

CONCERNING THE PUNISHMENTS TO BE INFLICTED IN SALESIAN HOUSES

Critical edition: J. Prelezio
Translation & Notes: P. Laws

INTRODUCTION

As with the Letter From Rome soon to follow it, this letter was clearly written in response to the difficulties being experienced at Valdocco at that time, which had led to a Commission being set up to examine the issues and propose remedies. These problems had their ultimate source in the uncertain line of command at the Oratory where local and General superiors lived and worked together.

Written as a circular letter in 1883, it was never circulated, or printed, probably because it was seen to sit ill with the "pedagogy of love" so much propounded by Don Bosco. We may never know who made the decision to "censor" the Founder. The matter is so surprising as almost to suggest that the decision was Don Bosco's own; one could scarcely imagine the faithful Rua making it.

There are five manuscript copies of the document, none of them in Don Bosco's hand. The copy considered to be the "most authentic" is in the handwriting of Fr John Baptist Francesia, who however "signs" the document "John Bosco", leading us to presume that it is either a copy of a now-lost manuscript of the Saint, or else was written under Bosco's supervision and control. This is ms A, the document used here. However, significant variations in mss B and C, could indicate another, unknown document: perhaps the one referred to above?

The experts cannot solve the riddle. What is certain is that the document faithfully reflects Don Bosco's thinking. In fact, two 'internal' features reinforce that conclusion: the evident unease of Don Bosco in addressing the subject, and the magnificent insight he offers us into the heart of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

TEXT

My dear sons,

Often, and from various places, there comes to me sometimes the request or at times even the entreaty, that I should offer some rules to Rectors, Prefects and teachers, which might give them a guide-line in the difficult case where one is obliged to inflict some form of punishment in our Houses. You know the kind of times we live in, and how easily a small imprudence could bring serious consequences in its wake.

Wanting to meet your wishes, and so avoid significant displeasure for both you and me, and better still, to obtain the best possible from those young people whom Divine Providence has entrusted to our care, I am sending you some directions and some counsels which, as I hope is the case, you manage to put into practice, will be of great assistance to you in the difficult art of moral, religious and intellectual education.

In general, the system we ought to adopt is called Preventive, which consists in so disposing the hearts of our students that they ought to be willing to do what we ask of them without need of external violence. With such a system I intend to tell you that coercive means are never to be used, but only and exclusively those suggested by patience and charity.

Given that human nature, too inclined to evil, sometimes needs to be held back by severe dealing, I believe it to be worthwhile to propose to you several means, which I hope by the grace of God will bring consoling results. Before all else, if we wish to be seen as friends wanting the real good of our pupils, and require them to do their duty, you must never forget that you represent the parents of these dear young people who have always been the object of my efforts, my study, my priestly ministry and that of the Salesian Congregation. If therefore you are going to be true fathers to these children, then you also must have a father's heart, and not turn to repression or punishment without reason and without justice, and only in the manner of one who does this under duress, and for the sake of duty.

I intend to set out for you what should be the genuine motives that ought to lead you to turn to repression, and what punishments to use, and who should apply them.

I. NEVER PUNISH UNTIL YOU HAVE EXHAUSTED ALL OTHER MEANS

My dear sons, how often in my long career have I had to convince myself of this great truth! It is certainly easier to lose one's temper than to be patient; threaten a young person rather than reason with him. I would say that it better suits our lack of patience and our pride to punish those who resist us, rather than bear with them firmly and with kindness. The charity I am recommending to you is the one St Paul used towards the

faithful newly-converted to the religion of the Lord, who often made him weep and implore them when he saw them less docile, and less responsive to his zeal.

Hence I recommend all our Rectors that they should be the first to practise fatherly correction in respect of our dear young sons, and this correction be done in private, and as the saying goes, in camera charitatis. Never directly rebuke anyone in public, except to prevent scandal, or to make it good when it has already occurred.

