

## **DON BOSCO – EDUCATOR**

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Don Bosco is a man of many colours: priest, saint, founder, mystic, prophet, servant of the young and the poor, educator, pastor, social activist, evangelist, healer, writer, churchman. He is a man aflame with the glowing fire of Sinai shining through myriad activities, talents and charismatic gifts; truly a man of God wrapped in an ecstasy of love-filled and hope-filled action with a world-wide reach.

Yet if we pause for a moment to consider this ecstasy of love-in-action we soon discover other spiritual blooms vividly at work:

- an ecstasy of solidarity with the poor and those most in need
- an ecstasy of faith-filled service
- an ecstasy of loving care finding form in a vast work of education, evangelisation and development on behalf of the young

Only grace, and faith-filled cooperation with grace, can explain the prophetic phenomenon that is Don Bosco in the world. The dance of Loving Spirit gives rhythm to Don Bosco's every pastoral-educative step: for God loves the young!

Don Bosco was never shy about affirming the deep religious roots of his pedagogical inspiration and the profoundly religious shape of his commitment to education. His Christian faith lies at the heart of everything he did. It is especially present in everything he did to overcome class- and poverty-based gaps in value-led educational, vocational, faith and economic attainment. As a mystic and a prophet, as a servant of the poor, Don Bosco was moved by an implicit eschatological vision made explicit in God-given motivations of hope and the pastoral resiliency to which they gave rise. He was the master of a pastoral-educative approach that developed the whole person and put the student firmly at the centre of his educative project.<sup>1</sup>

He believed that, amidst the uncertainties of the world, everyone is called to wholeness and completion in Christ. His ministry was coloured by the many hues and possibilities of that vision and the desire it provoked in him to bring Christ's healing work to completion in the lives of those he touched. Education became a privileged channel to the fulfilment of that desire precisely because Don Bosco knew from personal experience that next to good parenting education is the fundamental agency of human change and social development: the door to a better life, the door to complete and full expression of self.

Don Bosco had already seen this in the public life of his mentor and spiritual director St Joseph Cafasso (1811-1860) whose solicitude for poor youth had an immense impact on the young Don Bosco.<sup>2</sup> He witnessed Don Cafasso instructing the young in the faith, giving them clothes so that they could go to church, and finding them jobs with honest employers. He also saw Cafasso pay school fees and give bread to young people in need; and, of course, he witnessed Don Cafasso's work in the prisons. It is in such ways that the seeds of mystical and prophetic service are sown and their patterns learnt from a man of prayer and patient yet indefatigable action in the cause of charity.<sup>3</sup>

### **Mystic Fire**

God's fire, the fire of Sinai, is a transforming fire, a liberating and refining fire, an inspiring fire that inflames the goodness and the beauty in the human heart. There is nothing harmful or punitive in it. Like that fire, there is nothing harmful or punitive in Don Bosco's approach to education. The fire of Sinai speaks of God's compassionate presence in the world. So does Don Bosco. It speaks of God's light in a darkened world, of the transforming wisdom of Christ and the warmth of the Spirit touching and transforming human hearts and lives. So does Don Bosco. His mysticism is grounded in a spirituality of the heart. So is his educative-pastoral approach. Are we listening to the wisdom of the heart today?

A holy man he had no difficulty proposing holiness and the love of God to the young. He knew from experience that the touch of God's holiness is lovingly expansive even in dark and difficult times. For Don Bosco and for us religion, the way to holiness, the way of response to God's love, is not an add-on. It is not an optional extra. Like Don Bosco it is our hope that young people be touched by the divine fire that purifies and transforms but does no harm. For us too religion and spirituality are part of what it means to be a full human being.

In Don Bosco the mystic we see this fire spreading into the lives of young people who in their turn reached the heights of sanctity: Savio, Magone, Besucco<sup>4</sup> and many others during (and after) Don Bosco's life time, a message brought home in the names that appear in the rolls of Salesian sanctity. And Don Bosco was unafraid to make spiritual and vocational proposals at a time when socio-cultural, political and economic trends were blatantly inimical to sanctity. Does the picture sound familiar?

By definition, the authentic Salesian educator is one in whom the inspiring and transforming fire of Trinitarian love burns brightly because he or she has personally experienced a liberating encounter with the living God. Such an encounter inevitably reshapes the logic of the mind, the logic of the heart, and the logic of life. It moves beyond narrative to an ever-deepening understanding of the divine in life, and then to the radical, transforming wisdom of God; and the mystic and the prophet begin to emerge.

In such a radical encounter the mystic's eyes are opened to the One True Reality; they are awakened from the collusive con- sensual slumber of the majority to an enlightened posture of true being, touched by the unfragmented reality of pure knowledge and divine wisdom. They become creative thinkers and saints, radiating love and the fire of the Spirit. Everything they do they do in union with God.

