

## The Preventive System of Don Bosco

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The pedagogy of Don Bosco may be re-named for our times as the 'pedagogy of expression' because it is a system of education that is designed to enable a student to grow fully and freely into the kind of person he or she is 'meant' to be. Don Bosco himself called his educative method 'the preventive system' – a name he chose to contrast it with the 'repressive system' in vogue during his time. The latter was a type of education that used fear of punishment as the basis for control. In contrast, Don Bosco's preventive method would seek to 'prevent' the very need for punishment by placing the child in an environment in which he/she is encouraged to choose the 'good' rather than the 'bad'. In positive terms, this environment would create a healthy, congenial and friendly atmosphere in order to elicit the best that a student can offer – his/her complete self-expression.

The roots or the invisible principles of Don Bosco's 'system of expression' are 'Rapport', 'Religion' and 'Reason', while the trunk or visible body of this educational method is 'Presence'. These are the four principles of his educational system.

### Rapport

If an open environment is crucial to the learning process, establishing a relationship is its indispensable foundation. We learn faster from people we love. We learn faster because we are loved. An atmosphere of trust and acceptance is the key to healthy growth. This is the place for teachers to begin – love between each other and love for their children.

But how do teachers establish rapport. The guiding principle, Don Bosco advocates, is to start by establishing a strong bond of togetherness: "Love what your child loves, so that your child may love what you love". What is being proposed is a method that starts from what fascinates children: games, music, fantasy, sports... It simply means being interested in the things that interest your children. Don Bosco said, "It is not enough to love, children must know that you love them." This is realized in your concern for their interests.

But this concern and "loving what they love" or "letting them know you love them" is for a purpose, that is, that they may love what you love, that they may begin to value the things that you as a teacher value. Very often we adults tend to force down values on our students – we want them to hard work, to study, to show greater responsibility, to pray, to be punctual, to be honest... Unfortunately we want them to live by these values that we cherish without first ensuring that we establish a relationship of trust with them. Don Bosco's advice 'to love what they love so that they love what you love' emphasizes that important link between the 'teacher-child relationship' and vice versa. For him, the relationship is chronologically first and is as important as the demand to live by values. 'My teachers are my best friends' is one of the rare compliments teachers can ever receive from their students. Within such a trusting relationship students are almost always ready to listen and to live by the values their teachers want them to follow. Arriving at this depth of confidence, every teacher will know, requires much time, patience and humility.

### How does one prepare the ground for building confidence?

*Listening:* In order to love what young people love, teachers must first listen to the things they are saying, to the things they are not saying, to the things they are afraid to say, and to the things they themselves take for granted. Observation and good listening skills are important because they will help teachers to discover and anticipate their student's needs.

*Availability:* Reaching out to where young people feel most at home is a sure way to gain their respect and love. This means spending time, being with them in their play and encouraging them in what they value.



*Appreciation:* The task of 'drawing them beyond themselves' (i.e. 'educere', to draw forth) is firmly founded on an appreciation of who they already are. This means encouraging them to feel proud of themselves, their physical traits, their interests and their talents. This also means not comparing them with others – a common temptation for most teachers. Appreciation demands an acceptance of students as they are so that they learn self-acceptance and develop a healthy self-esteem which is the foundation for mature living.

*Creativity:* Since love is full of surprises, teachers will endear themselves to their students with a lively and creative eagerness to surprise them and thereby sustain their enthusiasm for living. Picnics, excursions, encouraging initiative, development of talents – these are all essential parts of education. They encourage creativity, reinforce positive self-esteem, foster participation and sharing and keep alive the bond of togetherness.

## **Religion**

Today it is so easy to be swayed by mass media presentations of happiness. Wealth, influence, fame, appearances – these are popular criteria for success. Teachers sometimes are influenced by these superficial interpretations of life and they often induce their students to join the frantic chase for the pot of gold and glamour.

