small house, situated on a hill, is hidden by lush greenery. Tired after the day's work and play, he falls asleep quickly, and he has a strange dream.

In his dream he sees many boys at play, but they are not behaving well. They curse and swear and fight with each other. Little John is shocked. He wants them to stop, but they do not listen; they tease, and taunt, and jeer, and call him names.

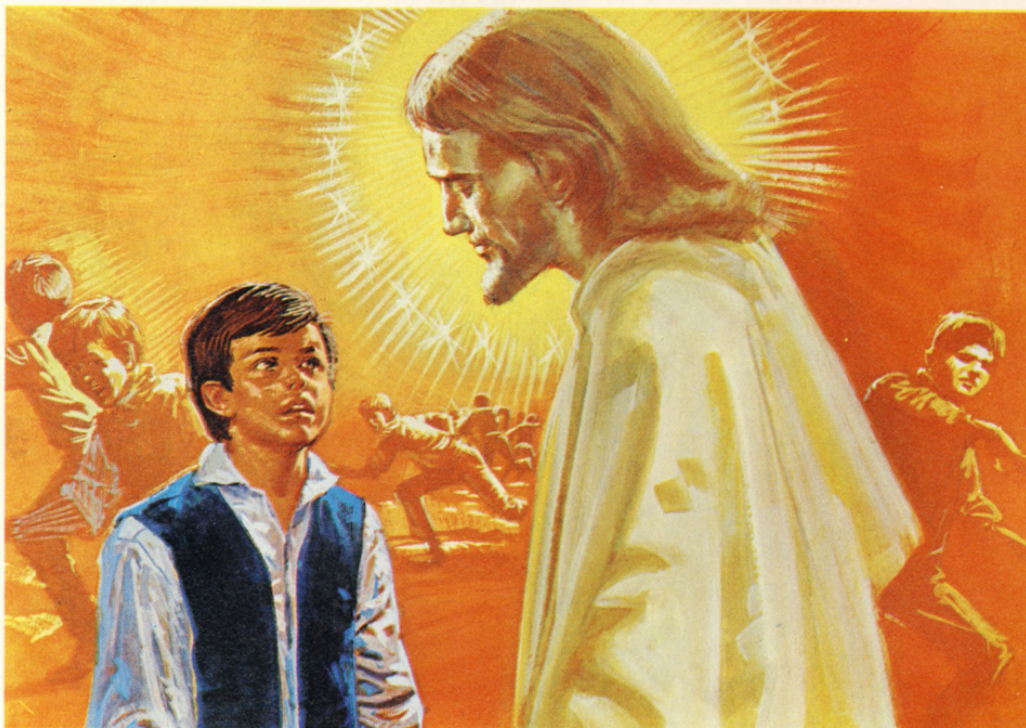






Soon fists begin to fly in all directions, noses begin to bleed, and a few get an ugly black eye. Little John is not frightened by the shower of blows which he keeps at bay with strong, well-aimed counterpunches.

Then Jesus appears to John. He looks grand and he is loving and kind. As little John Bosco tries to overcome his awe and fear, Jesus puts him at ease and tells him that he must try to influence these boys with kindness, not with brute force.







Jesus wants him to have friendly talks with the boys and to point out to them the beauty of virtue and the ugliness of vice. John pleads ignorance because he is only a small boy from the country, and Jesus reassures him: "I will give you a teacher," he says.

Then Our Blessed Mother appears and points in the direction of the boys. But John sees only wild animals like bears, tigers, and wolves. They howl and growl and he is scared. Our Lady bids him tame them.







Suddenly, the scene is transformed as all the wild animals become lambs. Our Lady tells John that it will be his mission to win over innumerable boys, to show them with kindness that it is better to love and to be good. He will succeed by being himself, and by striving to become humble, strong and robust.

As little John wakes up, he wonders whether what he had seen was only a dream. He turns over and over in his mind the appearances of Jesus and Mary, and he decides to tell his family about his dream.







The interpretations of each member of the family are amusing. Joseph says that he will become a shepherd. Anthony—not without malice—predicts that he will become a gang leader, while his Grandma gently admonishes him not to attach any importance to dreams. Only his mother sees the future priest.

As a juggler at a fair in Becchi draws crowds with his tricks, little John watches with keen interest. I must learn how to do that, he thinks, because this way I can get the attention of children. And then, after each performance, I can give them lessons in catechism.





