

# LOVE WHAT THE YOUNG LOVE

Don Bosco's way of Educating to Life

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## 1. THE SYSTEM:

One day in 1854 Don Bosco found himself in the office of the minister, Urban Rattazzi, and in conversation with him the honourable minister put Don Bosco a question, which Don Bosco had been asked several times by others, namely, what his educative method was. Don Bosco replied:

"Your Excellency surely knows that there are two systems of education: the repressive and the preventive. The former leans on force to repress and punish the guilty; the latter relies on gentleness to help the subject obey the law by offering him the most suitable and effective incentives. This is our method."

Two things must be noted in this reply of Don Bosco: One, that he clearly contrasted his method of education with the one widely in use in correction houses, which he felt to be inadequate, and two, that he called his method of education a "system" with the qualification "preventive". A clarification on each of these two key-words is essential.

Don Bosco did not elaborate a thoroughgoing scientific pedagogical system in the strict sense of the term. He was too much a man of action for that. "They want me to explain my method", he once exclaimed towards the end of his life. "Why, I do not even know it myself! I have always gone ahead as the Lord inspired my and circumstances required it." From this statement one must not conclude that Don Bosco had no guiding principles or a clear-cut method with specific goals and objectives in mind. Quite the contrary, as we shall soon see. The system that Don Bosco created and handed down to his sons was not born as a theory, but grew out of a lived experience of more than forty years spent in the midst, and in the service, of young people.

The term "preventive" easily leads to misunderstanding because of its negative connotation. It usually conjures up the idea of an over-protective environment of anxious educators and timid pupils, whom the former are constantly preoccupied to shield from any outside influence, lest it disturb the serenity of their tender consciences. This was definitely not the practice and the spirit of Don Bosco, who trained his boys for life in real-life situations adapted to their age and condition.

The word "preventive" comes from the Italian "*prevenire*", which has more the connotation of "to forestall", "to anticipate", "to provide for", than "to prevent". This might help to understand Don Bosco's mind as to the use of the term. He certainly strove might and main to prevent moral evil from taking possession of any of his boys. He was personally vigilant over his boys and their behaviour, the books they read the company they kept and the conversations they held. He exhorted his collaborators to do the same. But he emphasized that the educator should be present in the midst of his boys *anticipating* their needs, *forestalling* setbacks and negative experiences before they occur, and *leading* them gently to positive experiences, full of a rich human content. He insisted that in this way a bright, wholesome atmosphere be created through the educator's animating presence, which puts the boy "in the moral impossibility of sinning". The word "preventive" therefore has a wholly positive significance in Don Bosco's educational method, something like the significance it has in the term "preventive health care".

Don Bosco always maintained that the repressive system is easy and convenient for the educator, but leads to failure in education. The preventive system instead is very demanding and difficult for the educator, but easier and more advantageous for the pupils. It leads to good results in education.

Don Bosco gave careful thought towards the end of his life to elaborating the cardinal elements of his educative system. Proof of the fact are his three chief writings on the subject: The little treatise on *The Preventive System in the Education of the Young*, in 1873, the circular letter on *Punishments in Salesian Houses*, in 1883, and *The Letter from Rome*, in 1884. But more than to his writings, it is to his life that we must go in order to see the heart and the spirit on the educational method.

## 2. THE SOURCE:

In the words of Fr. Eugene Ceria, one of his chief biographers: "as some are born to write verses, and others to undertake journeys, Don Bosco was born to become a priest and an educator-priest" Already from a very young age he showed signs of the gift he had received from on high. When only five years of age he was teaching the rudiments of the Christian Doctrine to his companions in Becchi. As he himself remarked, he was very happy to be doing this, and it seemed to him that this was the only thing he had to do on earth. At the age of nine he received his first sign from heaven about where his life's work lay. This took place through a dream vision, the first of several that occurred throughout his life. I quote from his own account:

"At that age I had a dream, which remained profoundly impressed on my mind throughout my life. In the dream I seemed to be near my house in a rather spacious field, where a great crowd of young boys was gathered and were playing about. Some of the boys were laughing, others were playing, but not a few were blaspheming. On hearing those blasphemies I plunged myself in their midst, using my fists and strong words to silence them. In that moment there appeared a man of venerable appearance, in the prime of his manhood, elegantly attired. A white mantle covered his whole person; his face was so bright that I could not gaze at it. He called me by name and ordered me to place myself at the head of those boys, and added these words: 'Not with blows, but with meekness and charity must you win over your friends. Get about immediately to instruct them on the ugliness of sin and on the preciousness of virtue'.

