

THE SALESIAN MISSION AND HUMAN RIGHTS ESPECIALLY CHILDREN RIGHTS

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*Dear participants
at the International Congress on
“Preventive system and human rights”*

I am especially happy to greet you and at the same time address an encouraging and challenging word to you on a topic that is especially close to my heart during this 60th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Pope Benedict XVI spoke thus last December: “Sixty years ago, on 10 December, The United Nations General Assembly, meeting in Paris, adopted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which is still today the highest point of reference for intercultural dialogue on the freedom and rights of the human being. The dignity of each person is truly guaranteed only when all his or her fundamental rights are recognised, protected and promoted. The Church has always insisted that basic human rights, beyond the different formulations and importance they can take on within various cultural settings, are a universal given, because they come from the very nature of the human being”¹. As Salesians we are aware and convinced of this, which is why we are committed to education and to fostering a culture of education.

So I thank Prof. Vernor Muñoz for what he has said about the importance of promoting education as a fundamental right, especially the education of children/juveniles, in order to raise up active, inclusive, responsible and autonomous citizens. He has realistically presented the causes which hinder the education of millions of children throughout the world, thus continuing serious situations of exclusion and discrimination. As a Salesian I resonate with his words and I am convinced that the transformation of this culture which generates exclusion and marginalisation is the most urgent of challenges. I am also aware that today, education is the most important and precious tool for building a more just and supportive society where everyone, especially the young, the weakest and most needy, can look forward with hope to a human future which is dignified and happy.

1. The educational emergency in our society

Our times demonstrate that they have faith in education; there is an effort to extend it to everyone; there is a constant effort to adjust it to the challenges which arise in the area of work, the sciences and social organisation; it is more and more entrusted to specialist

¹ BENEDICT XVI, *The Holy Father's address for the 60th Anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights*, Rome 10 December 2008.

rights of children, as an educational proposal which is capable of generating culture and bringing society into a state of education.

2. Don Bosco's experience

Faced with the situation of the young of his time Don Bosco made the choice of education: a kind of education which pre-empted evil through faith in what was good in the heart of each youngster, and which developed his potential through perseverance and patience, built up each one's sense of personal identity. We are talking about an education which formed supportive individuals, active and responsible citizens, people who were open to the values of life and faith, men and women capable of living with meaning, joy, responsibility and competence. This way of educating becomes a true spiritual experience, one that draws from the "love of a God who provides in advance for all his creatures, is ever present at their side and freely gives his life to save them" (C. SDB 20).

When he came into contact with the boys in Turin's prisons, Don Bosco was disturbed. He writes: "Seeing crowds of youngsters of 12 to 18 years of age, all healthy, strong, intelligent, but reduced to doing nothing, flea-bitten, without sufficient bread, spiritual or temporal - this horrified me".³

Don Bosco sees how society is, appreciates what that means and draws consequences from it. The experience aroused in him great compassion for those dispossessed and exploited youngsters; a personal existential choice grew in his heart: "to do something to look after abandoned youngsters", as he told the Marchioness Barolo who gave him the alternative of leaving his work for his boys or working at the Refuge⁴. This choice of his was based on a deep faith in the merciful fatherliness of God and his Providence; it was also based on the belief that in each young person, even the most unfortunate or wayward, there is a spot which is accessible to the good which, if encouraged and supported, will lead him away from evil and to choosing ways which are life-giving and good. "It was then that I became aware of how few were brought back to that state because they had been abandoned to themselves. "Who knows", I said to myself, "If these young people had a friend outside, someone who took care of them, helped them and instructed them in religion on feast days, who knows but they might be held back from ruin or at least the number who find themselves back in prison might be reduced? I spoke to Don Cafasso about this idea and with his advice and insight I set to working out a way to go about it".⁵

Through imagination and generosity Don Bosco created a setting which was welcoming, full of human and Christian qualities, where educators were with the young people in an effective and affectionate closeness. The Valdocco Oratory became his ideal setup and a point of reference for the future, an authentic pedagogical workshop for the Preventive System.

In this setting Don Bosco put an *educative proposal* into effect with which he sought to *prevent* the negative experiences of boys arriving in Turin in search of work, orphans, or those whose parents could not or did not want to take care of them, urchins who were not as yet too unruly. This proposal offered young people an education that developed their best resources, gave them faith in themselves and a sense of their own dignity, created a positive climate of joy and friendship where in an almost contagious manner they picked up moral and religious values,

³ G. BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales*, a cura di A. Ferreira Da Silva, LAS Roma 1992, p. 104.