Don Bosco, instead, points to the root cause of genuine happiness: an ardent following of the will of God as we daily live our lives in faith and according to a moral plan. Love of God and love of neighbour which begins in the home continues in the school. One of the peak moments of family togetherness is the time each family sets aside to worship, praise, thank and petition God. Only in this manner will teachers be able to foster in their students a relationship that goes beyond 'feeling good' in each other's company to 'being-fully-in-communion' with each other and the surrounding world. Indeed, Don Bosco's is an educative system that is deeply centred around family togetherness – one that is tested on its knees.

But one may object. Isn't human rapport sufficient? Why talk of religion with my students when today, more than ever before religion is being seen as a means to divide humanity? Is not an education to a deep love for humanity enough?

The objection is valid, considering the way all religions have had their share of fanatics and fundamentalists who are ready to kill in God's name. The fear of religion turning into an instrument of hate is indeed a real possibility if it ignores reason – which is why Don Bosco gave equal importance to the use of 'reason' alongside 'religion', a point we will discuss in the fourth section of this article.

True religion, the type understood by Don Bosco, is one that brings out the best in our human nature in order to direct it to a more perfect loving, and a more generous way of living. Applying this principle to school life, teachers would have to confront some fundamental questions: What is the guarantee that the love teachers have for their students is not actually a camouflage for some pet affection that is profoundly tainted by their self-interests? Many teachers think they want the best for their students but end up forcing them to be dream-copies of some unfulfilled personal fancy.

And, yes, God does know. That is why for Don Bosco, education cannot be reduced to a purely secular humanitarian pedagogy. It has to go much deeper. For him, true education is a spirituality that seeks to inculcate in the heart and the mind of the child a profound sense of confidence in God's unconditional love for humanity. True education opens students to an appreciation for life, to a sense of duty and to the challenge of generous service.

*Life:* Teachers are to make efforts at being life-enhancing, never life-negating. Young people tend to live life as a feast. Music, theatre, dance, games, sport, art, crafts – these are all ways of living life's celebration and they have an important place in a student's life. But equally important are life-enriching attitudes such as gratitude, praise, joy, optimism, mutual



encouragement, and reverence for creation, interpersonal respect, and sensitivity to peace, tolerance and justice. In the process of learning and growth, ideas, talents and energies are all important. Nothing is wasted; no person is taken for granted. Each one respects the other and earns the respect of the other. Ways to overcome difficulties and challenges are sought through trust, participation and forgiveness in a spirit of family togetherness.

*Duty:* There is more to life than fun and festivity. The bitter pill that students have to learn to swallow is dedication to duty. 'As you sow, so shall you reap'. Investment of time in study, in dedication to 'doing one's duty' and doing it well, are tasks to be accepted cheerfully as 'God's Holy Will'. It is a Will that matures as it disciplines, that redounds to one's own growth and improvement. Routine is an essential part of this discipline, just as hard work and perseverance are. Young people find these hard to accept as they are caught up in today's techno-media culture which thrives on sensationalism, which tantalizes and entices through ever newer gimmicks and marketing tricks. The call to duty, however, is irreplaceable and there is no shortcut to happiness. It is worth recalling Don Bosco's advice to the fervent Dominic Savio who wanted to 'achieve' holiness through a list of sacrifices and mortifications: "For us holiness simply means doing one's daily duty cheerfully." One has only to begin implementing this principle through the minute-by-minute sequences of each day to realize the challenge of its hidden austerity.

*Service:* Teachers must be attentive to the dual nature of growth within their students. One is within, namely an inner journey to discovering God, relating to Him in prayer and the daily struggle to be happy in the fulfilment of one's duty. The other, equally important, is the journey outward towards making the world around us a lot better than it is. Teachers often tend to neglect the development of this second aspect of being religious. In so doing they raise self-contented students with a high degree of self-esteem and self-achievement, but with an equally large quotient of snobbery and greed.

Don Bosco was alert to the importance of opening student's minds and hearts to those less fortunate than themselves. At a time when people were fleeing areas affected by the cholera plague of 1844, he did the impossible. He sent his adolescent boys on a mission to assist the affected – with a scapular of Mary round the neck of each of his students. (History has it that none caught the plague!)

A child so immersed in the unfolding of the double journey 'within' and 'without' gradually learns to form that delicate and precious inner core of his being – his conscience. Through this he begins to understand his place in the universe, and to discover what he is "called to be" to improve life beginning with the world around him.