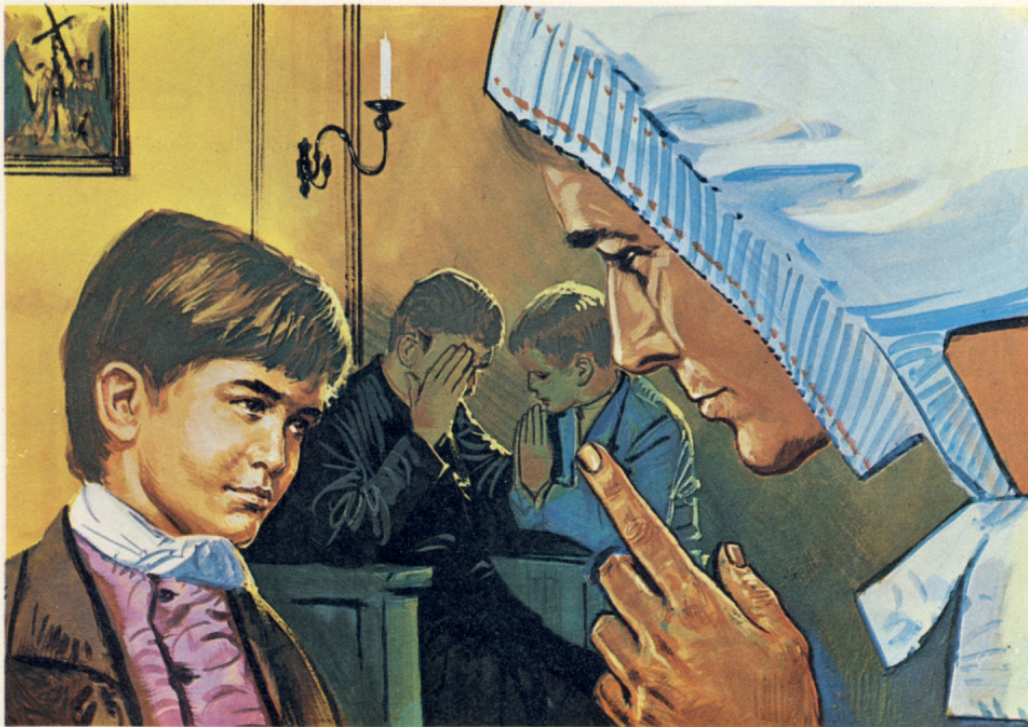


This is how John becomes God's little instrument. He entertains the neighboring children with many tricks, like walking on a rope or balancing a rod with a marble on top of his nose, and always—in between and after—he gets across some good thoughts from the Sunday sermon of the parish priest.

John strings a rope between two trees, and he walks on it as if he had done nothing else all his life. All the bystanders are gasping with admiration, and the general opinion is that he would make an excellent acrobat.





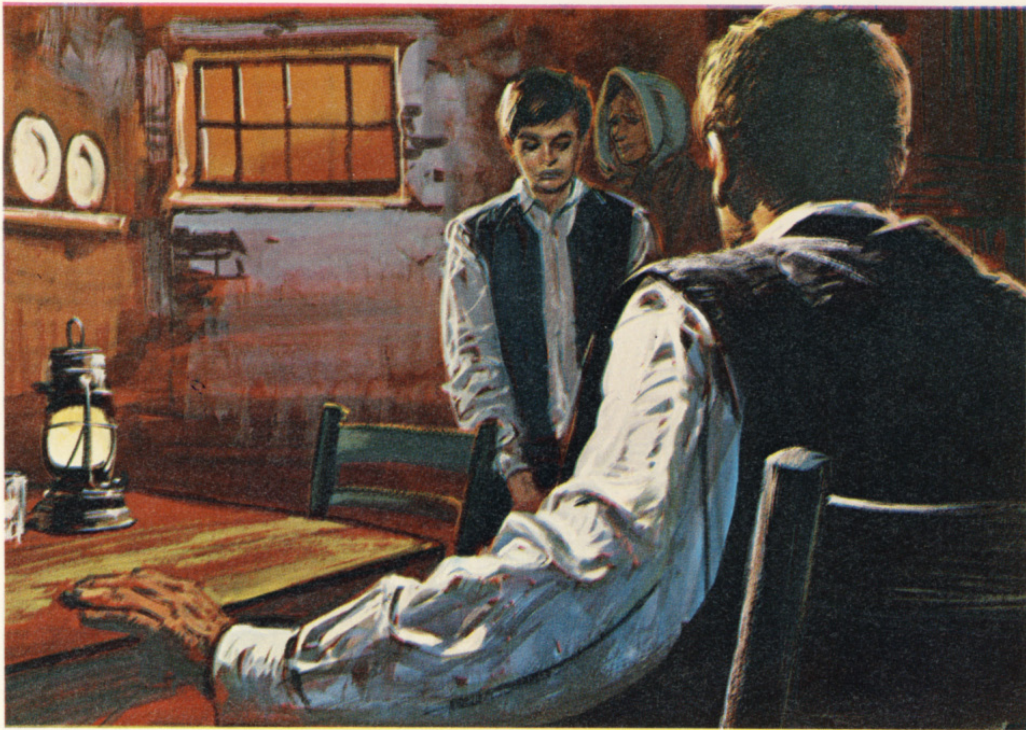


His mother knows that he will be a fine priest some day. Cultivating in him a spirit of true piety, she prepares him well for his first Confession and Communion.

As the idea of becoming a priest takes hold, John is often seen studying his religion. "I must learn all I can to instruct future audiences if, by the grace of God, I will become a priest one day," he thinks when he recalls his dream.