⁴ *Idem*, p. 151.

⁵ *Idem*, p. 104.

and included a *religious practice* offered and experienced in such a way that the youngsters found themselves spontaneously caught up in it.

Aware of the importance of the education of youth and the people for transforming society, Don Bosco became the promoter of *new social and preventive projects*; he thought about the relationship between work and the world, about contracts, leisure time, fostering popular culture and education. Don Bosco knew that it was not enough to cushion the situation of hardship and abandonment the boys were living in (palliative action); he set out to bring about cultural change (transformative action) through a setting and educative proposal involving very many people who identified with him and his mission.

3. The constitutive elements of Don Bosco's Preventive System

How are we to live out this same spiritual and educative experience that Don Bosco reached with the youngsters in Valdocco and how do we inculcate it into the ever more varied places where the Salesian mission is carried out? The way to do it is to deepen our understanding of and put into practice its basic elements, which we call “the oratorian criteria” in today's language.

3.1. The centrality and active involvement of the young, especially the poorest of them

Education which is inspired by Don Bosco's pedagogy puts the young person at the heart of the educative and pastoral project and action. It listens to their voice, identifying what their expectations are, their desires, delusions and hopes; it accompanies them on the way to an awareness of their own abilities, helping them to be more trusting in their possibilities for developing them and of their becoming active participants in their own project of life.

Putting young people at the centre of apostolic and educative attention “is one of the more specific elements of the rich spiritual heritage left us by Don Bosco. And the task entrusted to us is to bring it to every culture we go to and work amongst and where, very often, young people don't count for much.”⁶

We need especially to make this choice on behalf of young people who are more at risk and poor, identifying their situations of hardship either visible or hidden, counting on the positive resources they have, even for those most frazzled by life's experiences, dedicating himself completely to their education and evangelisation.

The more I get to know the Congregation, spread through five continents, the more I become aware that we Salesians have tried to be faithful to this basic criterion, to be close to and supportive that is, of the most needy and to see the situations of the young that society does not want to see: for example, street children, child soldiers, child labourers, children exploited by that accursed sexual tourism, etc. We have grown in our sensitivity towards the poorest; the work of our pioneers, who at times worked like “free-wheeling outfielders”, was then taken up by the institution; everyone is especially gaining a mentality which helps us locate ourselves anywhere, with this particular key to reading the situation.

⁶ Fr. CHAVEZ VILLANUEVA, *GC 26: a navigation chart towards the Jubilee 2015. Under the banner of “Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, Final address of the Rector Major at the closing of CG26, in “Da mihi animas cetera tolle”. Chapter Documents, Rome 2008, p. 138.

3.2. A Preventive culture

The urgency for prevention, its advantages and its implications, is established with ever more alarming data, but taking it on as a principle and putting it effectively in place cannot be taken for granted in many contexts. Preventive culture is not the prevalent culture. On the contrary!

But prevention costs less and achieves more than simply containing deviancy or by an act of recovery that comes too late. In fact it allows most young people to be freed from the weight of negative experiences which are a risk to physical health, psychological maturity, development of one's potential, eternal happiness. It allows them to develop their best strengths, profit better from the best and most supportive educational courses, and start afresh from the basics instead of collapsing under the weight of it all.

This pedagogy “tends towards education in trust, trust in today's young people and trust in the future, just when it is becoming essential to accept the challenges of modernity”. In today's societies, strongly competitive and only guided with difficulty to invest in trust, the young people condemned to be left on the margins risk becoming more numerous, youngsters left to survive without being able to benefit from what is recognised as being theirs by right: health, education, work, etc... This is why, following Don Bosco's teaching and focusing on the recognised rights of juveniles, we want to dedicate ourselves to fostering the culture of prevention.

Don Bosco was convinced that the heart of the young, of every young person, is good, that even in the most unfortunate of them there are seeds of good and that it is the wise educator's task to discover these and develop them. We need, then, to create a positive climate in our educational works, with proposals that encourage the recognition of these positive resources, foster their development and open up to a sense of life and a taste for what is good.

