

# Saint John Bosco

## *Champion for the Young*

by Emily Beata Marsh, FSP



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Illustrated by Wayne Alfano



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## THE FIRST DREAM

Nine-year-old John Bosco was in the middle of a fight. All around him boys were yelling, screaming, punching, and hitting.

“Stop it! Stop it!” John yelled as he ran around the field. But shouting at them wasn’t working! *Maybe if I start hitting them, they’ll stop hurting one another,* he thought. John kept darting between the fist-fighting, screaming boys. Suddenly he bumped into a kind-looking woman.

“Don’t hit them, John,” she said in a soft voice.

Startled, John looked around. *What is happening?* he thought. Now the boys had become wild beasts!

“Be gentle, John,” the woman said. “You will win their friendship if you are gentle.”

Instantly, the wild beasts turned into little lambs. Confused, John looked at the woman. She smiled.

“Lead these lambs to pasture, John. Take care of them. Later you will understand.”

Then John woke up. He realized that it had all been a dream.



Nine years earlier, on August 16, 1815, Francis Bosco called to his sons Anthony and Joseph. "Come, boys! Your new brother is here!"

Seven-year-old Anthony and two-year-old Joseph crept into the bedroom where their mother, Margaret, was propped up on the bed holding a new baby.

"Here he is, boys," Margaret whispered. "This is John."

Francis lifted Joseph up so he could touch John's hand with his finger. Anthony stood behind him. Francis looked at his family and smiled.

"Tomorrow we will take him to Saint Andrew the Apostle Parish in Castelnuovo (Kah-stel-NWO-voh) to be baptized," he said.

Francis took the newborn to the church while Margaret stayed home to recover from childbirth. The parish in Castelnuovo d'Asti (Kah-stel-NWO-voh DAH-stee) was the closest church to the Bosco's small village of Becchi (BEK-ee) in northern Italy. Only one day old, John Melchior Bosco was baptized there on August 17, 1815.

“This is a special boy, Francis,” the priest remarked.

“Yes, Father,” Francis replied. “All my boys are special: Anthony, Joseph, and now John. We are blessed, Father.”

Francis Bosco was a farmer and a handyman. His first wife had died, leaving him with one son, Anthony. Francis married Margaret Occhiena (O-KYAY-nah), and their son Joseph was born in 1813, just two years before John.

Francis, Margaret, and their three boys lived with Francis’ mother in a stone cottage on a small piece of land. They worked hard and lived simply. John’s home was a happy one. Surrounded by love, the little boy grew quickly.

“Joseph,” Francis called from the field, “run and tell your mama that we are almost ready for lunch. Anthony and I have been working hard all morning and we are hungry!”

“Un-gwee!” little John mimicked, clapping his hands. He held up a worm to show his papa.

“Let that go, John,” Francis laughed. He picked his son up and swung him to his shoulders. “Let’s have lunch, boys.”

"Here are my men!" Margaret smiled at her husband with their three sons in tow. "Come, come . . . lunch is almost ready."

Margaret handed Joseph the plates to put on the table. She took little John from Francis and scrubbed his hands. A few minutes later, the family was sitting down to their midday meal.

"Let's thank the Lord," Francis said. They bowed their heads as Francis led them in a prayer. The sun shone outside and a poor but happy family enjoyed their meal inside. Thankfulness and laughter filled their house . . . for now.



During the week, the Bosco family worked hard on their small farm. Francis also worked for a man on one of the neighboring farms. Every Sunday, the family walked to Castelnuovo for Mass. One-year-old John liked to watch the priest and the altar servers. He knelt very still when the priest lifted up the Host and the chalice.

"That is Jesus, little John," Mama Margaret liked to tell him. "Jesus loves you!"

Walking home from church one day, Francis and Margaret watched their three boys run ahead of them.

"It's almost May, Francis," Margaret said. "Father will be having a Rosary procession at the church each night."

"Yes, just like he does every year," Francis replied. "Do you think all the boys are old enough to go?"