From that time onward Don Bosco realised that his vocation was to serve the young and he gave himself unreservedly to his mission. Overcoming many and serious difficulties, this poor shepherd lad became a priest in 1841. Even during his seminary days at Chieri, a provincial town in Piedmont, North Italy, he would gather boys on Sundays and feastdays to instruct them; but it was in the first year of his priesthood in Turin, a city that was beginning to feel the impact of the industrial revolution, a city to which numerous boys were flocking from the countryside in search of work, that Don Bosco saw an opportunity to exercise his mission. These boys had left home and family to seek a livelihood in the city. Confused and disoriented in this large and strange place, with no home to go to, no work to do, no one to help them, they were an easy prey to crime, vices, diseases and exploitation. Often they would end up in jail, where in the company of older and hardened criminals, they became worse. After their term they would be released from prison, only to be nabbed again for another crime. And thus the vicious spiral went on and on, blighting the lives of hundreds of boys, even before they reached manhood.

Don Bosco's opportunity came when on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1841, while vesting for Mass, he met an orphan boy, Bartholomew Garelli. After a friendly chat, he invited the boy to come back to him the following Sunday and to bring his friends along. In a short time there were hundreds of them, attracted by the kindness, the goodness and the winning ways of Don Bosco. They would flock to him on Sundays and feastdays, and he would spend the whole day with them, chatting and playing and singing with them, and gradually instructing them in the Christian Doctrine and leading them to Mass and the Sacraments. The rest of the week he would spend seeking jobs for his young friends, visiting them at their places of work and inviting new friends to join his band.

Driven out from one vacant field to another by people who could not bear to have the peace and quiet of their Sundays disturbed by the din of hundreds of dirty, unruly youngsters, all screaming, yelling and jumping about to their hearts' content, Don Bosco finally managed to acquire a piece of land with a shed standing on it in a place called Valdocco, on the outskirts of Turin. Here his work took root and sprouted, and spread, first in other parts of North Italy, then to France, Spain, England, and across the ocean to South America.

It was necessary to speak at some length of Don Bosco's life and personal style, because the Salesian method of education as an inspiration stands out sharpest in the Founder. Before being a theory, his system of education was first a life that was lived, a personal experience of forty years and more in the service of the young. Any systematic account of Don Bosco's method of education must needs confront itself with this limpid source.

### 3. THE GOAL:

Don Bosco formulated his programme for boys in simple but meaningful statements. He spoke of forming "good Christians and upright citizens"; he set his sights on the "health, wisdom and holiness" of his boys, and proposed a lifestyle comprising "cheerfulness, study and piety".

The first thing that stands out from these and other statements of Don Bosco and his educational practice is the *unity* and *harmony* of the educational project. It covers all the essential requirements of the young person, and his needs of body, heart, mind and soul, from the need of food and lodging to the need of affection, culture and recreation, to the deeper aspirations for meaning and value, to the still deeper yearning for God and communion with Him. We might call this educational system an *integral humanism*.

The second thing worthy of note is that there is a definite hierarchy and order among these several dimensions of a young person that need to be catered to. For Don Bosco there was no doubt that the religious dimension is primary. It stands at the peak and the summit, and every other dimension is finalised (not instrumentalised) towards it. By religion is not meant first and foremost a particular creed with its rituals, practices and organised social setup, all of which go under the name of religious belief. By religious dimension is first meant that personal, free response of love and surrender to God, which we call faith. Although faith in God is linked with some particular religious belief, and for Don Bosco, a Christian priest working for Christian boys in a Christian context, the obvious reference is to the Christian religion; nevertheless he was most keen on inculcating the personal and free response, which we call faith. Religion in this sense, for Don Bosco, is the highest value, the unifying and integrating force in a young person's life that gives it direction, meaning and energy. It is the most important factor in a young person's growth to maturity.