John's older stepbrother, Anthony, bears him a grudge. He is jealous of the boy's many talents and of his ability to study. "You lazy bum," he insults his little brother. "I sweat and earn my daily bread with my hands while you just sit around and read books. Out with you! This is not a house for a good-for-nothing."

John's brokenhearted mother is forced to send him away in search of work. "Go, my son," she sobs. "Go in peace and may God always be with you. Be good always. Heaven will protect you. Good-bye!"





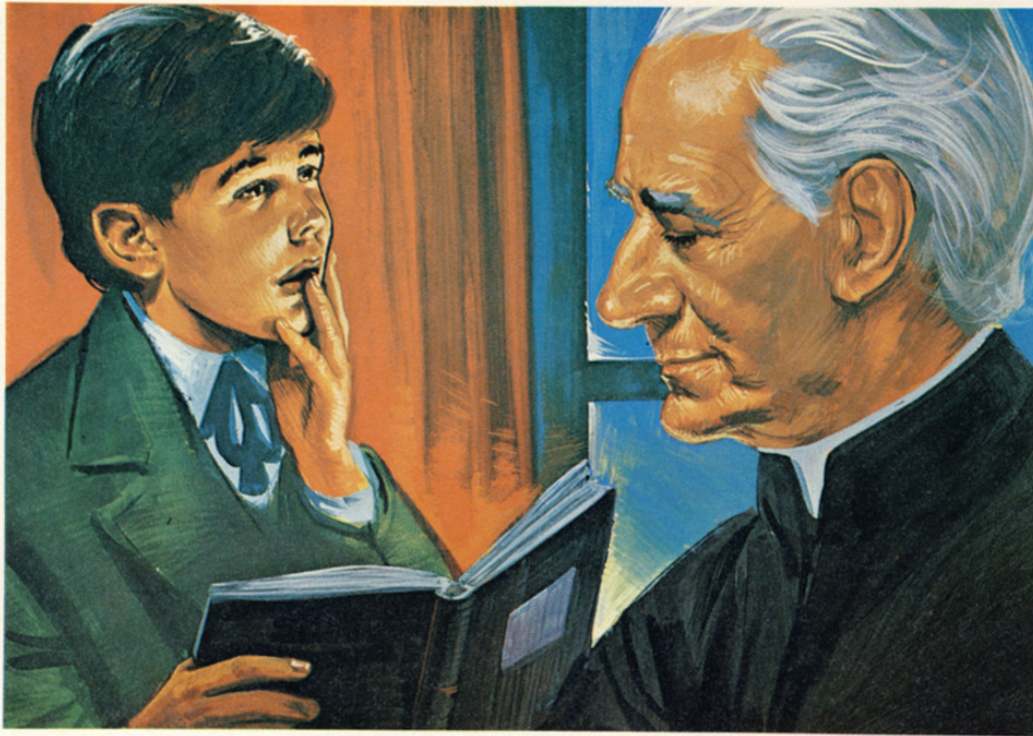


John is taken in as a shepherd by a farmer called Moglia. "I have no father," he says, "and I need a job to earn a living." Mr. Moglia, moved by his request and circumstances, takes him in as a farmhand.

After two years of manual labor, a meeting with good Father Calosso turns out to be providential for John. The kind pastor is impressed with the intelligence of the little boy who knows the Sunday sermon by heart. The good old priest decides to give John lessons in Latin, in order to help him become a priest.







Fr. Calosso takes John into his own home so that he can continue his studies. "The boy is definitely meant for learning," he says, "and he must receive a good education."

Little John Bosco receives a lesson. His teacher wants him to be well prepared, and John is eager to learn as much as he can in order to master the knowledge which is necessary for the priesthood.







John's good benefactor, the dying Fr. Calosso, gives John the key to his savings so that he can continue his education. "Remember me in your prayers, my son," he says to the sobbing boy. "I shall never forget you, dear Father," he promises. John afterwards gives the key to Fr. Calosso's relatives who came for it and took everything away.

One night John has another dream. He sees the same lady who appeared to him previously, and he beams with joy when the lady says to him: "Courage, son! Look at all these lambs. You will always lead them in the right direction, and I shall always help you."







The dream fills John with joy and strength. "Now I know," he thinks, "that Heaven wants me to be a priest forever." As he shares his happiness with his friends, he founds the Society for a Good Time, which aims to serve God joyously.

At the fair, John watches all the performers in order to learn tricks which are more advanced and more difficult. As he talks with the priests who mingle with the crowds, he meets the seminarian, Joseph Cafasso, who will become his model and spiritual guide.







The conversation between the cleric Cafasso and little John is interesting. The young seminarian talks about a life dedicated entirely to God while John favors a combination that would include active charity so as to win over souls for God.

John becomes a popular leader among the boys. They are all very fond of him because he is always kind and cheerful. He often falls back on his tricks and entertains his friends for hours with short, easy prayers in between.