"Anthony and Joseph went last year," Margaret said. "But John is still just a baby. . . ."

"He is so attentive at Mass, though," Francis spoke slowly. "There's something special about the way he watches the priest."

"You're right," Margaret said. "We will bring him."

May came quickly, and the Bosco family joined in the nightly Rosary processions at the church.

One May evening, Margaret called to Joseph, "Go tell your papa to come in from the field. It's almost time to leave for church!"

Joseph obediently went out to the field. Francis was already walking toward the house.

"Why are you so late, Francis?" Margaret asked. "We have to leave."

"Margaret, I'm so tired tonight," Francis said. "It was very hot today, and I had to clean out the neighbor's cellar at the end of the day. It was so cold in there."

“Are you feeling ill? Maybe you should stay home?” Margaret asked as she buttoned John’s coat. “There is some soup on the table. Eat some and go to bed. Rest will be good for you. You have been working very hard.”

When Margaret and the boys returned home that evening, Francis was already in bed. But the next morning, he was still in bed. Three days later, he was very sick with pneumonia.

The next day, with Margaret, Anthony, Joseph, and John gathered around his bed, Francis died. John was not quite two years old.

Margaret led her sons out of the room. “No, no,” little John protested. “If Papa doesn’t come, I don’t come.”

Margaret knelt down by her youngest son. “Your father has gone away.” She paused. “You don’t have a papa here, little John.”

This sad conversation remained John’s earliest memory—his mother kneeling beside him, hugging him, and whispering through her tears, “You don’t have a papa here, little John.”

## ACROBAT FOR GOD

Mama Margaret paused in the doorway of the room where her three sons were sleeping. It was very early, but it was time to wake them up to begin their chores. Since Papa Francis' death, the Bosco family had worked very hard to keep up their farm. Anthony was now eleven years old, Joseph was six, and John was four.

"Boys," she said gently, "it's time to get up."

Anthony rolled over. Joseph squinted and stretched, and John propped himself up on one elbow.

"Good morning, Mama," he said.

"Good morning," Mama Margaret smiled. "Get dressed now, boys, and then we'll say a prayer to start the day."

After prayers each morning, the Bosco boys milked the cows, led them out to the field, fed the chickens, gathered wood, and brought in water. Then, after a simple breakfast, Joseph and John walked to school while Anthony helped Mama Margaret on the farm.



When Joseph and John came home, they scampered out to the field. There was always a lot to do on the Bosco farm!

“What are we doing today, Mama?” John asked.

“Hello, boys!” Mama Margaret was kneeling in the dirt. “How was school? Did you find the bread I left for you on the table? Joseph, please help Anthony with the hoeing, and Johnny, you can help me plant these seeds.”

“Okay, Mama,” John sat down next to his mother. Mama Margaret showed him how to plant the seeds carefully and quickly.

Each day, Johnny helped Mama Margaret with a different chore: planting, picking vegetables, shelling corn, stacking wood, baking bread. In the evenings after dinner, Joseph and John studied while Mama Margaret mended socks and shirts.

One such evening, Mama Margaret put away her mending.

“Come, boys,” she said. “It’s time to say a prayer before we go to bed. We must thank God for all he has given—”

A knock at the door interrupted her.

“Who could that be?” she wondered aloud. She opened the door to a shivering young man in a threadbare coat.

"Please, ma'am," he said, "I had very bad crops this year, and I haven't eaten in two days. Could you . . ."

"Come in, come in," Mama Margaret said. "We can always find an extra bowl of soup."

The boys looked at one another. This was not the first time this had happened, and Mama Margaret always managed to find some food for the people in need. She often gave them a place to sleep in the stable. And she always invited their "guests" to join them for the family's night prayer.

Johnny watched all of this from his place on the floor by the fireplace. From his mother's good example he was learning how to be generous and to love his neighbor. But there was much more learning to do.

The year that John turned nine, he visited one of his aunts. His aunt worked for the local priest, and the priest taught him how to read. After that, he read history books or legends aloud to his family. Sometimes other families came to listen, too. John knew that not every family prayed together like his family did. So before and after each reading, he invited his listeners to say a Hail Mary together.