If there is no improvement after the first warning, speak to another staff member who has some ascendancy over the guilty one. In the last resort, talk it over with the Lord. I would wish the Salesian always to be like Moses, who sought to appease the Lord, justly angry with the people of Israel. I have rarely seen any advantage gained from improvised punishments, inflicted before other means were tried. Nothing, says St Gregory can compel a heart, which is like an impregnable city, and which it is necessary to conquer with affection and gentleness. Be firm in wanting the good and preventing evil, but always gently and prudently. Persevere in being amiable, and you will see that God will make you masters of less-than-docile hearts. I know, this is perfection, and one does often meet it in teachers and assistants, who themselves are often young. They are not used to approaching children the way they should be approached. Either they hand out standardised punishments and achieve nothing, or they let everything go bad, or they just strike out, right or wrong.

This is the reason why we often see evil multiply, discontent spreading even among the better ones, and the corrector is left unable to do any good at all. For this reason I must also in this instance put before you my own experience. I have often met certain types who were so stubborn, so reluctant to receive any good advice, that they offered me no more hope of saving them, and in whose regard it was seen as necessary to adopt severe measures, and who were turned around only by charity. Sometimes it would seem to us that a particular child was taking no notice of our corrections, whilst deep inside he was well-disposed to cooperate, and meanwhile we were ruining him by a poorly-understood harshness, and by demanding that the guilty one make immediate and complete amends for his mistake. I say to you first of all that perhaps he did not believe himself to have deserved so much for his fault, which he committed more out of fickleness than out of malice. Quite often, when I have sent for these little trouble-makers, treated them in a kindly way, and asked them why they were so unruly, I was given the answer that they were being "picked on", as the saying goes, or persecuted by one or other superior. When I would look into the matter calmly and without making a fuss, I had to admit that the fault was not nearly as bad as it seemed at first, and sometimes simply wasn't there at all. For this reason I must say to you with sorrow that we always must bear part of the blame for the insubordination of some students. I have often noted that those who demanded silence, handed out punishments, exacted prompt and blind obedience, were nonetheless those who showed little respect for the useful advice I and the other superiors found it necessary to give, and I became convinced that a teacher who forgives his pupils nothing, are in the habit of forgiving themselves everything. So if we want to know how to command, let us be careful to first learn how to obey, and let us set out first and foremost to make ourselves loved rather than feared. When then repression becomes necessary, and we must change system, because there are certain characters who can only be controlled by strict dealing, one needs to know how to do it in a way that does not let any sign of anger to show. And so we come spontaneously to the second recommendation which I will entitle thus.

II. TRY TO SELECT THE OPPORTUNE MOMENT TO CORRECT

Everything at its proper time, says the Holy Spirit. I tell you that whenever one of these unhappy but necessary affairs arises, one needs to be very prudent to know what moment to choose, so that this act of repression might be useful. It is clear that maladies of the spirit require at least the same level of treatment as those of the body. Nothing is more dangerous than a malady applied incorrectly, or at the wrong moment. A knowledgeable doctor waits until the patient can accept the remedy, and with that in mind waits for the right moment. And we can get to know (the right moment) only from experience which has been fine-tuned by the goodness of our hearts. First of all then, wait until you have mastered yourselves; do not let it be understood that you are acting because of a bad mood, or in anger. In this event you would put your authority at risk, and the punishment would become harmful.

You may recall from the profane authors that saying of Socrates to a slave he was not pleased with, If I was not angry, I would strike you. Our pupils watch us keenly, and are good at judging from little signs like the expression on our face or our tone of voice, whether we are worked-up because of our devotion to duty, or because we are angry. Then, nothing more is needed to cause the benefit of the punishment to be lost. Even though they are young, they know that only reason has the right to correct them. Secondly, do not punish a child at the very moment the fault is committed, for fear that because he is not yet able to own up, or overcome his emotions, and recognise the importance of the punishment, he might become embittered, and commit the same, or even worse, faults. You need to give him the time to think it over, to get hold of himself, fully recognise his fault and at the same time the justice and necessity of the penalty, and so make it possible

for him to profit by the experience. I have often thought that this was the way the Lord treated St Paul when he was still "breathing threats and murder" against the Christians. It seems to me that the same rule is proposed to us when we encounter certain spirits who stubbornly oppose our wishes. Jesus does not throw him to the ground at once, but after a long journey, after he has had the chance of reflecting on his mission. And he did this far away from those who in any way could have encouraged him in his resolve to persecute the Christians. There instead, outside Damascus, he showed himself to him in all his power and might, and with gentle strength he opened his mind to see the error of his ways. And it was precisely in that moment that he changed Saul's attitude, so that from persecutor he became the apostle of the Gentiles, a chosen soul. It is upon this divine example that I would want my Salesians to mould themselves, so that with enlightened patience and diligent charity, in God's name they await that opportune moment to correct their pupils.