By giving the primacy to the religious dimension, the other dimensions are not thereby discounted as of no value. They have their legitimate place and value, their consistency and autonomy, which must be fully respected and brought to play their vital role in the formation of the whole person. There is no question of instrumentalising these dimensions to that of faith, but of bringing them together in a harmonious blending, such that human and religious values integrate to build up a sound, balanced, mature personality.

Underlying these fundamental concepts there is in Don Bosco a very exalted notion of the human person, as a free and responsible agent, master of his own destiny, endowed with an inviolable dignity as a child of God, made to His image, and called to give a free and loving response to the infinite love of God here in this life, so as to live in perfect communion with Him forever after death. The human person therefore is the most sacred thing on earth, human life is most precious, and to achieve the goal proper to man is the most crucial thing that matters. That is why for Don Bosco, to educate a young person to live a truly human life was a passion, a vocation, to which he consecrated the whole of his life and all his energies.

### 4. THE METHOD

In Don Bosco's own words, "this system is based entirely on Reason, Religion and Loving Kindness". Before seeing these as three different methodological approaches to the education of the young, it is necessary to note that that these are three inner resources waiting to be trapped, three deep-seated aspirations of the human heart longing for fulfillment: *the need to know and understand, the need to love and be loved, the need to find significance and complete happiness in the Ultimate Mystery*. A system of education that makes these three elements the cardinal points of its educative approach to the young is sure to find a resonant chord in their hearts. Let us now consider them one by one, beginning with Loving Kindness.

#### a) Loving Kindness

It is at the centre of Don Bosco's method of education.

"Remember that education is a matter of the heart, of which God alone is the Master, and we can do nothing unless God teaches us the art and gives the key in our hands."

In a dream towards the end of his life, about which Don Bosco wrote a long and deeply moving letter from Rome on 10 May 1884 to his Salesians and boys at the Oratory of Valdocco, a past pupil by the name of Valfre appears to him and explains the efficacy of loving kindness. "See", said Valfre, "familiarity leads to affection, and affection leads to confidence.... Confidence opens the heart, which reveals everything without fear... They become frank.... They become docile to whatever is told them by the one who they feel certain loves them".

Of course, the path of loving kindness that brings about confidence is not always easy. To become a friend of young people is a slow conquest. Affection cannot be imposed. This is true Don Bosco knew it too well. "In every young heart, even of the most unfortunate, there is a chord". Don Bosco knew that the heart is like a fortress, always closed to rigidity and harshness. Hence his advice to educators and parents: "Strive to make yourself loved".

There is a way of loving the young in fact that is hardly perceptible to them. Don Bosco wants a type of love that manifests itself in concrete gestures, in one's behaviour, in one's manner of acting, of speaking, in the tone of the voice, in the smile. Don Bosco gave his followers the name Salesians because he wanted them to imitate the kindness and gentleness of St. Francis de Sales, who once remarked: "You can catch more flies with a drop of honey than a barrel of vinegar".

Love alone is not enough. He insists that we must stay with the young. "One must spend time with the young, take part in their games". He asks for something more: "**Love what the young love**". He exhorts his Salesians thus: The educator must love what the young love, and the young will come to love what the educators love. In the Letter from Rome of 1884 this important educative principle is explained thus:

"If the young feel that they are loved because the educators take part in the things that are pleasing to them, they learn to love the things they naturally don't like, such as discipline, study, etc., and these things they learn to do with enthusiasm and love".

Don Bosco lived this principle. He played with his students; he challenged them to a race and often won. With all the work he had in hand he spent time with them in recreation to converse with them; he cracked jokes, he recounted lively stories, and they laughed heartily, and full of happiness, he laughed too.

For Don Bosco all this was good and useful for the education of the young. But there still remained something more. Loving kindness has still another important trait, which in the Letter of Rome of 1884 is expressed thus: "It is not enough that the young are loved; it is necessary that they themselves feel that they are loved". In short one must also tell them that one loves them.

