

THE RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL DIMENSION OF THE EDUCATIVE SYSTEM OF DON BOSCO

Ashley Miranda, SDB

It was Mother Teresa who said that the greatest of all human sufferings is the suffering of loneliness—to feel that no one cares, that it matters to no one whether you are dead or alive. We live in the communication age and we are surrounded by wonderful inventions designed to bring human beings closer to one another. E-mail, mobile phones, low cost air travel has made it so very easy for us to keep in touch with our friends and loved ones, however far they may be from us physically. However, the sad reality of our times is that perhaps now more than ever before there are innumerable young people who are lonely—very, very lonely, with no one to talk to, no one with whom to share their pains and anxieties, their struggles and hopes for the future.

There are many symptoms of this loneliness that grips many young people today. Perhaps the two most significant ones are the fear of long-term commitments and the desperate yearning for instant happiness. Young people of today, like young people of the past, are extremely generous; yet at the same time we see that many of them are afraid to make commitments that would bind them over a lifetime. As far as happiness is concerned, it must be admitted that all human beings yearn for happiness and that it is only natural to do so. But in the case of many young people today it is the question of “how to achieve as much happiness as possible, as soon as possible and as easily as possible.” Often it is the case that they settle for instant gratification at the cost of long term integral happiness.

In a context like this, the preventive system of Don Bosco becomes especially relevant. The preventive system did not begin as a theory that Don Bosco studied and then later put into practice in his work with young people. Instead, it is a pedagogy and a spirituality that evolved from Don Bosco’s lived experience of many years with the young people of the streets of Turin and other cities of Italy.¹ It is true that Don Bosco’s time was very different from

our own, but the principles of education that he outlined are as relevant today as they were in his time.

We are all aware that the three pillars of this system are Reason, Religion and Loving Kindness. These pillars do not stand by themselves; each of them presupposes and involves the others.² In this reflection I would like to focus on the place of religion in the preventive system as lived out in the India of today with its many creeds and faiths. There is no doubt that in Don Bosco's time the religion in question was the Catholic faith. Don Bosco worked in a society that had a very strong Christian ethos. The majority of the boys he reached out to came from Catholic families, some fervent, others much less so. Even though the situation that we work in today, here in India, is one in which Catholics are a small minority and most of the young people we encounter come from other faiths, this pillar of religion cannot be dispensed with. Without religion the preventive system would cease to be the preventive system.³

We have already said that the Preventive system is both a spirituality and a pedagogy. Disconnected from its spiritual roots it is ineffective as a pedagogy. In practice this would involve the following:

First of all, from the point of view of the preventive system, the educator is not in the profession primarily because he is a good teacher, or because he wants a job, or even because he loves young people. Instead he is an educator because deep down inside he feels called by God to this special mission. He recognizes that he is only a channel and that God is the true teacher. Within the preventive system, the educator does not look at himself as doing a favor to young people. To be an educator is for him a great privilege; to be involved in the formation and growth of young people and to enjoy their trust is a great blessing. In the life of Don Bosco we see very clearly this strong sense of having being called by God. The dream that he had at nine in which he felt called to dedicate his life in service to young people who were poor and lost animated his whole life. He accepted every sacrifice; he faced every challenge before him because he felt impelled by this dream to give himself to the welfare of the young till his dying breath.

At the heart of the preventive system is the deep conviction of God's unconditional and compassionate love for all human beings, especially his predilective love for young people. And it is this love that the educator tries to actualize in the life of the young people he serves. He realizes that one of the greatest gifts that he can give to the young is the assurance that their life is meaningful, that they matter, if to no one else, at least to God who has a special and personal plan for each one of them.

The educator seeks therefore to help the young to read the different signs in their lives and so discern God's will for them. He seeks to drive home to them that while there are many legitimate things that could give them immediate happiness, their surest guarantee of an integral happiness that will endure through a lifetime is to do God's will, to live out the personal vocation given by God to each one of them.