III GET RID OF EVERY NOTION THAT COULD LEAD PEOPLE TO BELIEVE THAT YOU ACT FROM RESENTMENT.

When you are administering a punishment, it is difficult to preserve that calm which is necessary to assuage any doubt that you might be acting to impose your authority, or to vent your anger. The more one acts from spite, the less you are likely to be heeded. The heart of a father, which we ought to have, condemns this way of acting. We should regard those over whom we must exercise authority as we would our own children. Let us place ourselves as it were at their service, as Jesus did, who came to obey and not to command. We should be ashamed of anything in us that might savour of authoritarianism. We are put over them only to serve them with greater pleasure. This is how Jesus acted with his Apostles, putting up with their ignorance and lack of refinement, with their wavering loyalty. He dealt with sinners with an informality and familiarity such as to amaze some, almost scandalise others, and inspire many with the hope of gaining God's forgiveness. This is why he tells us to learn from him to be meek and humble of heart. Given that they are "our children", let us rid ourselves of all anger when we have to curb their faults, or at least hold it in check, so that it appears to be suppressed. No commotion of spirit, no scornful looks, no hurtful words on our lips. Rather, let us feel compassion for what is happening, hope for the future. Then you will be true fathers, you will indeed correct.

In certain more serious moments it is more useful to turn to God, to humble oneself before him, than to let loose a torrent of words which, if on the one hand only harms the one who hears them, on the other hand does nothing for the one who deserved them. Let us call to mind our Divine Saviour who forgave that city which did want to receive him inside its walls, despite the protestations on his behalf made by two of his ardent apostles, who willingly would have had him call down lightning on it as a just punishment. The Holy Spirit urges us to this calm using those sublime words of David, Be angry and do not sin. If we frequently see our work prove useless, and we gain nothing but thorns and brambles from our labours, believe it, dear friends we must sheet it home to defective methods of discipline. I do not believe it opportune to spell out for you in detail how God wanted to give a serious practical lesson to his prophet Elias, who was not a little like some of us in his ardour for God's cause, and an overweening zeal for repressing the scandals he saw spreading among those of the house of Israel. Your superiors can give you the full account as it is written in the Book of Kings. I will limit myself to the final expression, which serves our purpose well, and it is, God is not in the whirlwind, which St Teresa interpreted as, Let nothing disturb you.

Our dear, gentle St Francis (of Sales) as you know, fixed a strict rule for himself that his tongue would not utter a word when his heart was agitated. In fact, he used to say, "I am afraid to lose in a quarter of an hour that little gentleness that I have managed to put together drop by drop over twenty years, like dew falling into the receptacle of my heart. A bee takes several months to make that little bit of honey that a man eats in one mouthful. And then, what's the point of talking to someone who is not listening?" One day he was reproached for having dealt with excessive gentleness with a young man who had seriously offended his mother. He replied, "This young man was not capable of gaining anything from any rebuke of mine, because his poor attitude had deprived him of reason and common sense. A harsh correction would have done nothing for him, and would have done me a lot of harm, causing me to act like those people who drown trying to rescue another". I have wanted to emphasise for you these words of our revered Patron, wise and mild educator of hearts, so that they could better command your attention, and you might also better commit them to memory.

In certain cases it can be useful to speak to others, in the presence of the guilty party, about how unfortunate people are who are so lacking in good sense and self-respect as to merit punishment. It can be useful to suspend the usual signs of confidence and friendship until one becomes aware that (the student) needs cheering up. The Lord has often consoled me when I have made use of this simple device. Public shame should be the last resort. On occasions, you might make use of another person in authority to counsel (the student), and say to him the things you yourself would like to say, but cannot. This person can take away his shame, dispose him to approach you. Look for someone to whom the boy can open up in his trouble, in a way that perhaps he cannot do with you, because he is not sure he will be believed, or because he is too proud to admit he should. These are the means to be used, as the disciples of Jesus did, whom he sent before him to prepare the way for him.