It would be enough to think of the story of Mickey Magone, the “General at recreation” at the Carmagnola railway station, to whom Don Bosco first offered his friendship, then an educative micro-climate at the Valdocco Oratory, then his own competent guidance (“Dear Magone, I'd like you to do me a favour, ... let me be master of your heart for a while”), to the point where he found meaning for his life and the source of true happiness in God (“Oh how happy I am!”) and became a model for the youngsters of yesterday and today.

Prevention, then, must become the intrinsic and basic quality of education and in this way anticipate negative habits, spiritual or material, and situations which will arise, and at the same time multiply initiatives which will direct the person's resources still healthy resources towards attractive and valid projects.

3.3. Community experience

Don Bosco at the Oratory created a community, that is, a family where he was present, a setting for encounter, familiarity, where there were human and Christian values that went as far as making the proposal of holiness a desirable one. For Don Bosco each Salesian work must be a “home”, that is a *family* for young people without a family; a setting where personal relationships, presence and dialogue between educators and young people are privileged, along with youthful involvement, group activity as places for fostering personal growth.

Don Bosco made the *group* a special choice for his pedagogy: the group as a place where young people experience the search for meaning and build their own sense of identity; a place for creativity and active involvement; a school where they learn to fit responsibly into the society where they live; a privileged medium for experiencing Church. In this way the group

3.5. Christian vision of person and life

The situation of indifference to religion is well known, one in which the majority of young people in Europe grow up. This indifference has extraordinary cultural relevance. Religious experience is presented in negative tones, as an infantile phenomenon, something which only generates guilt, an obstacle to the full development of the person, scientific progress and social peace; this is why religious experience is reduced to the private sphere.

It is enough to look at the world of contemporary literature or cinema. It is difficult to find, over the past decades or in the more representative or successful works, productions where the chief characters receive their inspiration for life, or their dignity for living, from Christianity.

This mindset is spreading to other social and cultural contexts where the public presence of religion is viewed with increasing diffidence, especially Christianity as a social factor or Christian faith as an expression of life.

The irrelevance of faith to culture and life makes the young indifferent and strangers to the religious world, makes the question of God meaningless, empties religious language of meaning and puts at risk the absolute value of human rights themselves, letting them often become subordinate to economic interests or political power.

The educator, according to Don Bosco's heart, is aware that the Preventive System's education is based on a Christian view of person and life; he or she is convinced that the deepest and most meaningful wealth of person resides in the human being's openness to God and the call to be a child of God. Therefore the educator seeks to reawaken or get young people to more deeply appreciate openness to the religious meaning of life, to develop a capacity to discover in daily existence the signs of God's presence and action, to communicate a conviction about the profound coherence there is between faith and human values like solidarity, freedom, truth, justice and peace. The educator believes that the Gospel involves their most authentic expression, regenerates their weaker aspects and enriches them by opening them up to the horizons of God.

3.6. Social projection of educational activity

Looking after the young people who came to the Oratory was important for Don Bosco, but equally important for him too was his concern for going out in search of others beyond. He was concerned about the development of the human person to full human and Christian maturity, but he was also concerned about the transformation of society, through the education of the young.

Aware of the importance of the education of youth and the people for transforming society, Don Bosco became the promoter of new social and preventive projects; he thought about the relationship between work and the world, about contracts, leisure time, fostering popular culture and education by means of the Press.

The society which Don Bosco had in mind was a Christian society, built on a foundation of morals and religion. Today this vision of society has been transformed: we are in a secular society, built on principles of equality, freedom, participation; but the Salesian educational proposal still retains its capacity to form a citizen who is aware of his or her social, professional, political responsibilities, able to dedicate him or herself to justice and to promote the common good, with special sensitivity and concern for the weakest and most marginalised groups. We have to work, then, at changing the criteria and view of life, to promote an altruistic

them, convinced that the best way to respond to their poverty is, in fact, through preventive action".¹⁰

In a few of my addresses¹¹ I have tried to show that education is the privileged way for this preventive and renewing activity in many circumstances of hardship and marginalisation affecting boys, girls and youth throughout the world. I have especially presented the Preventive System of Don Bosco from the point of view of a conscious taking up of responsibility on the part of those being educated, who change from being those who are to be protected, because they are needy, to those who take on responsibility, because they have rights and recognise the rights of others, thus preparing tomorrow's citizen in today's youngster.