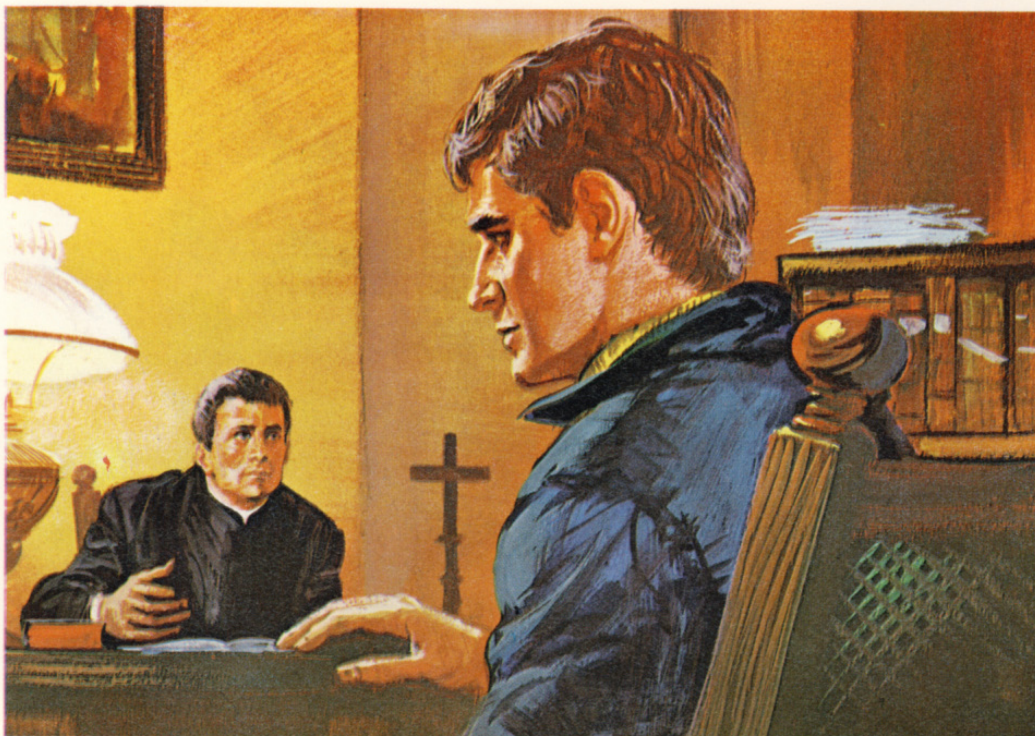






John is now a teenager. He has finished his courses and informs his mother that he wants to be a Franciscan Friar. "Have you consulted our priest?" she asks. "Yes, Mother! He wants me to go and see Father Cafasso in Turin."

Good Father Cafasso receives him with joy, but tells him plainly that he is not meant to be a Friar. "You must go to the major seminary in Chieri," he advises him, "and I shall help you pay part of your fees."







At Chieri, he makes friends with a Jewish boy. They are the same age, and they get along very well. His new pal becomes interested in John's religion. "I would love to be like you," he tells him.

The father of the Jewish boy does not want his son to become a Christian. "Never," he says firmly. "I shall never give my consent to your changing your religion!" When the boy insists, he disinherits him.







The name of the newly-baptized boy is Peter. Both he and John are now very happy. As their friendship deepens, they provide the other boys with an example of how good, cheerful lads, who are fond of God and men, should conduct themselves.

Some ragamuffins, engaged in horseplay, want to draw other boys into what they consider fun and games. They insist on having the reluctant Louis Comollo join them. When Louis resists, they become abusive.







It is not long before the ruffians pounce on him, and a shower of fists descends upon their helpless victim. Bosco rushes to the rescue and fights off the bullies, who run away.

After the two boys exchange introductions, “I am John Bosco,” “I am Louis Comollo,” their talk soon turns to Comollo’s most cherished topic—his entrance into the seminary. “I too would like to be a priest,” says John.







John Bosco meets old pals. They have heard that he wants to enter the seminary in Chieri, and they have come to say good-bye to him. John welcomes their thoughtful kindness.

The first step of his career in the priesthood is reached, and John dons the cassock. The occasion is a lively and moving one, as eager eyes watch the ceremony. The solemn silence is broken only by the sobs of his dear mother, Margaret, who sheds tears of joy.







John enters the seminary and places all his trust in God. "You know, O God," he prays, "that I want to be a priest for the poorest of the poor among the children. You showed me my mission when I was 9 years old. Help me now to realize it!"

John continues to make great progress in his studies as well as in the acquisition of virtue. He frequents the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist. "I don't mind skipping breakfast," he confides to Comollo, "but I must receive Communion every day."