Let it be seen that no other rule is required other than what is reasonable and necessary. Try to act in such a way that (the student) blames himself, so that all that is required on your part is to mitigate the penalty he had already accepted. I have one final piece of advice for you in regard to this serious matter. When you have managed to win over this stubborn spirit, I beg you not only to leave him the hope of being forgiven by you, but that it is still possible for him, through good behaviour, to cancel the black mark he got for his faults.

IV. ACT IN SUCH A WAY AS TO ALLOW HOPE OF PARDON TO THE GUILTY ONE

We must avoid the fear and the worry caused by correction and put in a word of comfort. To forget, and cause to be forgotten the unhappy days of his mistakes, is the supreme art of the good educator. One does not read that the good Jesus reminded Mary Magdalen of her offences, in the same way as, with uncommon paternal kindness, he brought St Peter to confess his fault and make amends for it. Also the child needs to be convinced that his teacher has high hopes that he will make amends, and so feel himself once more set along the road to virtue by his kindly hand. You can get more with a friendly look, with a word of encouragement that gives his heart new courage, than you can with repeated blame, which serves only to upset him, and put a damper on his enthusiasm. Using this system, I have seen real conversions among those one would otherwise have believed impossible. I do know that some of the sons I hold most dear are not ashamed to make known that this was the way they were drawn to the (Salesian) Congregation, and therefore to God. All youngsters have their black days - you have had them yourselves! Heaven help us if we do not try to help them to pass them by quickly and without trouble. Sometimes simply having them understand you do not think they acted from malice is enough to ensure they do not fall again into the same fault. They are guilty, but they would rather they were not seen as such. We are lucky, if we are able to use this method to educate these poor fellows! Be sure, my dear sons, that this art, which appears so facile, and contrary to good outcomes, will render your ministry profitable, and you will win over certain spirits who were and would have remained for a long time incapable, not only of good results, but of reasonable hope thereof.

V. WHAT PUNISHMENTS SHOULD BE USED AND BY WHOM

But should punishments never be used? I know, my dear sons, that the Lord wanted to compare himself to a "watchful rod", in order to discourage us from sin, also for fear of punishment. And so we also ought sparingly and wisely imitate the conduct God wishes to trace out for us with this telling figure. Let us then use this "rod", but let us know how use it with intelligence and love, so that betterment will be the effect of our chastisement.

Let us remember that force punishes the offence, but does not heal the offender. One does not cultivate a plant by bending it with harsh violence, and so one does not educate the will by burdening it with a yolk that is too heavy. Here are a series of punishments which are the only ones I would want used among us. One of the best means of non-physical repression is the unhappy, severe, and sad look of the superior who makes the one at fault see - given that he has some sort of heart - that he is in trouble, and which might inspire him to sorrow and amendment. Private, fatherly correction. Don't overdo the scolding. Make him understand that his parents will be upset, and that there is a chance of making up. Eventually, he will feel constrained to show gratitude, and even generosity. If he falls again, let us not be kind too quickly. One may move on to more serious and sharp warnings. In this way you will, with justice, enable him to see the difference between the way he is behaving, and the way you are treating him, pointing out to him how he is repaying so much good will, so much effort to save him from shame and punishment. However, do not use expressions calculated to humiliate; show that you entertain good hopes for him, declaring that we are ready to forgive, the moment he has given sign of better conduct.

For more serious faults, one can arrive at the following punishments: taking one's meal standing at one's usual place, or at a table apart. Dining in the middle of the dining room, or finally, at the door of the dining room. But in each of these cases, the offender must be served the same meal as is served to the others. Being deprived of recreation is a serious punishment, but never put anyone in the sun, or out in bad weather, so that he might come to harm.