Teachers sooner or later realize that the exhaustion of their energies in the striving to advance student's security cannot compensate for one basic truth: their students are not their property. God gifts them students to be caretakers in partnership with His plans for each of them and develop in them a profound and personal relationship with their Creator. Such a relationship is foundational. It is the fulcrum, focus and finale of life's double journey. It is foundational because in a young person's moments of loneliness, doubt and despair only such a foundation has the guiding light of an answer.

## **Reason**

Don Bosco introduced reason as one of the three important pillars of his educational system because he saw its potential as the factor that balances love on the one hand and faith on the other. Reason safeguards a relationship based on love from degenerating into mere sentimentality or anarchy. Reason also supplies the necessary equilibrium that preserves a believer's faith from fundamentalism. The objection raised in the previous section of this



article – about religion spawning a brood of fanatics – is very real, precisely when the believer does not sufficiently develop the capacity to believe intelligently.

How can reason be used effectively in the difficult art of teaching? It provides the teacher with an excellent disciplinary means to lay down rules for behaviour and to ensure that they are followed without having recourse to punishments.

Here are some important tips to keep the rules 'reasonable'.

1. Keep them few or you will curtail spontaneity.
2. Keep them simple.
3. It is best to involve the child in their formulation – especially if they have reached age 7, the 'age of reason'. This will help them to understand the 'purpose' of the rule.
4. Communicate them clearly with tactful reminders from time to time. (Keeping in mind that children are by nature forgetful)
5. Rules have functional value. They are but an aid to fulfil a purpose outside themselves. It is important to see the larger picture, especially when rules are broken.
6. Rules must be implemented with firmness – though occasional flexibility does help.
7. If you were in your child's place would you yourself practice the rule you have made? If your answer is 'no', you have some re-thinking to do.

When rules are made without proper understanding, self-knowledge or knowledge of the child, teachers may err by using these same rules as defences behind which to conceal their own insecurities and complexes. Teachers who do not know or accept their students as they are may tend to enforce rules that are foreign to the psychological make-up of the youngsters. Nagging or constant reminders of moments when rules were broken is a misuse of the gift of reason. Nagging can hinder a healthy teacher-student relationship and can stifle growth.

Don Bosco's conviction of the importance of rules in the education of young people has to be seen within the context of the two other principles of his educative system which we have already mentioned, viz, rapport and religion. Only when all three principles are balanced will self-expression and freedom to grow take place. Teachers will be happy to be with their students, just as students will feel at home in the company of their teachers. The blending of Rapport, Religion and Reason in holistic education guarantees the full growth and development of the child.

### **Presence**

The three R's, of Don Bosco's system of Education, namely Rapport, Religion and Reason are not three separate principles. They are parts of the one nurturing tree that fosters growth through the indispensable presence of the teachers. This 'presence' of the teacher in the life of the student is the epitome of Don Bosco's educative system.

Strangely, the demands of a work culture, the craze for upward economic mobility and the desire to live above one's means seem to make 'presence' a rare commodity even for teachers today. They are not easily available to their students. Along with the teaching profession, they are also engaged in many other activities.

But presence in the sense of being physically in a place is not enough. For rapport, religion and reason to be truly lived out with one's students, teachers have to be present in a way that is qualitative. This calls for a type of presence that has the following characteristics:

1. *A motivating presence* – one that infuses enthusiasm, encouragement and is optimistic. The presence of the educator infuses in the child a thirst for knowledge through the tactful use of queries, experiments, and exposure to new and educative environments.



2. *A personal presence*: The presence of the teacher is such that each child feels known, loved and accepted. This is all the more essential when relating to children having different levels of intelligence who are weak, handicapped and underprivileged.

3. *An incarnational presence*: As explained under the section on 'rapport', loving what your students love or 'getting under their skin' has an important purpose: seeing the world through their eyes will make them want to experience the world and the values you live by.

4. *A creative presence* that is open to the joy of discovery. Life is too rich, too precious, too varied to be experienced between the fine print of cold textbooks or within the walls of classrooms. Being open to discovery means being ready to try new ways, new solutions, and new ideas. Risk is a necessary ingredient of all creative learning.