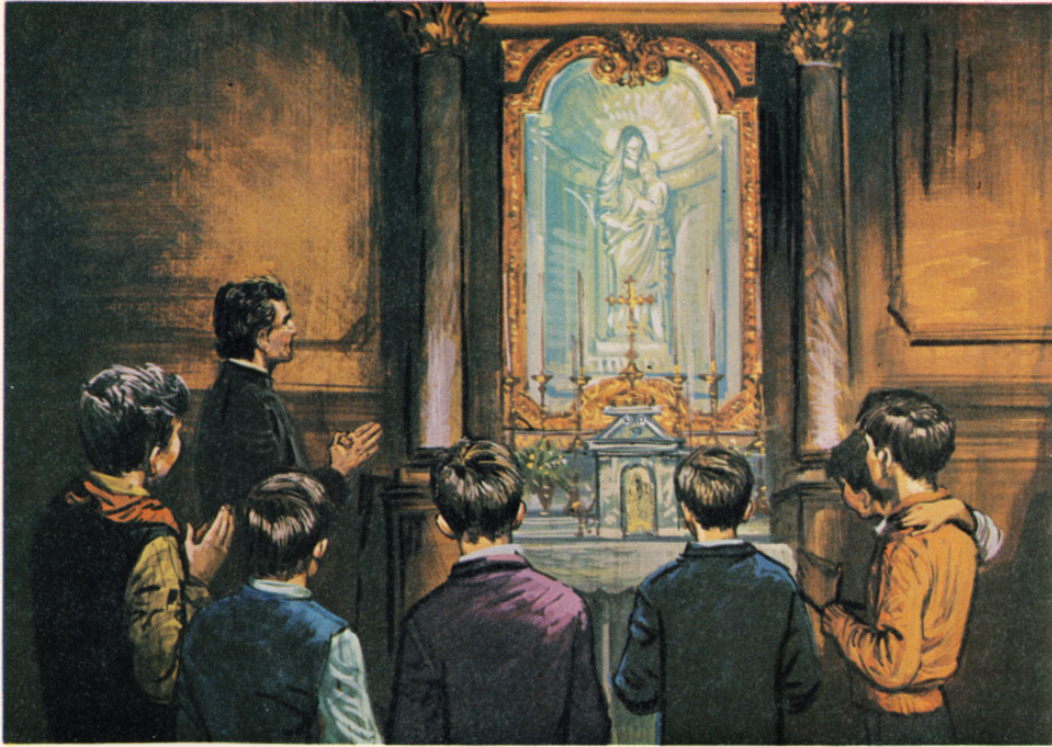


By special permission, the boys are allowed to visit John Bosco, their dear friend, every day. They burst onto the playground of the seminary every afternoon for lively games.

Drawn to John Bosco, youngsters come from everywhere to enjoy his company. They are older now, but they remember that he was once the hero and the leader of their games. They talk to him about their dreams of the future.





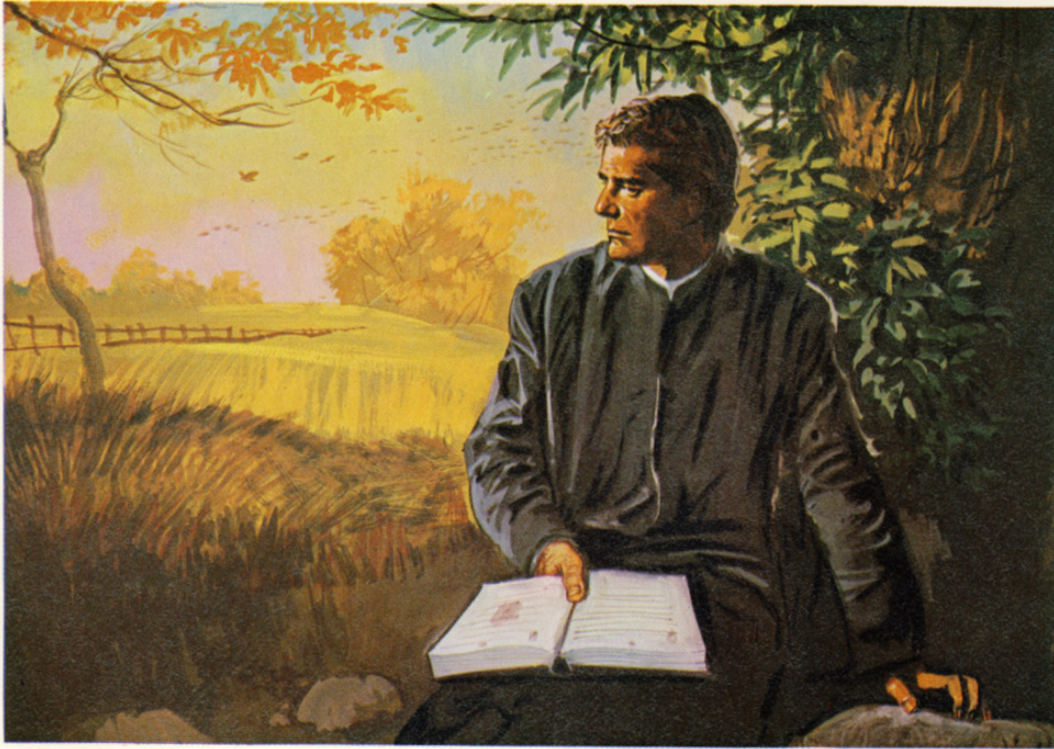


Whether all those boys have come for games or for a talk with their friend John, they always spend some time with him in the chapel of the seminary, where they adore Christ in the Eucharist and pray to Our Lady.

