

The most significant values of the Preventive System

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INTRODUCTION

Is Don Bosco's preventive system still relevant for young people experiencing difficulties in today's society?

Some of our contemporaries remain quite doubtful when they think that a 19th century educator, who besides is a priest, could still nowadays bring a pertinent pedagogical response. The socio-economic realities of our countries at the beginning of the 21st century are so different from the ones prevailing in Turin in the 19th century. However, they have a common characteristic: that of a society in crisis. In Don Bosco's days, people were experiencing several transitions: from a farm to an industrial society, from a rural society to an urban one, from monarchy to a republic. Even today, we live a crisis, marked by important mutations on the economic, technological and cultural levels. We are entering in a society that economists and sociologists call post-industrial or post-modern. And, as in all era of social crisis, the transmission of values becomes a crucial question, and the problems of youth are acute, particularly those related to the immigration phenomenon.

All of these periods of profound transformation are characterized by intense turbulence among young people who question their future. This is even more so for the weakest of them, in particular for those who are victims of various types of social exclusions.

Don Bosco's brilliant intuition, which still remains so relevant in today's world, consists in knowing how to decode the phenomenon of violence observed in the neighborhoods of Turin as a clear symptom of a lack of education.

Let us not forget that violence is the most natural manner of managing conflict, of expressing anger. What is far from being natural is the fruit of education, that is, harmony and peace, the building of respectful relationships with those who are different.

Education is the number one problem in our modern societies. This was the intuition of Don Bosco in the last century. Let us recall the words that he said in Paris, during his most triumphal visit in 1883: « *If you don't take care of young people now, they will soon keep you very busy!* »

In an era characterized by uncertainty and a lack of trust in traditional institutions, the young people recognize the authority of the educator not because of his mandate but rather because of his credibility. The foundational conviction of Don Bosco's preventive system is the quality of the relationship between the adult and the young. This is the central axis of the pedagogical approach of the 'Valdocco' of France, a center of preventive interventions for youth at risk in the Paris and Lyon suburbs.

In fact, let us not forget that, what characterizes youth today as in Don Bosco's times is:

- lack of trust towards adults
- anxiety for the future
- difficulties in the process of socialization

The three important guidelines of the preventive system which still remain very pertinent in a time of crisis are: to restore authority by developing an educative relationship based on trust, to

allow the young person to project himself in the future as a witness of hope, and to learn to live together among young people and with adults by building an alliance with them.

Let us reflect a few moments on these three values of the Salesian pedagogy: trust, hope, and covenant.

1) A pedagogy of trust

Without trust, there is no education. This is the basic principle of education as understood by Don Bosco. The authority of the educator can only be rooted in this relationship of trust between him and the young person.

All the research conducted on the topic of resistance confirms that the capacity for change in a young person involved in repeated offensive behaviors, rests on the relationship with an adult that knew how to trust the young person, without locking the young person in his or her past.

How do we establish this trust? Far from advocating some educational technique, Don Bosco answers only ``through affection``. He is the educator who, in the 19th century, after all the rationalistic movements of the age of enlightenment, reinstated affection within the educational relationship. Anyway, affection is part of any human relationship. So, instead of negating it, Don Bosco encourages the educator to manage affection by placing it at the service of a relationship based on trust. « *Without affection, there can be no trust. Without trust, there is no education* ». This is, yesterday and today, the best synthesis of the educational thought of John Bosco.

An education based on trust, is an education based on reason. The educator who acts in a reasonable manner, convinced that the young person is gifted with the capacity to reason, is able to understand the interests of the young. The preventive system rests on this conviction.

Regardless of the behavior of a young person, even if first appears to us as unsuitable and stupid, whether it is called delinquency, drug abuse or other types of risky behaviors, the young person always has a reason for doing it. I am not saying, of course, that he is right, because he can hurt himself and others. But he has *his own* reasons. As long as the educator does not identify these reasons, his answers risk being stupid, inadequate or distorted.

There is, says John Bosco, two ways to educate a child:

- either by discouraging the child: it is the repressive method, based on the fear of punishment.
- or by persuading him: it is the preventive method, entirely based on the respect of the child's rights.

An education based on trust is rooted in an unshakable faith in the capacity of a young person to grow, regardless of his present difficulties.

Believing in the young person, education empowers each one, regardless of his difficulties, and invite him to help the growth of the group as opposed to being the downfall of a group.

If we really think about it, it is always a young person with difficulties that help the educator to grow in his pedagogical capacity: he is then obliged to question his approach, to evaluate himself.

2) A pedagogy of hope

The motto given by John Bosco to his disciples deserves to be heard: `` *The Salesian never complains about time* ``.

Time is not a reality to complain about, but on the contrary it is an asset in helping young people to maximize all the avenues of progress in order to build a just, fraternal and peaceful world.

Nowadays, it is very important to teach the child, the adolescent, to be in awe when encountering beauty and progress! Of course, we must warn them against the possible abuses of new discoveries. But, let us make sure that this warning does not stop them from being capable to marvel at what emerges.

« *A falling tree makes more noise than a growing forest tree* » says an African proverb. It is time, for the sake of the happiness of our youth, that we stop bombarding them with the noise

of the falling trees (largely diffused by the medias), and that we expose them to the beauty of growth.

It is this attention to the process of growth that characterizes the way John Bosco looks at the young. The story of the seed, called to become a great tree, is certainly, the best parable on education.

There are three categories of men and women in the narrative of the seed. First of all, there are those who only see a seed (let us admit that the vision is quite limited!). Then, there are those who, in looking at the seed, only dream about the tree (these idealists risk, in only dreaming, crushing the seed). Finally, there are those who see both the seed and the tree. These are conscious of the grounds.