We have said that the preventive system is both a spirituality and a pedagogy. This also means that the aim of this system is not merely to transform the life of the student but that of the educator as well. This system is oriented to the integral growth and personal development of both the educator and the student. Don Bosco said very clearly that the aim of his educative system was to make saints both of the teacher and of the boys. For him, nothing less would suffice as a goal.

The preventive system is one that makes more demands on the educator than on the student. Each of the three pillars asks much of the educator. In what follows let us look at some of the demands that the pillar of religion makes on the educator.

1. A Pedagogy of Presence

The preventive system requires the deep and committed personal involvement of the educator in the life of the students. Don Bosco was deeply convinced that it is not enough for the educator to do a lot for the students. He was of the view that all the sacrifices of the educator, his hard work, his commitment would amount to nothing if the educator did not prize above all else time spent with his students. He advised his Salesians, and witnessed in

an extraordinary manner through his life, that “it is not enough for the educator to love his students; they should know that they are loved”.⁴ He was convinced that there was no better proof of this love than presence. The educator, according to the preventive system, seeks to be present in the life of his students not only in the classroom, but also during moments of prayer, work, and most importantly at recreation. He enjoys their company and is ever willing to listen to them.

One may ask, “Why should the educator be present? Is not hard untiring work for the welfare of one’s students proof enough of love?” The answer to the above questions is that perhaps it is indeed possible to love one’s students without having to be actually, physically present in their lives. However, the love that the preventive system demands has spiritual roots. The educator values presence because that is how God chose to relate with us. God loves us so much that in Jesus Christ he chose to become one of us. The educator is present because God is present. And the presence of the educator has the very same characteristics as God’s presence to us. It is not the presence of a policeman or of a task master, but the presence of one who has the best interests of the students at heart, a presence that encourages, supports, builds.⁵

2. A Pedagogy of Joy and Optimism

Don Bosco was convinced that education must be a joyful experience and he strove always to create an ambient in which young people could grow in a spirit of spontaneity, and joy and laughter; in an ambient in which he felt very much at home. This was possible because deep down Don Bosco was an optimist. Actually more than an optimist, he was a man of faith. He was convinced that there was someone greater than him was in charge, someone greater than everyone and everything in this world. Someone who cared for and loved, young people in particular, in an intense and personal way. Don Bosco saw himself as being only a humble, unworthy servant of this great and loving God. It was this faith that kept him going, that gave him the strength to carry on in spite of everything.

This faith of Don Bosco was translated into a very lively trust in young people. He believed in the young, in their intrinsic goodness and he encouraged those around him to do the same. He made it clear to them that an educator could not be one who constantly lamented his times, who despaired about young people. It is this belief in the young that enables the young to believe in themselves and spurs them on gradually to change.

3. A Pedagogy of Compassion and Patience

From the point of view of the preventive system the educator is not a trainer. He does not look for immediate and quick results. The educator is called to imitate God himself in his patience. Education is the fruit of a relationship in which the educator helps the young in his care to give shape to their lives. Results are not his first concern. He is compassionate and patient with the young and accompanies them in though the challenges and trials of life. The educator is one who is ready for the long haul. He knows that the results of his work will be seen in the long run. To succumb to the temptation of quick results would seriously compromise his work of education.

4. A Pedagogy of Respect and Reverence

Don Bosco knew each one of his boys by name and his relationship with them was characterized by a very profound respect and reverence for them. This respect was not some kind of pedagogical stunt but instead a natural manifestation of his deep conviction that each young person was a precious child of God, created out of love, with a purpose uniquely his own. That is why Don Bosco was very gentle in his dealing with the young. He never ridiculed them or looked down on them. He never used harsh words with them and even when they were difficult on occasions he went out of his way to make allowance for their shortcomings and to forgive them. It was this reverence that won the hearts of young people. They felt not only important but also loved. It is no surprise therefore that so many of his boys wanted to and eventually did

become his closest collaborators in his mission of being educators of the young.