The Preventive System seeks to prevent evil through education, but at the same time helps the young to build up their own personal identity, give new life to values they had not succeeded in developing because of their marginalised circumstances, nor discover or draw up reasons for living with meaning, joy, responsibility and competence. Such a System also believes decisively that the person's religious dimension is his deepest and most meaningful treasure; therefore it seeks, as the most ultimate purpose in all its proposals, to guide each youngster towards the realisation of his or her calling to be a child of God.

Faithful, then, to this precious inheritance, we must commit ourselves as educators to the promotion and defence of human rights and the rights of juveniles, concerned especially for the integral personal development of the young. It is worth recalling the insistent call that I and Salesians from around the world with me at the 25th General Chapter in 2002, addressed to those responsible for and interested in the future of humanity and especially the young: "We are on the side of the young, because we have confidence in them, in their willingness to learn, to study, to escape from poverty, to take their future into their own hands. ... We are on the side of the young because we believe in the worth of the individual, in the possibility of a different kind of world and above all in the great value of education. ... Educating the young is the only way to prepare a better future for the whole world. We want to respond to economic globalisation with a globalisation of an educational character!".¹²

4.2. Fostering a culture of rights

Education also offers the aim of building a culture of human rights, open to dialogue, persuasion, and ultimately preventing violations of those same rights, rather than punishing and repressing them.

Poverty and marginalisation are not a purely economic factor, but something that touches people's conscience and challenges society's thinking, that is, culture; we need to move from a culture of having, appearances, dominating, to one of being, gratuity and sharing. At this point I would like to go back to the word of Pope Benedict XVI in his address at the opening of the 5th General Conference of CELAM at Aparecida (Brazil). The Pope said:

¹⁰ GC 26, 98

¹¹ Cf. Fr. CHAVEZ, *Before it is too late let us save the children, the future of the world*, address at the Campidoglio, Rome 27 November 2002, on the occasion of the commemoration of the foundation of Borgo Ragazzi Don Bosco.

Fr. CHAVEZ, *Give more to those who have less. An educational rethink for cultural change*, CISI meeting on marginalisation and youth difficulties, Frascati 29 December 2004.

P. CHAVEZ, *Education and citizenship. Forming the citizen in a Salesian way*, 'Lectio magistralis' for the Doctorate "honoris causa" from the University of Genoa. 23 April 2007

Fr. CHAVEZ, *Educating with the heart of Don Bosco. Preventive System and human rights*, 50th anniversary of Porto Alegre Province, October 2008.

¹² Cf. GC25, n. 140.

"How should we respond to the great challenge of poverty and need? ... Both Capitalism and Marxism promised to find a way to create just structures and said that these, once in place, would work by themselves; they said that not only would there be no need for the personal morality of former times, but that these structures would foster a common morality. This ideological promise has been proven false. The facts are there to see. The Marxist system, where it became government, has not only left a sad record of economic and ecological destruction, but also the sad oppression of souls. We see the same thing also in the West, where the gap between rich and poor has grown and where we see a disturbing degradation of personal dignity through drugs, alcohol and other false mirages of happiness.

Just structures are an essential condition for a just society, but they don't come about nor do they function without the moral consensus of society concerning fundamental values and the need to live out these values through essential renunciation, even of one's own interests.

Where God is absent - God with the human face of Jesus Christ - these values do not show up in all their strength, nor is their consensus about them. I do not want to say that non-believers cannot live according to high moral standards and example; I am saying only that a society where God is absent cannot find the necessary consensus on moral values and the strength to live according to the model for these values, even contrary to one's proper interests".¹³

Don Bosco's Preventive System and spirit calls us today to a decisive task, collectively as well as individually, to change the structures of poverty and underdevelopment and, especially, to foster the moral values which guarantee a renewal of mentality and attitudes which lie at the basis of unjust situations. Through education we want to foster an altruistic culture, a modest style of life and consumption, readiness to share freely, justice understood as attention to the rights of everyone; this is the culture of the dignity of life, commitment to being supportive, openness to the Transcendent.

4.3. Some requirements

Promoting human rights and the rights of juveniles has to be, in our hands, a tool for educating and transforming culture. That means looking to some important requirements which will guarantee the task.