To educate, according to John Bosco, is to offer the best ground in order to allow the child to take root in their family, social, and cultural heritage and to bloom as a unique person.

It is joy, according to John Bosco, that characterizes best this ground. A major aspect of the art of education consists in being able to promote around oneself an environment of peace and joyful serenity. This joy is essential for the growth of the child. A sad childhood does condemn us. Joy seems to be the essential component of a Salesian educational climate. It is not so much a conquest (nothing is more unauthentic than being joyful because one has to be joyful). It is a fruit: joy always comes over abundantly to those who live in truth and in love.

The only way to respect the right of a child to grow is to see in the young both the child that he is and the adult that he is called to become. That is how John Bosco sees a child. It implies that the child is not maintained in a prolonged childhood or treated like a miniature adult.

To develop a project taking into account the child, his present reality and his potentiality to be the adult of tomorrow, is both to ``offer a sense of security`` and to ``make him responsible``. The art of the Salesian educator is in the healthy position between these two tensions.

What young people at risk suffer the most is a lack of security! Aren't the most violent neighborhoods of our cities the neighborhoods where the young people are most insecure regarding their future?

To offer security... It means to know how to express the unconditional character of affection that links us to the young people... It is also to safeguard a set of rules that stand strong in spite of the adolescent's attempt to rebel...

Finally, to offer security is to help the young to experience success.

The drama of so many young people who drop out of school is grows out of an institution that teaches them to fail. Failure only begets a loss of self-confidence and that, in turn, causes other repetitive failures.

We can only break such a spiral by introducing success: this means to build on the capacities already acquired by the young people, to focus the spotlight on what he is capable of doing, inviting him to grow. Isn't this the message that John Bosco teaches us when he tells us about his first encounter with Bartholomew Garelli?

To offer security, but also make responsible... because it is only by exercising responsibilities that we learn to become responsible... Many adolescents today suffer because they are not entrusted with any responsibilities in our societies, and this is particularly true for young people who are socially excluded... Let us not be surprised by their manner of evading reality! The greatest drama regarding exclusion is in feeling of social uselessness that it creates. What most young people need to meet is not so much an adult that offers to help them as an adult that is capable of saying: ``*I need you*``. During many Good Nights, Don Bosco loved to say to his young people: ``*Without you, I cannot do anything*``.

Right from the beginning of his work, he had the idea of asking the older youth to be responsible, and to lead the younger ones.

3) A pedagogy of alliance

In a world characterized by the restlessness of young people living together and the difficulties of intergenerational relationships, Don Bosco proposes a pedagogy of alliance. This pedagogy is not about doing for, but with the young; the young person is not only a recipient but rather a

partner of the educative interaction. During the Good Nights, John Bosco would love to say: *“I need to discuss something with you...”*. This is a pedagogy based on the rights of the child.

The building of this covenant relationship with the young requires a good stance from the part of the educator. He must be sufficiently friendly so as not to be indifferent, and sufficiently distant, so as not to be in fusion with the child.

Essentially, the art of education consists in identifying the space of proper distance and proximity with the young. A great difficulty in education – and that is why education for John Bosco is more an art than a science – is that the proper distance and proximity to be determined depends on both the young and the educator.

When speaking about education, what is important – and it is even more so for young people who are deprived of affection – is not the intention of our gesture that matters, but rather the way it is perceived by the child. This requires always a great prudence on the part of the educator.

John Bosco used to repeat to his educators: *“What matters is not that young people be loved, but that they know that they are loved”*. In other words, the essential is in the perception of the child.

This great educator, called *“Father and Teacher of Youth”* in the ecclesial tradition, is often presented with the popular imagery of a tightrope walker. It took me quite some time to understand the meaning of this image. Of course, it refers to the fact that, as adolescent, John loved to play as a street entertainer to gather his friends. But there is also a more symbolic meaning: isn't the art of education somehow like the art of a tightrope walker? To know how to say yes, but also to know how to say no; to be sufficiently close, but also sufficiently distant. To offer security, but also to make responsible. It is always a question of balance.

We are talking not only about a covenant with a young person but also with the group. To experience the group, not like a burden, but like an opportunity for the process of socialization. With a group, the educator sometimes has a tendency to only perceive a sum of individual relationships, while it is a question of interactivity between the members of the group.

John Bosco, thanks to his undeniable talents as a comedian, knew how to transform the group as an ally. He was able to see the dynamic of the group, not as a difficulty, but rather as an opportunity to promote the growth of the responsibility of each one toward the others. For example, think about the associations.

Finally, it is also about building an alliance between all the adults which relate with the same young person. In the last letter which he addressed to the directors, John Bosco stressed the quality of the relationships between the members of the educative community. The first right of the child is certainly the right to the coherence between all the adults that accompanies his growth. How many times have I identified a link between the violence of a child and the incoherence of the adults that accompany him!

CONCLUSION

The final word will be borrowed from someone else. Let us listen to Jean Duvallet, an old friend of Abbé Pierre, as he speaks to young Salesians :

«You have works, colleges, and oratories for the young, but you have only one treasure: the pedagogy of Don Bosco.

In a world in which youngsters are betrayed, squeezed dry, crushed, exploited, the Lord has entrusted to you a pedagogy in which respect for the young person, for his greatness and his frailty, for his dignity as a son of God prevail.

Preserve it, renew it, rejuvenate it, enrich it with all the latest discoveries, and adapt it to these twentieth century creatures and their tragedies that Don Bosco could not know about.

But for heaven's sake, preserve it!

Change everything, if necessary lose all your houses but preserve this treasure, forming in thousands of hearts the way to love and to save the young, which is Don Bosco's heritage. »