On holidays, Bosco is everything to everybody. His native village, Becchi, needs a good tutor badly. When he does not teach literature, he instructs the boys in solid trades like carpentry, bookbinding, printing, or shoemaking.





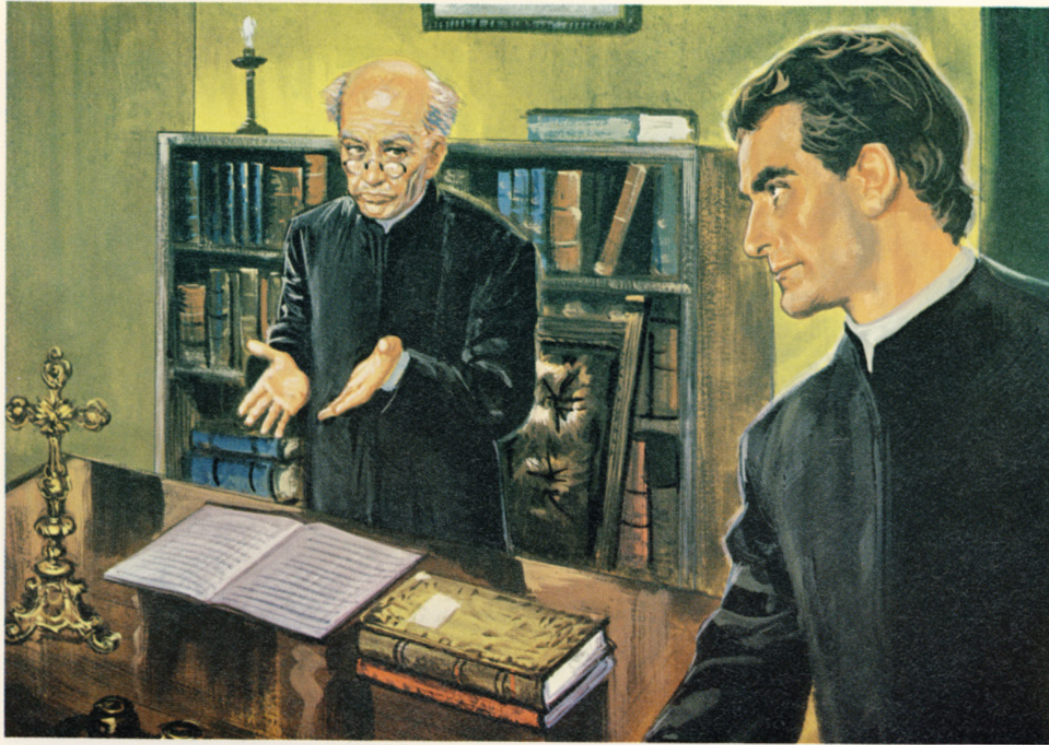


At home, during a much-needed and well-deserved vacation, after having instructed the boys in one trade or another, he would spend time thinking about his childhood and the dream he had when he was 9 years old. . . .

John is a good preacher and his parish priest often asks him to take over. His sermonettes are very popular, because he knows well how to make them interesting with stories which are sometimes amusing and always instructive.





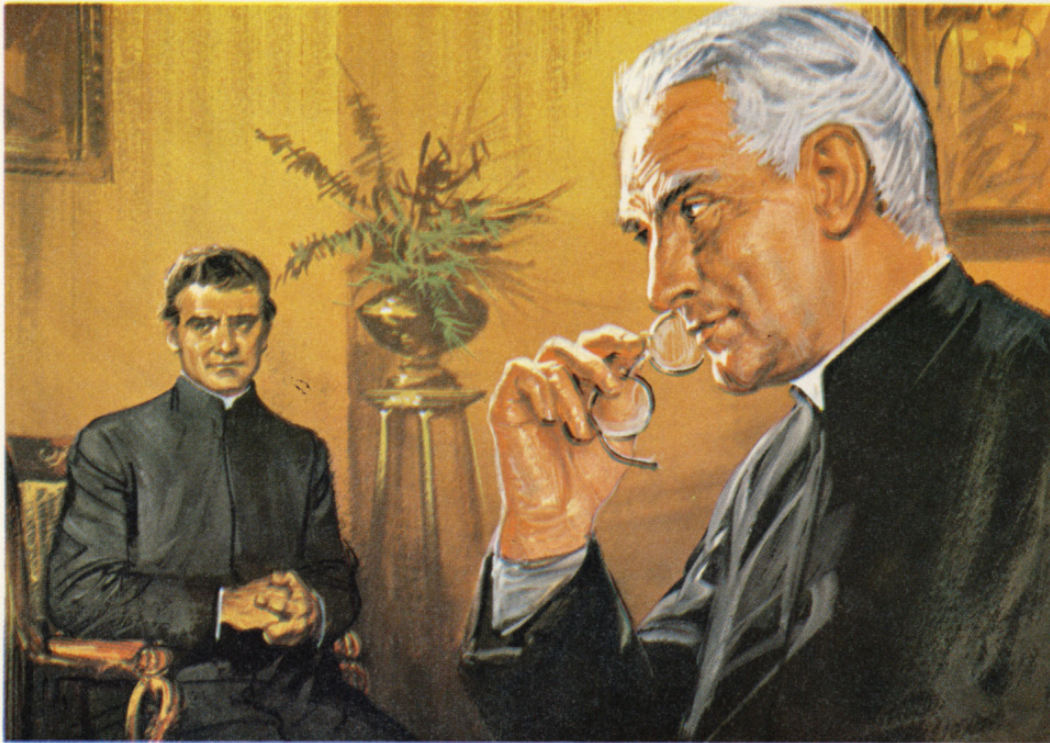


His parish priest, a good and experienced old pastor, praises Bosco for his well-prepared talks and encourages him to love the art of preaching. He also stresses the need to speak as frankly and as simply as possible.