Don Bosco had no hesitation to tell them so. In the Preface of one of his first books, *The Companion of Youth*, which he had printed for his boys, he had written:

"My dear boys, I love you with all my heart. It is enough that you are young for me to love you very much".

One evening, giving the traditional goodnight to his boys, he said:

"My dear sons, you know how much I love you in the Lord, and how I am totally consecrated to do to you the greatest good I can... Whatever I am and whatever I have, my prayers, labours, health, my life itself, I wish to place all at your service. You can rely on me for whatever you need. I give you all of myself. It might be a miserable little thing, but when I give you all, it means that I reserve nothing for me."

The consequences of this declaration were astounding. Don Bosco loved all his boys in such a way that each one of them felt he was most particularly loved. One day a lively dispute arose among them as to who was the one Don Bosco loved most. When they approached him to settle the issue, Don Bosco held up his hand and pointed to his five fingers: "Which of my five fingers do you think I love best? I love all of them and each of them particularly, and I would be very sorry to have to part with any of them".

On the educative plane the consequences of a young person feeling himself loved are extraordinary. Don Bosco used to say: "The supreme happiness of a child is to feel itself loved". In the Letter from Rome this principle is enunciated: "One who feels loved, loves. The one who is loved obtains everything, especially from the young". Don Bosco lived more than forty years in the midst of boys. He claimed that he got whatever he asked for from them, and never even once did he need to raise his hand or his voice. The secret of his success with boys was Loving Kindness.

### ***b) Reason and Religion***

These are the two pillars of Don Bosco's method of education. However, they should not be seen as merely standing alongside each other, such that Reason illumines, clarifies, enlightens what Religion proposes, while Religion in its turn, provides the motivation, the ultimate meaning, significance and orientation of a project of life governed by Reason. Together, Reason and Religion build up that integration of Faith and Life, which is the goal of every sound education.

Between the two, as we have seen, there is a hierarchy, with Religion at the very top. For Don Bosco, the well-educated and mature human person is one who places at the apex of all his knowledge, the knowledge of God; at the summit of his life-project, his eternal happiness with God; and at the centre of his personal conscience, submission to the Will of God.

Reason stands for a wise and progressive enlightenment of the minds of the young, opening them to the world, to culture, to the realities of life and the appeal of values. Reason also implies a clear enlightenment of the mind on the truths concerning God and moral behaviour by a sound and systematic teaching of moral science.

In dealing with the young, Reason also signifies reasonableness, good sense, simplicity, and avoidance of anything artificial. The rules of good behaviour to be inculcated must be reasonable and essential; they must be clearly explained, and their necessity and value must be patiently brought home to the young. Reason in this context also means persuasiveness and dialogue, and formation of the conscience to personal responsibility and freedom.

The interplay of Reason, Religion and Loving Kindness in the educational system of Don Bosco is nowhere seen more clearly than in the delicate matter of discipline, corrections and punishments. While Don Bosco was insistent that the boys be corrected, each time they committed a fault, he tried to minimise punishments as much as possible. In a good-night talk of August 1863, he told his boys:

"I tell you quite frankly that I hate punishments. I dislike giving orders and threatening punishments for those who disobey. That is not my way. Even when someone does wrong, I'd rather correct him kindly. If he mends his ways, everything is settled. Should I have to punish any of you, I would be more severely punished myself because I would be very unhappy."

Loving kindness and reasonableness should be the inspiring motives in giving corrections and meting out punishments. Here are a few recommendations taken from Don Bosco's *Treatise on the Preventive System* :

1. An educator should seek to win the love of his pupils if he wishes to inspire fear in them. When he succeeds in doing this, the withholding of some token of kindness is a punishment which stimulates emulation, gives courage and never degrades.

2. With the young punishment is whatever is meant as a punishment. It has been noticed that in the case of some boys a reproachful look is more effective than a slap in the face would be. Praise of work well done, and blame in the case of carelessness are already a great reward or punishment.

