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ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Man of the day:

Saint John Bosco

How would you like to have as your friend a big gray dog who looks like a shaggy wolf, who seems to appear out of nowhere when you're in trouble, and when you look around after the bad men have run away, he's gone? A kid's best friend, that's what he'd be. John Bosco had that dog, or the dog had him. It's hard to tell which.

Now, there are two kinds of people who should never teach boys: people who don't like boys or know what they are, and people who do not like men or know what they are. Saint John Bosco was the greatest teacher of boys the modern world has seen, and that was partly because he remained a boy all his life long.

When John Bosco was only a small boy he had a dream that all kinds of fierce animals were chasing him, but while he was running away, a woman's voice told him instead to bring those animals into pasture, and when he did, they became a flock of gentle sheep. John took the dream to heart, and when he grew up and became a parish priest in Turin, he saw plenty of wild and fierce animals roaming the

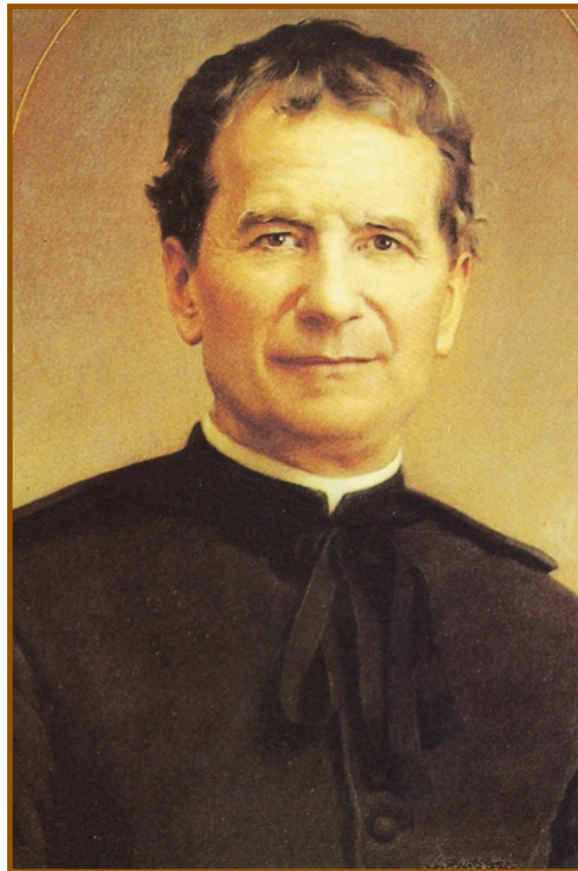
streets. They were the homeless boys of that big city black with soot from the factories. Those boys were growing up to be worse than beasts. John Bosco's heart went out to them.

What would you do if you wanted to bring God to rough boys on the streets? Let's say right off that

whatever you'd do, it would help if you had the physique for it. John Bosco had it. He grew up with hard physical work on his mother's plot of land, which she and he and his brother had to tend themselves after the father died, plowing, planting, reaping, caring for the cows and horses and pigs, and keeping the vineyard. But John had a hobby that didn't involve shovels and pitchforks. He would set up a small stage in front of his friends and repeat what the priest said on Sunday, but he added in things that the priest didn't do. John walked on his hands and did cartwheels. He did magic tricks, picking coins out of people's ears. He did as a

boy the things he would later do *for the boys*. He was already an athlete for God.

A lot of the priests in Turin didn't like John Bosco, because they were all about having clean linen and drinking tea, while John was walking a tightrope in front of twenty cheering and very dirty



boys, catching their attention by his strength and agility, and winning their hearts with his good humor and his love.

So they tried to shut him down. That is not a new thing in the world. God would cause John Bosco to succeed despite the grumbling and the envy of other churchmen. That's also not a new thing in the world.

Who was the first boy that Father John Bosco – Don Bosco as they called him – saved from poverty and ignorance? One day Don Bosco overheard the sacristan of his church scolding a teenage boy, a scruffy and ragged lad from the streets. He wanted the boy to assist at Mass, but the boy said he didn't know how to do it. "Then get lost!" hollered the sacristan, but Don Bosco interrupted.

"Let me have the boy," he said.