At the end of his holidays, Bosco's departure for the seminary would inevitably plunge many a youngster into sadness. "Oh, come back quickly, John," they would say. "We will miss you!"

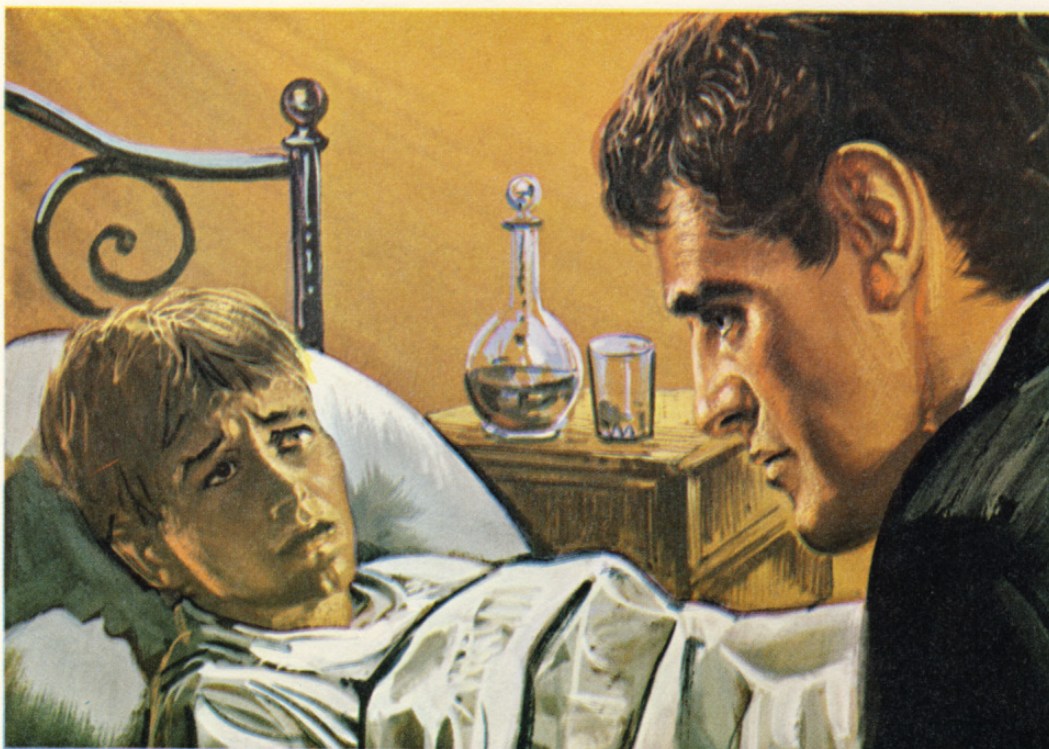






Bosco makes the acquaintance of Father Borel, a good and learned priest. They discuss how to take care of so many boys who are neglected by their parents and left to roam the streets, an easy prey to all sorts of dangers and vice.

John's dear friend, Comollo, is dying and John is heartbroken. "I now very much want to be with God," are Comollo's last words. "You, John, you will live long and you will do very much to help the young!"







One night, after his death, Comollo appeared to John. At first he was awfully frightened by the mysterious voice of the apparition, but then he rejoiced very much at the reassuring words: "Bosco, I am saved!"

In a friendly conversation with the archbishop, John talks about his eagerness to become a priest. "My health has been poor since Comollo appeared to me," he says, "and I would like to request that Your Grace ordain me a year ahead of time!"