5. *A preventive and corrective presence*: Students are apt to forget rules. Being there with them would help prevent exposure to harm. Furthermore, timely reminders do help. But these reminders must be respectful of the offender. Accusations, name-calling, sarcasm, lecturing, moralizing and generalizing are to be avoided. Faults are best corrected by being reasonable, polite, factual, firm and to the point. If corrections do not work, it is usually the manners in which corrections are given that are often to blame. But there could be other reasons such as frequency, timing, tact and context that may have to be looked into.

A presence that instils fear and punishment does more harm than good. This is humiliating and can be manipulated dangerously by a teacher who lacks self-esteem. Punishments are often merely short-term benefits to satisfy the teacher's need to take control of a difficult situation. They rarely prove to be helpful in the long run. In his letter to his Salesians, Don Bosco advised:

"My sons, how often in my long career has this great truth come home to me! It is so much easier to get angry than to be patient, to threaten children rather than persuade them. I would even say that usually it is so much more convenient for our own impatience and pride to punish them than to correct them patiently with firmness and gentleness." (Letters of John Bosco, 201)

## **Discipline**

Don Bosco's abhorrence of the 'repressive system' of education that controlled children by fear of punishments led him to believe that a type of education without punishments was actually possible. The system of expression was born. It is an educational method that seeks to create an environment that is so conducive to an all-round growth that it puts the child in the 'moral impossibility of doing wrong' – just as a doctor would emphasize the practice of preventive health care measures as a necessary requisite for staying healthy.

But if, as a last resort, punishments need to be administered (as indeed sometimes they are inevitable), here are 10 important points for educators to remember.

1. The child has a right to know what is right and wrong, what can be done and what must not be done. Teachers should not punish if they have not communicated the rule to the child or have not stated clearly their disapproval of the child's offending action.

2. Do not administer a punishment without giving at least two warnings to the child. This delay will demand greater control on the part of the teachers but it will help them to avoid erratic and injurious punishments which could later cause them remorse and guilt.

3. The punishment must be proportionate to the transgression.

4. The timing of the punishment must follow the transgression so that the child will associate the two and not repeat the transgression again.



5. The punishment used must be consistent so that the child will know that whenever a rule is broken, punishment is inevitable. When consistency is maintained, it is enough to signal the first two warnings and children are sure to stop misbehaving.

6. Whatever form of punishment is used, it should be impersonal, that is, the result of violating a rule and not because 'You are bad!' This will ensure that the child will not interpret the punishment as caused by a personal defect that will lower his/her own self-worth.

7. Punishment must be constructive so as to motivate good behaviour in the future. Physical punishments are not the only type of punishments. Denying the child a favour, or giving an additional amount of work to be completed, can be as effective.

8. Especially when the reason for the punishment is unclear, a brief explanation may help the child to recognize it as fair and just.

9. Punishment must lead to conscience building to help children develop self-determination and inner control.

10. Punishment must never humiliate – neither in words nor in action. It must never be seen as an act of "meanness" or revenge on the part of the teacher. Punishments administered in these ways create in the child deep scars of resentment that take years to heal.

"Be careful not to give anyone reason to think that you act under the impulse of anger. It is difficult to keep calm when administering punishment. But it is very necessary if you are not to give the impression that you are simply asserting your authority or giving vent to your anger.

Let us look on those over whom we have a certain authority, as sons. Let us be determined to be at their service, even as Jesus came to obey and not to command. We should be ashamed to give the least impression of domineering. We should only exercise authority in order the better to serve the boys.

...There must be no angry outbursts, no look of contempt, no hurtful words. Instead, like true fathers, really intent on their correction and improvement, show them compassion at the present moment and hold out hope for the future.

In serious matters it is better to ask God's help in humble prayer, than to make a long speech that wounds those who hear it and does no good at all to the guilty ones."

*(Letters of John Bosco, 201, 205)*

The system of education of Don Bosco serves as a wise and time-tested framework for every teacher. It is intensively challenging while at the same time amply rewarding. Indeed, teaching – according to the educational method of Don Bosco – is the delicate art of growing with your students.