DON BOSCO THE EDUCATOR

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DON BOSCO SAYS

9. ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS I WAS ASKED ...

***The first House in France***

*"Several times I was prompted to express some thoughts around the so-called Preventive System, that we were wont to use in our homes."*

It wasn't easy to translate into words the educational experience that I was living for 36 years. I seemed to be unable to express what is essential. There are experiences that mark our lives, but one cannot always put it on paper. Yet I felt an urgent need to do so.

Our Congregation, which was approved by the Church a few years earlier (April 3rd, 1874) was developing as the mustard seed mentioned by Jesus. There was the first missionary expedition (November 11th, 1875); and another was being prepared, and then yet another. Already in November 1875 two priests, a cleric and a Salesian Brother had started in Nice a modest educational activity with the oratory and a boarding school for craftsmen and students: the St. Peter's Patronage. Nice, was a strip of land nestled in a beautiful landscape that from March 1860 was transferred by Cavour to France in the Treaty of Turin.

***"The short treatise on the preventive system" is born***

Liked because it spoke the language of young people. I approached the young universe as I used to do among young workers of Porta Palazzo or in dark prison cells in Turin or in dusty courtyards of Valdocco. I did not despise anything of what was a just and noble yearning of the youth. I tried to be faithful to God (the first dream was becoming a reality!) and the young people, without refusing anything that I considered useful and valid. I felt solidarity with the young and the view to the future. How often I repeated to them, I wanted them to be happy *"in time and in eternity".* The experience confirmed me more and more that courage is about daring to love, to know how to hope. I recommended to my Salesians: *"We need to know our times and how to adapt to them".* Pedagogical flexibility and firm loyalty at the same time! When I insisted on fidelity that my Salesians had to bear witness, I certainly didn’t demand that they copy me. I lived in a particular time and was influenced by a cultural form typical of the Nineteenth century. To copy me, would let me grow old gradually and reduce me to a ... museum piece that no one, out of respect, would dare touch! Do not copy, but revive! Dynamically, with fidelity to the present time! Fidelity to our mission on which both were vital meant going over what I had done as a Founder, and translating it into the present with nothing betrayed.

***The three pillars of my educational system***

The starting point and as a sure reference was ***reason***. Not the cold and anonymous imposition of a code. Dialogue with young people. Being aware of their anxieties, discerning their needs. The boy always in first place. I listened to him willingly and with sincere interest. I showed confidence in him. My educational method was that of true freedom. I was convinced that there could only be authentic education where there is liberty and respect for the person. And I suggested: *"You give free space to jump, run, cackle at will. Gymnastics, music, recitation, the theatre, the walks are very effective means to get discipline, help to morality and to health ".* I deliberately left out a confidence of incalculable value: *"For about 40 years dealing with the youth, I do not remember having used any punishment whatsoever".*

The Preventive System did not impose anything; in exchange, I proposed a great deal. I offered a vision of a healthy integral humanism in which the boy was wholly included. My concern was to form consciences. I insisted: *"Allow yourself to be guided always by reason and not by passion".* I was preparing young people for the challenges of life. I moved them to the sense of duty, of work, of an honest profession. I offered reasons to live responsibly and with joy. As I wrote in the preface of the *Sacred History* I propose its sole purpose is to *"enlighten the mind to make good the heart".* The experience convinced me that kids *"have a natural intelligence to know the good that is done to them personally, and are also given a sensitive heart easily open to recognition".* My way of educating demanded much, but offered much more.

I had inherited from the family environment a faith simple and robust. ***Religion*** was the second column of my educational system. My relationship with God was that of a child. I was a priest very much in love with the Eucharist, punctual and fatherly in hearing the confessions of my kids and instilling in their hearts the assurance of forgiveness and of the divine embrace. In my continual contacts with them I tried to make *"good Christians and honest citizens".* I never got tired of holding up to them the example of the Holy Virgin as the Immaculate Conception and Help of Christians.

With the word 'religion' I did not mean an exercise of piety detached from life, but an expression of faith embodied in everyday life. Religion was "to make a beautiful suit for the Lord" with every young person, as had happened with Dominic Savio. And so the Preventive System was transformed into the pedagogy of youthful holiness.

It was not up to me to invent this educational method. Several saints and saints and many educators had contributed. I was enriched by many without whom no one could boast an exclusive authorship. A group work which lasted for centuries. Having said that, for the sake of truth, I must also add that I have left my mark.

I want to touch on the third cornerstone of the Preventive System as I have lived it. I passed it on to my Salesians as sacred inheritance, almost like a hallmark: ***loving kindness***. Something that I had not invented myself, but which I made my own. Typical of my way of educating. An unmistakable badge of my pedagogy. In this word I have hidden a style of love that identified the teacher with youth, to love the same things they love, to transform the educative relationship in a style of filial and fraternal presence, a friendly and desired presence and the educational environment within a "family". Here was all the love that I had received from my holy mother, here gushed forth the family spirit from which arose the works that were called 'houses', here they breathed the love, trust, respect, the taste of being and working together as I was absorbed in my farming surroundings and the friendliness of sympathy, of optimism, of human warmth. A love which turned the educators into *"loving fathers".*

In those scanty 9 pages on the Preventive System, if read carefully, you will find that the word "heart" or equivalent expression has been used 19 times! When I met my kids or wrote to them I used the words *"my dear children"*. In the Piedmontese dialect which I was using to make myself understood better, the word 'children' refers not only to a biological gift and not even translated as the synonym "boys", but included a broader and comprehensive meaning: the spiritual paternity, which the Apostle Paul could boast about (Gal 4.19) and why I practically used to translate into material, physical care, bread, intellectual food, moral and religious support. When I spoke of love, I was referring to an educational presence. Authority did the serving, the experience became a life lesson and love turned itself into gift, proposal and offering. Love became irreplaceable educational law. Whence came the familiarity with a taste of true paternal affection, with a homely scent. And here I like to remember what a French journalist had written in 1883 speaking of the climate that reigned at Valdocco. Maybe it was a bit exaggerated, but it described a concrete situation. The journalist from Pèlerin stated: "from one place to another you *go like a family"*. The guys I understood to be in flight; from simple recipients to enthusiastic protagonists. Many had remained at my side. I started to reread the dream I had when I was still a child. The mysterious phrase said by that majestic lady: *"In time, you will understand everything"* began to acquire a deeper and truer sense. The educational values in which I had always believed, held up. The proof was in my eyes: my spiritual children, those guys whom I had one day welcomed and loved in Valdocco were on the job, as head of prestigious printing companies, directors of renowned schools, intrepid missionaries in Argentina. I could state clearly: *"the Congregation has nothing to fear. He trained men ".* I saw the scene observed in many dreams: *"Those animals had become lambs ... Many lambs became shepherds who took care of bringing up more. The shepherd boys growing up in large numbers, split and went elsewhere to collect other strange animals and guide them into other folds".*

With the grace of the Lord and the maternal assistance of the Help of Christians the pedagogy of love, fantasy of charity has triumphed and in all latitudes of the world has grown my inheritance: *Da mihi animas!*