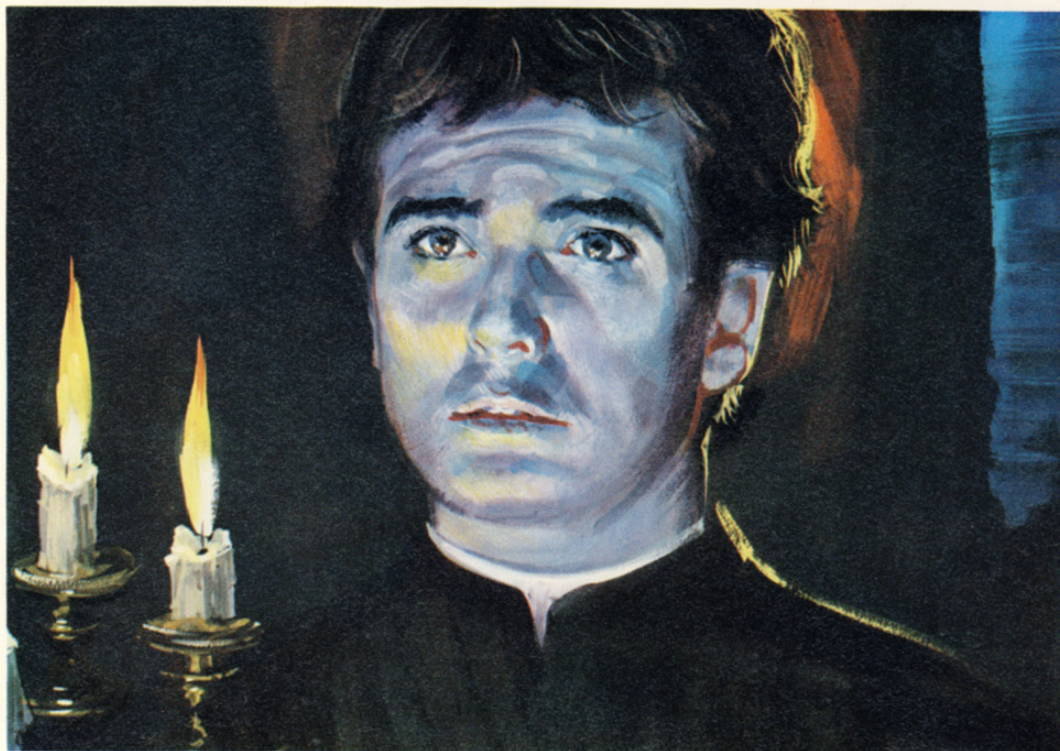






After consultation with John Bosco's teachers at the seminary, the archbishop grants him the favor he has requested, and John becomes a deacon. Only one more step, and he will be a priest forever.

On the eve of his priestly ordination, Bosco prays: "O Jesus, tomorrow I will be your priest. You have called me to be a soldier in your army, and I shall dedicate my life to help children in need. Mary Most Holy, bless my priesthood."







On the 5th of June in the year 1841, John Bosco is ordained a priest. His mind is filled with gratitude for the divine Providence which has led him toward the priesthood. The good Lord and his heavenly mother have been assisting him step by step to reach this glorious goal.

Don Bosco's first Mass is celebrated at the altar of the Guardian Angel in the little church of Saint Francis of Assisi. He is overjoyed as he pronounces the words, "Lord I am not worthy. . . ."







Don Bosco's mother gives her son, the priest, a piece of advice: "My Son," she says, "to be a priest means suffering and renunciation. Your apostolate will be wonderfully successful. Also, to live a life of poverty will contribute to the results of your apostolate."

A criminal is led to the place of execution. The priest at the side of the condemned man is Father Joseph Cafasso. "Let's invoke the help of God and the assistance of the Blessed Virgin Mary," the priest whispers. "An Act of Contrition... Hail Mary..."







Don Bosco joins Father Cafasso in visiting poor prisoners. Almost all are criminals under sentence of death. Don Bosco feels faint at the sight of so much waste and misery. Father Cafasso advises him to stop visiting the jails.

Teenagers fight in the streets. They quarrel over money and threaten each other with drawn knives and their words are bad and offensive.







The sacristan is annoyed because a boy who cannot serve Mass has entered the sacristy. "Get out of here," he yells, "before I hit you with this broomstick." Don Bosco rushes to the boy's rescue. He reprimands the sacristan and speaks to the boy gently and kindly.

During the conversation, he finds out that the boy's name is Bartholomew Garelli and that he is an orphan who lost both father and mother when he was a small child. Don Bosco asks him to wait in church until after Mass, when he promises to continue with their talk.







The conversation that ensues is pleasant and cheerful. Don Bosco's kindness puts the stranger at ease. When he learns that the boy can neither read nor write, he asks, "Well then, can you whistle?" and Bartholomew laughs out loud—for the first time in many years.

When Don Bosco teaches Garelli the "Hail Mary," he repeats the words after him with moving simplicity and concentration. "O Mother," the priest prays quietly, "it is your day today, the 8th of December. It is indeed a good beginning!"







A week later, to Don Bosco's great delight, Garelli returns with many other boys—all are much like himself. Don Bosco welcomes them with open arms. "You are all welcome," he says. "You are all Don Bosco's boys! Please come back and bring your friends."

Don Bosco begins to instruct all comers in catechism. How they love him! How he loves them! They become great friends, and they promise to learn their religion well. Don Bosco realizes that his first dream has come true.







Every day the number of boys is growing. By now they count about two hundred and their numbers keep increasing. Don Bosco is glad that his mission is getting off to such a good start, and he murmurs a prayer to ask Jesus' holy mother for her continued assistance.

One night, Mary Most Holy, the powerful help of Christians, again appears to Don Bosco in a dream and shows him his future place of work in Valdocco, a suburb of Turin: "You will build a big church for me right there on these plains," she says. "It will be the house of the Lord, from where His glory and mine will shine throughout the world."