In the summer, nobody wanted to be inside listening to stories. So John tried something different. During the summers when he was ten, beginning and through his teenage years, he went to watch the traveling jugglers and acrobats in town. Then he practiced and practiced: tightrope walking, leaps and cartwheels, and handstands. He learned some magic tricks, too.

For John Bosco, Sunday was show day! After Mass, he gathered the children and some of the villagers in a corner of his family's field. He jumped up on the tightrope that he had stretched between two trees.

"Before we start," he called out, "we're going to pray a Rosary."

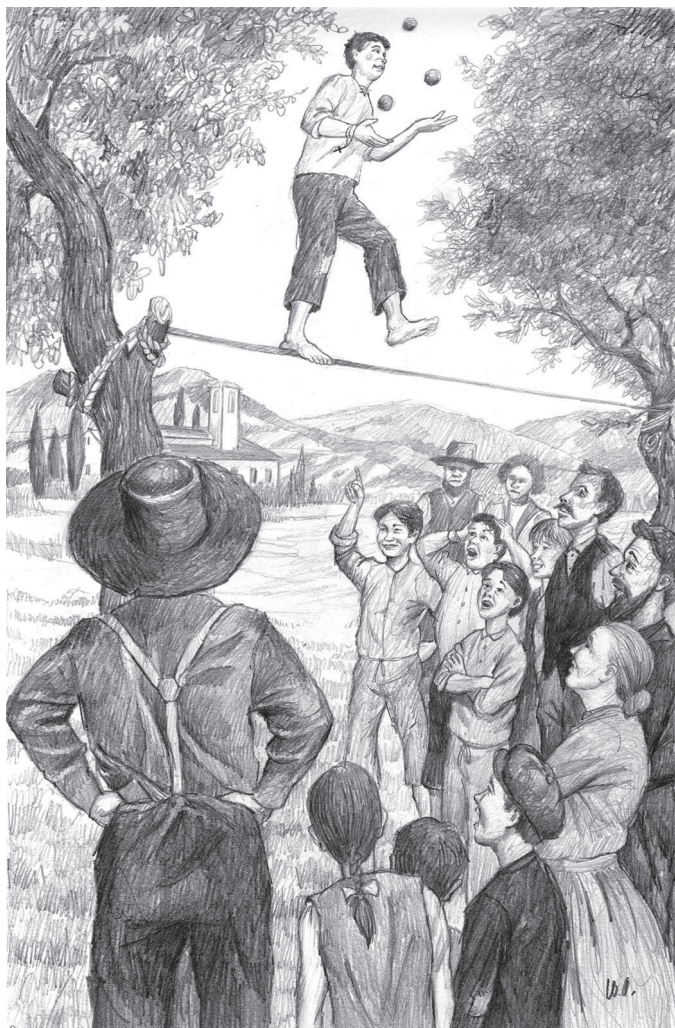
The crowd grumbled.

"We didn't come here to pray," someone said. A few people started to leave.

"After the Rosary, we'll have the show," John said. "That's how it works." Then he started the Rosary.

As promised, after the Rosary, he jumped back up on the tightrope and began leaping, jumping, and cartwheeling.

A few Sundays later, John expanded his show . . . and the prayer time! After the Rosary, he repeated what he remembered from the homily he had heard preached at



*"After the Rosary, we'll have the show," John said.  
"That's how it works."*

Mass. Then he walked through the crowd. Suddenly he pretended to pull a small rock out of a little boy's ear.

"Oh!" cried the little boy. "Where did that come from?" His mother smiled.

John pulled similar stones out of the ears of two other children. Jogging to the front of the crowd, he began juggling the rocks. He continued juggling as he jumped up on the tightrope. Letting the rocks fall to the ground, he used his feet and his hands to get across the tightrope. The show continued, delighting the villagers of Becchi.

"What will he think of next?" Mama Margaret marveled.