The boy's name was Bartolomeo Garelli. He was fifteen. Did he know when to kneel at Mass and when to stand? He didn't even know how to make the sign of the cross. So Don Bosco taught him how, and made him promise to come back the next day. The priest was kind to him, so the boy kept his promise. But he did more than keep his promise, just as Don Bosco was more than simply kind. Bartolomeo brought a couple of other boys with him. That is how Don Bosco's ministry to the wayside youth of Turin began. If the boy had a home, Don Bosco would go and visit him there, and meet his mother and father and his brothers and sisters. If the boy wanted food, he got it for him. All the boys, just like all the rest of us, needed the grace of God, so Don Bosco took them to church and taught them the faith. They needed play, so he took them also to the park, where he mingled his instruction with games and athletic feats.

You must not think that Don Bosco was just an

ordinary man who was good with children. He was a brilliant man. He wrote more books in his life than a lot of people have read – nearly a hundred of them. His superiors gave him the chance to be a professor at a university, and he would have taken it, because he was an obedient priest, but he told them that he still felt he needed to take care of the poor children – that was what God had called him to do. Three hundred boys – and his ministry was just beginning!

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Imagine the yard outside of your church, and imagine that there are fifteen or twenty boys playing football on it. That would be something, wouldn't it? Not for Don Bosco. He had *three hundred boys* playing outside of his church. Not all priests were happy about that.

The people of the parish weren't

always happy, either. Boys are noisy creatures. They trample the grass. The ball they're kicking sometimes bounces into the flowerbeds. One of the boys might step on a lily. All kinds of terrible things like that can happen. So you must imagine Don Bosco leading the boys on a Sunday walk, miles and miles into the countryside, arriving at a church, asking permission to say Mass there, doing so with all those boys in attendance, then having breakfast in the open air, followed by play, and catechism, and the long walk back into Turin, singing hymns as a choir would sing them, and praying the rosary. The boys would remember those Sundays for the rest of their lives.

Don Bosco went on to found the Salesians, named after Saint Francis de Sales. The Salesians follow the wisdom of its founder. Kindness, not punishment, was the key. Don Bosco could always get the boys to obey him by being kind to them, by praising their good works, and by showing them that he loved them and would do anything he could to feed them, house them, teach them, and build up

their souls. Now, I could now write fifty pages about the Order and its thousands of houses and the hundreds of thousands of boys to whom they ministered during the life of Don Bosco himself. But I don't have fifty pages of room, and you don't have fifty pages of time, so I will turn to two things that should warm the hearts of boys.

One was their mother. A lot of the boys were orphans, and whether they were or not, Don Bosco was a man, and a boy needs a mother's care too, something that he could not quite give them. That was why he begged his mother Margarita to come and join them. It meant a great sacrifice for her, to leave her beloved little cottage in the country, and the farm she had worked from the time she was married, to go to dingy and noisy and dangerous Turin, the big city, and be mother, housemaid, nurse, and teacher to hundreds of boys. But she did it. They called her Mamma Margarita, and what that one old woman did freed up Don Bosco to build more and more – teaching, always teaching, establishing the Oratory of Saint Francis, hiring professors for it, founding a seminary within it, and reaping the reward of vocations to the priesthood. Man and woman, mother and son, working together as if in a dance, as God intended it to be.

The other was a dog named Grigio. He was three feet tall at the shoulder. Take a yardstick and put on end on the floor. That was how big Grigio was, not counting his neck and head. He had thick white-gray fur, and a muzzle like a wolf's. He could put the fear of dog into the robbers and killers that would swarm in the alleys of Turin. Where did

Don Bosco find Grigio the dog? Nowhere. Don Bosco did not find him. Grigio found Don Bosco. Remember: "It was not you who chose me," said Jesus to the apostles, "but I who chose you." Many times when Don Bosco was walking from the country into Turin, or walking the city streets at night, this magnificent animal would appear out of nowhere to walk beside him, just when assassins were about to leap out at Don Bosco from the dark and kill him. One time Grigio pinned a bad man by the throat, and he would have killed him if the man hadn't pleaded with Don Bosco to call his dog off. The boys loved Grigio, but they could never get him to eat anything they gave to him. Grigio refused, even when once they got him to enter the refectory where everybody took their meals. Grigio would come and go when Don Bosco needed his protection, and that was that.

He even appeared to the priest and a friend of his thirty years later, when they lost at night in a swamp full of bogs and quicksand. "If only my Grigio were here!" cried Don Bosco, when sure enough, there was the dog, who led them by a zigzag path out of the danger.

The dog may have been a guardian angel. But wouldn't our own dogs be guardian angels, if they could?



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