We understand that mystics are those who abandon the prison of self and become doorways to the sacred, people who savour the aroma of Christ, who in that aroma live radically open and different lives, seeking to help others live their lives to the full, to overcome the challenges that hold them back, and strengthen the ethical fibre of a just society.

As mystics like Don Bosco we favour and support the search for experiential transcendence; we want to help people to achieve their spiritual potential and challenge the barrenness of so much of life. Mystics like Don Bosco always seek ways to make barren lives fruitful, and barren places fit for life.

### **Prophetic Spirituality**

Prophetic spirituality blossoms where two desires meet: our heartfelt desire for God and God's unimaginably vast desire for us. In the steps of St Francis de Sales Don Bosco discovered this marvellous space and shared it with the world. Where is this awe-inspiring space? It lies in the region of the heart and blossoms in all the creative and imaginative facets of loving kindness and compassion- ate service, the core principles of the Salesian approach to education. Salesian mysticism blossoms, it flourishes as prophetic spirituality when God's fire becomes our sun, when Don Bosco's vision becomes our way, when we understand what Mary means when she says to us, Do what- ever he tells you (John 2:6).

Prophetic spirituality is about producing difference. It engages in the dance between the customary and the new, between a possible future and the given past or present. It actively supports and encourages a new social imagination just as Don Bosco did. It has a breathless impatience with injustice and exploitation just as Don Bosco did. Think: why did some of Don Bosco's priestly colleagues believe he was mad? Why did many early disciples leave Jesus? Touched by divine fire both were dancing in a different space to their peers. Are we? Listen to the Prophet Jeremiah:

*Be appalled, O heavens, at this,  
be shocked, be utterly desolate,  
says the Lord,  
for my people have committed two evils:  
they have forsaken me,*

*the fountain of living waters,  
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,  
broken cisterns,  
that can hold no water.*

(Jeremiah 2:12-13)

Can you hear these words and others like them echoing through Don Bosco's life, echoing in his development as a Christian educator? He wanted the young to develop spiritual cisterns well able to hold divine waters, waters and wisdom from the crystal springs of Spirit and the Living Word. His ear is attuned to a cry and a need imperceptible to and ignored, marginalised by many others. Prophet that he was, Don Bosco adamantly refused to be fed on the sin of the people (Hosea 4:8). He listened to the silent cry of the young, especially the poor and abandoned. That is why his approach to education supports uprightness, justice, steadfast love, mercy, faithfulness, and personal knowledge of God (see Hosea 2:19-20).

Prophetic insight into divine love also plays a pivotal role in Don Bosco's educational insight. Listen again to Hosea:

*I will heal their faithlessness;  
I will love them freely...  
I will be as the dew to Israel;  
he shall blossom like a lily,  
he shall strike root as the poplar,  
his shoots shall spread out;  
his beauty shall be like the olive,  
and his fragrance like Lebanon.*

(Hosea 14:4-6)

Don Bosco recognised all these potentials and promises in the young. Can you hear them echoing in and inspiring his life-long desire to help them become good Christians and honest citizens? Like Micah he had no time for empty and perfunctory worship. The contemplative in action, the active mystic wanted something more, something deep, something with liberating integrity for the young. He invited them to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with their God (see Micah 6:6-8). Is this level of insight what we seek for them? If not, then how can we propose holiness as Don Bosco did? Prophetic spirituality is always ready to sing the Lord's song, always ready to sing new songs.

Or have we wandered from the prophetic path Don Bosco trod before us, making peace with the customary and the familiar, satisfied with the old songs, closed to anything new? How can we call such a stance educational? Where is the learning in it, the life-long transformational learning that lies at the heart of the prophetic call? Where is the critical reflection, the questioning of personal assumptions and preferences and the distorting habits of mind and expectation to which they inevitably give rise?

More: how can we dance in the space between the new and the customary if we exclude religion, if we ignore the spiritual longings of the human heart? But then, are we ourselves ready to touch the flame? Are we ready to hold the sacred in our hands? Are we ready to leave our comfort zones? Are we ready for *ruah hakodesh*, holy spirit? Are we ready to stand in the space where prophetic spirituality unfolds and transforms? Are we able to witness to sacred possibility and new beginnings? Are we ready to witness to the sacred space where meaning begins? Are we ready to dance again with Don Bosco? Are we ready to let divine fire inflame our souls?

Prophetic spirituality is active; it turns towards the world. Its contemplation is actively social, its prayer and meditation is active and attentive, its Eucharistic and Marian devotion is active and aware, open, shared, lived with the young. Look at Don Bosco. His commitments, like those of the great biblical prophets are fierce, fearless, unwavering, challenging, dynamic, standing on the side of justice and the poor. Are ours? His convictions about the meaning of life are rooted in God. Are ours?