The role that Religion plays in the matter of discipline comes out clearly in the conversation mentioned above between Don Bosco and the minister, Urban Rattazzi. Among the several questions the minister put to Don Bosco, one was about the means the latter employed to maintain order among so many boys who poured into the Oratory. Don Bosco replied:

"First and foremost we try to inspire in these boys a reverential fear of God, love of virtue, and horror of sin through catechetical and moral instructions. We guide them to the right path and help them through good and timely advice, especially by teaching them to pray and to frequent the sacraments... In short, we do everything recommended by Christian charity to form in them a right conscience which, enlightened and sustained by moral principles, will lead them to do good and avoid evil."

For Don Bosco, in the matter of discipline, the choice before the educator is either "Religion or the stick"

### c) Educative Interventions

Reason, Religion and Loving Kindness converge together in a coherent series of educative interventions. The first is the creation of an *educative ambient*, rich in human values. Don Bosco was the friend of many boys in the most varied circumstances; but he was also the animator of a community of young people, characterised by certain traits and with a programme of development. Deep human intuitions and profound motivations of faith had convinced him that there was need of an educative ecology where values would circulate and be transmitted from one to another freely in a bright, festive and healthy environment. To his boys of the Oratory he said:

"The fact of there being so many of you together is a great help toward producing this honey of cheerfulness, piety and diligence. This is the advantage of being here in the Oratory. Your number alone makes your games more joyful, chases melancholy from your hearts, encourages many of you to bear the burden of schoolwork, and arouses competition and the sharing of knowledge. The good example of many helps us also spiritually without our even being aware of it."

The environment is not something generic and insignificant. It has characteristic features. It is not simply a material place, where the young gather indifferently. It is rather a community, a programme, a definite orientation into which the young are inserted.

Within this environment Don Bosco educated through *groups and associations*, in which the young are the protagonists and leaders, challenging and encouraging one another to excel in good and wholesome activities.

## 5. THE VALUES:

Values are caught rather than taught, although it is also true that they need to be clarified if they are to be readily assimilated. Don Bosco's system was permeated through the through with value-education. The goals, the objectives, the method all proclaim and testify to rich, profoundly human and religious values. Integral human education with its roots in Reason,

Religion and Loving Kindness is itself bearer of as complete set of values for a good and happy life.

In the XXI General Chapter of the Salesian Society, we endeavoured to capture the spirit of Don Bosco and his genius in educating the young. This is how the values of Don Bosco's educational system are spelt out for our times:

"In terms of *personal growth*, we want to help the child to build a sound and balanced humanity, fostering and promoting:

- a gradual maturing in freedom, in the assuming of his own personal and social responsibilities, in the clear perception of values.
- A serene and positive relationship with persons and things that will nurture and stimulate his creativity and reduce conflict and tension.
- The capacity to maintain a dynamic, critical attitude in the face of events, to be faithful to the values of tradition and be open to the needs of history, so as to become capable of making consistent personal decisions.
- An enlightened education in sex and love that will help him to understand the dynamics of growth, of self-giving and of encounter with others, within the context of his life's commitment.
- The quest and planning of his future, in order to liberate and direct toward a precise vocational choice the inner potential hidden in the destiny of every boy, even in one less endowed as a human being.
- In terms of *social growth*, we want to help our charges have a heart and mind open to the world and to the needs of others. To this end we must educate youth:
  - to be available, to have a sense of solidarity, to dialogue, to participate, to share responsibility.
  - To become part of the community through the life and experience of the group.
  - To become involved in justice and the building of a more just and open society".

## **CONCLUSION**

Don Bosco's educational system has proved its validity during his lifetime and a good hundred years after his death. Generations of young people all over the world, of different cultures and creeds, have experienced the beneficial effects of his wise and understanding approach to the young. Our times have seen an ever increasing generation gap between youngsters and their parents and educators, a gap which is becoming more and more difficult to bridge. Modern society with its complexity and its pressures, and the media with their false values and seductiveness make it even more difficult for young people to face life serenely and grow to maturity. Don Bosco's time-tested approach of Loving Kindness, Reason and Religion offers a sound and viable method of educating young people to life. The challenge to all parents and educators is to creatively interpret and make their own Don Bosco's extraordinarily successful experience with the young.

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