5. A Pedagogy of Ordinary Things

It is often the case that in our desire to do great and extraordinary things we miss out on the small and ordinary things of life which in reality make life truly beautiful. The preventive system of Don Bosco is one that seeks to help young people to truly value the so called 'ordinary moments,' for every moment is a gift from a loving and provident God. Don Bosco sought to help the young people in his care to reach the highest possibilities of their being. He was convinced that it is not by doing extraordinary things, but instead by doing ordinary things extraordinarily well that life is transformed and becomes truly rich.

The value given to the ordinary in the preventive system is seen especially in the kind of spirituality that Don Bosco sought to inculcate among his boys. He told them that holiness or 'wholeness of life' comes from doing one's ordinary duty extraordinarily well. Don Bosco made his boys aware of the shortness and uncertainty of life. None of us has any control over how many years we are going to live, but what we need to do is to add life to our years. Don Bosco exhorted both his fellow educators and his boys to always be enthusiastic. This, he told them, is possible only if they lived pure and transparent lives rooted in God the source of all life and goodness.

6. A Pedagogy of Interior Freedom

Don Bosco equated holiness with wholeness. As we said earlier, he wanted the young people he worked with to be fully alive. He made it clear to his collaborators that the proximate aim of the educational project they were involved in must be to foster personal freedom and responsibility. Otherwise the young people in their care would never be able to arrive at the holiness and wholeness that is God's plan for them. God's love requires a personal response in freedom and love. This response can never be

forced. It is not something that can be ensured by a myriad of rules and regulations. Rules and regulations did have a place in his institutions but he always cautioned his collaborators that they had to be kept to a minimum if they wanted their work of education to be effective. True education is a matter of the heart, he told them.⁶ True education is a matter of the integrated formation of the character of the young person in a spirit of freedom. This, we can say, is the distinctive ethical feature of Don Bosco's educational strategy. Don Bosco was of the view that a piecemeal approach to education that focused exclusively on only one or other aspect of the young person's life would not be beneficial in the long run. He advocated instead an integrated approach that focused on the virtues. He sought to create a formative ambient in his schools and oratories that made rapid growth in the virtues possible. He was so successful in his endeavour that within a very short span of time he was able to practically effect miracles in the lives of his boys. The vast majority of his boys came from backgrounds that were far from ideal. Don Bosco did not seek to reform them with rules or the cane. Instead he surrounded them with love and presented before them an ideal of holiness and wholeness so enamoring that it was not long before even the most difficult of his boys longed to become saints by growing in the virtues.

There is surely much more that we can say about the preventive system and about its religious and ethical foundations. But I think for the purpose of this reflection what we have considered so far will suffice. I would like to stress once again that the preventive system was born in a context that was decidedly Catholic and that its spiritual roots are in the Catholic faith, most especially in the central mystery of God's personal and incarnational love for all his children. The educator in his work of education seeks to imitate the God who became one of us, he seeks to imitate the Good Shepherd who went after the sheep that had strayed away and was lost on the hillside. I firmly believe however, that the preventive system can be adapted and be very effective in other religious contexts as well. This has been proved repeatedly in a number of very diverse contexts over the last hundred and fifty years all over the world and also in India. Perhaps the only context

in which the preventive system would not be as effective as it has proved to be would be a context in which God does not find any place whatsoever. After all at the core of this system lie twin convictions, first of God's unconditional and personal love for the young and second that the educator is one who is 'called' and sent on a mission.

Notes

¹ Pietro Braido, *Prevenire non reprimere: Il sistema educativo di don Bosco* (Rome: LAS, 1999) 185.

² Braido, *Prevenire non reprimere* 291.

³ Cf. Paul Avallone, *Reason, Religion and Kindness: The Educational Method of Saint John Bosco* (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1979) 9, 50.

⁴ John Bosco, "Letter from Rome," in *Constitutions and Regulations of the Society of St. Francis de Sales* (Rome: Editrice S.D.B., 1984) 257.

⁵ Braido, *Prevenire non reprimere* 302-303.

⁶ Cf. Avallone, *Reason, Religion, and Kindness* 45.