That is why Don Bosco and those who are rooted in his prophetic spirituality serve life to the full (John 10:10); that is why they seek, support and propose loving encounters with a living God-in-Christ. Prophetic spirituality reverences and recognises God's spirit and presence at the heart of every life and all creation. It discerns and responds to the face of Christ, the Crucified Risen One, in the faces of the young and those in need; and it recognises God's face in a planet under human duress. In all of these things we are called with Don Bosco to be witnesses to hope.

*Let your face shine on your servant;*

*save me in your steadfast love*

(Psalm 31:16)

## **Servant Spirituality**

The question for us all, then, is this: what is the bright centre around which my whole life revolves? If my life, like Don Bosco's, is truly oriented on the divine how can mystical fire be separated from the Salesian work of education and for that work to be separated from the authentic expression of a servant spirituality?

Such a separation can only mean that Salesian educators have failed to grasp the true nature of Don Bosco's mystical path, his prophetic vocation, his friendship with God, his life-long concern for the young, and his world-transforming service. It can only mean that they have failed to open their lives to God's transforming fire, and failed to respond to the inspiring and transforming graces that bud forth as service. They have not personally known or have forgotten the light shining in God's face.

Servant spirituality is part and parcel of the prophetic call:

*Behold my servant whom I uphold,  
my chosen in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him,  
he will bring forth justice to the nations*  
(Isaiah 42:1)

It is grounded in loving kindness, gentleness, compassion, care and concern, and its commitments are shaped by these very human qualities. It is a spirituality of the heart that serves human and spiritual wholeness. Servant spirituality serves life and justice and stands in contrast to repressive, dominator models in life, leadership, religion and education. In Don Bosco's terms it is preventive, ethical, interactive, and open to the Spirit in order to engage the human spirit in the search for meaning, integrity, identity and the core self.

Educational praxis that does not engage with these human qualities misses the point. For Don Bosco true religion, true devotion, engages with all of these forces and brings them together in the liberating space of spirituality and care. He understood that some sense of spirituality, however vague, some residual religious sense, is the anchor-hold of most people's work ethics and social morality. That is why he valued and gave his life for the inspiration, education, and all-round development of the young.

Servant spirituality taught him to put them first. His servant spirituality led him to be a teacher, a bearer of inspiration, a model of faith in touch with the deep questions of the human spirit. He was a servant, a guide, one who offered invitations and proposals, not a disciplinarian. He offered a vision grounded and made real in personal dedication. The young knew they were in the presence of some- one who was truly on their side, someone whose values, experiences and assumptions they could take to heart. He entered through the heart and encouraged the mind.

Yet in all of this Don Bosco remained a realist. He understood that he could not draw all the young people he met to be honest citizens and good Christians. But that did not stop him trying. He was happy to serve those he could help to be honest citizens, but he was also deeply concerned for those he knew would

become neither honest citizens nor good Christians. He never lost hope of winning hearts for God. He would have delighted in what we call today spiritual and religious social capital: the religious and spiritual virtues, attitudes and skills that build wholeness, wholesomeness, wellness, integrity and wellbeing.

Even an incomplete listing of the virtues and attitudes associated with theories of spiritual capital will be familiar to the Salesian educator: love, hope, discernment, empowerment, service, knowledge, remembrance, hospitality, forgiveness, reconciliation, non-violence, play, acceptance of failure, healing of hurts, and genuine participation in group and community activities. Following Don Bosco the Salesian educator today is well-placed to support all the spiritual and religious forces that nurture resilience, hope, respect, work ethic, and creative mental ability among the young.

Spiritual capital also favours forms of networking, relationships, and respect for legal and ethical norms that enrich lives and communities, all of them elements in Don Bosco's approach. Theories of spiritual capital remind us that faith-based activities have measurable personal, social effects. Don Bosco would not have been surprised. Spiritual capital not only makes a theological framework and worshipping tradition available to people and the young, it offers a sound moral vision and a faith-basis for life.

Spiritual capital is not only a powerful source of energy and motivation that is equally at home on immanent and transcendent levels of awareness and involvement, it stands in stark contrast with materialistic postmodern and neo-liberal visions of self-interest and greed as the basis of moral and economic conduct.

Don Bosco would seek to moderate greed with generosity, private ambition with civic engagement, self-interest with care of others, and present exploitation of the world's people and resources with future needs and consequences. It should come as no surprise to the Salesian educator that accurate understandings of spiritual capital in education and life offer major transformational potentials, potentials to serve individuals and the world.