A heavy punishment could be to ignore him for a day in class, but not beyond that. There are other ways he can make amends for his fault. Now, what will I say to you about lines? This kind of punishment is unhappily too frequent. I have taken the trouble, in this matter, to consult those who are said to be famous educators. There are those who approve, there are those who disapprove, as useless and as harmful to the teacher, as it is to the pupil. Therefore I will leave you free in this matter to do as you please, warning you that for the teacher there is the danger of going to excess with no benefit (to anyone), and the pupil is offered the occasion for grumbling and garnering a lot of sympathy on account of seemingly being persecuted by the teacher. Lines put nothing to rights, and they are always a shameful burden. I know that some of our confreres are accustomed to give as lines the study of some piece of poetry, whether sacred or profane, and that using this means they got greater attention, and some intellectual benefit. On those occasions one saw the truth of the saying that all things come together for good to those who seek God and his greater glory, and

the salvation of souls. This confrere of yours was converted through doing lines. I regard it as a special blessing from God and a case more unique than rare. But it worked, because the teacher was able to be seen as charitable.

But one should never come to adopt the so-called reflection room. There is no misadventure by which a student can be thrust into anger and discouragement, as that which assails him when he is punished in this way. The devil uses this punishment to take violent hold over him, and drives him into grave faults, almost as if to avenge himself on the one who wanted to punish him in this way.(1)

(1) In the fear that in some colleges by way of rare exception and absolute necessity one should believe these rooms should be used, these are the precautions I would want adopted. The Catechist or other superior should frequently go and visit the poor culprit, and using kind and compassionate words, he should seek to pour oil onto that much-tried heart. He should sympathise with his situation, and take the trouble to help him understand how all the superiors regret having to use such an extreme punishment, and he should enable him to ask pardon, and make acts of submission, and request that he be given another chance to show amendment. If it seems the punishment is effective, get him out before time, and you will certainly win him over.

A punishment should be a remedy. Now, we should be quick to put a stop to it when we have attained our dual purpose of heading-off the wrong, and preventing its re-occurrence. Succeeding in this way in granting pardon, one also gets the precious result of healing the wound caused to the heart of the child. He sees he has not lost the good will of the superior, and he courageously goes back to his duty.

In the above-mentioned punishments, I have only had in mind offences against school discipline. But in those sad cases where a pupil may have given grave scandal, or may have committed an offence against the Lord, then he should be brought at once to the Superior, who will take those efficacious measures he deems appropriate. If anyone then should remain deaf to all these wise means of amendment, and should prove to be a bad example, or scandalous, then he should be sent away without hope of returning, with the provision however, that as far as it is possible his good name should be protected. This can be done by counselling the young person to ask his parents to take him away, or by directly advising the parents to have him change school, in the hope that their son will do better elsewhere. This act of charity usually has a good effect at all times, and even in some painful circumstances, leaves a happy memory in the minds of the parents and of the pupils.

All that remains for me is to indicate who should give the directions concerning the time and manner of punishment.

This must always be the Rector, without however his seeming to be the one. His role is private correction because he is more able to approach with ease certain less-sensitive souls. His role covers general and also public correction. And it is also his role to determine the punishment, without, however his announcing it or carrying it out. Therefore I would wish no one to take the decision to punish without previous agreement or approval of his Rector, who alone decides on the time, the manner, and the nature of the punishment. No one should exempt himself from such loving dependence, and pretexts should not be sought for eluding his supervision.(2)

(2) Teachers or assistants should not put an offender out of class, but when this is not observed, then he should be accompanied to the Superior.

There should be no excuse for making exceptions to this most important rule. Let us then be obedient to this recommendation I leave you, and God will bless and reward you for your virtue.

Remember that education is a thing of the heart, of which God is the sole master, and we will be unable to achieve anything unless God teaches us the art, and puts the key in our hands. Let us attempt in every way, including this humble and complete dependence (on the Rector), to take possession of this impenetrable fortress always closed to rigour and harshness. Let us strive to make ourselves loved, to inculcate a sense of duty, and of the holy fear of God, and we will see the doors of many hearts open with great ease, and join with us in singing praises and blessing of Him who wished to make himself our model, our way, our example in everything, but especially in the education of the young.

Pray for me, and believe me yours always in the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Feast of St Francis of Sales

Your loving father and friend,

Fr John Bosco