- A Salesian re-reading of rights

Each one of us, as an educator, has chosen a Christian anthropological viewpoint, the same one that inspired Don Bosco, so he or she must become a defender and promoter of human and juvenile rights. We can be assisted by a Salesian re-reading of the principles which lie at the basis of these rights. Herewith some elements of this re-reading, especially in reference to the rights of children.

- The integral nature of the human being and the application of the principle of the indivisibility and interdependence of all the basic rights of the person: civil, cultural, religious, economic, political and social.

- "I want you to be happy now and in eternity" and the application of the principle of integral human development, a development which, in the holistic vision of the Convention on the rights of the child, includes physical, mental, cultural spiritual, moral, social, political aspects. A social welfare logic does not suffice nor does a guarantee of survival; we must offer children the essential elements for their appropriate and complete development; this involves us in giving attention to circumstances which, in fact, limit this holistic viewpoint in the daily dynamic of the educational process.

- "One for one" and the principle of the greater interest of the child. This principle of the Convention emphasises the need to adequately understand each situation and aspect of the life of the child and to know how to appreciate the opinions of the children themselves in

¹³ BENEDICT XVI, *Opening address to 5th General Episcopal Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean*, Aparecida, 13 May 2007, n. 4.

choosing and aiming educational interventions at what is truly good for them. Such attention to the real situation of the child is essential for practising the Preventive System.

- The centrality of the child as an active individual and the principal of participation. Listening, involving, ensuring that children are involved in questions about their life is the way to give them responsibility as members of the society in which they live, and to enable their social abilities. In this spirit we need to take another look the kinds of reception and involvement of children in our educational programmes and activities.

- The “it’s enough that you are young for me to love you” and the application of the principle of non-discrimination. This is linked to identifying the privileged beneficiaries of the Salesian mission: the poorest and most disadvantaged youngsters, those who are at risk of being marginalised, those with disabilities, refugees, migrants, the abandoned, children who are victims of abuse, etc. In this sense we should foster participation and active involvement of the weak in our educational settings, in our proposed activities, in the various groups etc.

- *A renewed scheme for community sharing*

The communal nature of Salesian pedagogical experience demands that we always work as a group, as an educative community. It is not possible to do everything by ourselves, like the pioneers, or in a self-directed way. Only in community can we assure the circumstances for a truly educative activity and setting. We need to develop a network mentality, both amongst the various activities and groups of the Congregation, and other people who have the lives and education of young people at heart.

To transform society from within, by carrying out our educational mission, requires the reawakening of new social and cultural energies, overcoming situations of blatant injustice, appealing to everyone's social responsibility. As Salesians, with our many resources and rich spiritual and pedagogical heritage, we hold an important responsibility. We need to be the animating core and centre for calling together everyone who is ready to take up in a supportive way an educational commitment according to Don Bosco's style. Sharing the defence of human rights and those of children can be a strong motivation for giving solidity to this cooperation and for sustaining the hard daily task.

- *A renewed pastoral intention*

To guarantee the effectiveness of human rights in Salesian educative and pastoral activity there needs to be a growing conviction of the essential relationship between education and evangelisation. “We need to recall that evangelisation develops along with human development and authentic Christian freedom. Love of God and love of neighbour have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God (Cf. *Deus caritas est* 15). For the same reason social catechesis and adequate formation in the Church's social teaching will also be needed... Christian life is not only expressed through personal virtues, but also in social and political virtues”.¹⁴

Salesian activity also includes a concern for the integral salvation of the individual: knowledge of God, filial communion with Him by acknowledging Christ, the sacramental mediation of the Church. Having chosen youth and poor youngsters, Salesians accept the departure points where young people are to be found and the possibilities they have for a journey of faith. In every recovery initiative, or initiative of education and human development, salvation is proclaimed and made possible, a salvation that will become more explicit little by little as those involved become more capable. Christ is everyone's right. He is to be proclaimed without forcing the moment, but not letting the occasion pass either.

It is the reference to Christ, the New Man, which can help us to rethink our task of promoting human rights and educating the young who are most disadvantaged and at risk. It helps us to understand the goal of the full realisation of human existence. “Coming face to face with Jesus of Nazareth... does not pose any other alternative or successive threshold than that of those

¹⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the opening of the 5th CELAM Conference*. 13 May 2007. n. 3.