### **The Institution as Servant**

There is another wing to servant spirituality: the institution as servant. Today caring is mostly offered through institutions, large, complex, powerful, often impersonal, at times corrupt and incompetent. How do we take care of the institution? How do we ensure that it remains a servant? Part of the answer is institutional renewal and regeneration. The task is to move the institution to a higher, even extraordinary, distinguished level of quality and service. Don Bosco changed a seedy neighbourhood. What have we changed? Are we even up for change? What examples of such change can you identify?

The twin difficulties tend to be complacent neglect and a shifting of standards of service complicated from time to time by an ethos of collusion and disinterest, especially in the absence of participative models of leadership. The servant spirituality of an institution is readily undermined by idiosyncratic, unpredictable, unaccountable and dominator styles of leadership. Nor is it helped when change of personnel leads to unexpected and unnecessary interruptions and discontinuities of service.

Such are the forces that so often undercut the quality of servant spirituality in institutions. The postmodern turn to individualism is another complicating factor. Instead, servant spirituality within institutions demands interacting builders and prophets rather than individualistic bureaucrats and line managers. We need caring visionaries and servant administrators working together who truly care for the institutions and the people they serve. Servant leaders must be influential but they must also be ready for an evaluating task if the quality of service is to grow.

There is a paradox here: the ability to stand fully within an institution and yet maintain an objective, discerning stance, something that is difficult to do, especially when someone has thrown themselves heart and soul into the work. Discernment requires both responsibility and the willingness to change, factors that are often absent in reality, especially when self-protective omniscience is at play in institutional leadership. Imagine what happens when defensive omniscience is partnered by the burden of indecisiveness and personal disinterest! Imagine what happens when indecisiveness and disinterest damage creativity!

### **Salesian Education & the Church's Mission**

Education is integral to the mission of the Church and the Church challenges every educational establishment to be a place of encounter with God's love and truth (*Spe Salvi* 4). The Salesian school, then, faithful to the vision of Don Bosco, is meant to be a place where personal encounter, growth in knowledge, and the reality of Christian witness weave something beautiful in the life of each student. It offers them moments of encounter with God's beauty, reflective moments to savour God's delightfulness. With Don Bosco we are convinced that faith-based education nurtures the soul of a nation, helps its spirit find just form in the world. Salesian educators serve God's desire to be known in the world. At the same time we support the deep-seated human desire to know God; we support the human search for liberating truth.

The Salesian school is unafraid of a religious, faith-based stance even when mainstream socio-cultural thought and the dominant social media favour faithless, materialistic and atheistic choices, choices influenced by the rampant rationalism, naturalism and materialistic humanism at work in the self-



secularising societies and populations of the Western world. Salesian educators understand that faith and

reason lift the human spirit and challenge it to see through the illusions that obscure divine truth. In the words of Blessed John Paul II: <sup>5</sup>

Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves cf. Ex 33:18; Ps 27:8-9; 63:2-3; Jn 14:8; 1 Jn 3:2 (*Fides et Ratio*, Introduction).

All of this has to do with self-knowledge as a journey of discovery, a journey that critically embraces the *delectabilia divina*, everything that is good, true, beautiful and delightful about God; itself what John Paul II called the *diakonia* of the truth (*Fides et Ratio*, 2). For the Salesian, education, when it is grounded in authenticity, always and inevitably involves an encounter with God's wisdom, a wisdom that brings us to a deeper, more complete understanding of the world in which we live. We are unafraid to encounter the sacred in an unenchanted world.

We are unafraid to encounter the transcendent dimension of cosmic reality of which we are a natural part and in which we encounter the vast luminescence of God. As the Book of Proverbs puts it, those who acquire wisdom also acquire sacred understanding (Proverbs 4:5), a force that liberates and informs us in our encounters with the different faces of human truth. We live in a world of faces and voices that can quickly drown us in a welter of contrasting concerns (*Fides et Ratio*, 28). Truth can be cast into doubt, it can be set aside; but it can also be recovered in the presence of mystics, prophets and the friends of God (Wisdom 7:27).

It should come as no surprise, then, that the Salesian educators, following in Don Bosco's footsteps, are concerned about ideologically driven efforts to separate faith and reason, religion and spirituality. We want to create educative environments where truth is loved, where exact understandings are sought, so as to bring the true, the good, the beautiful and the delightful closer to ourselves, and the young people we serve, in all the saving power of truth, in all their splendour and in all their deep simplicity. We believe that the identity of our schools and centres is fundamentally a question of conviction:

- about ourselves, our origins and destiny;
- about Christ and his word as it is lived in the faith community;
- about faith made tangible in real lives;
- about spirituality lived in practices of authenticity and solidarity that mirror prophetic mysticism, service, justice, ecology, liturgy, prayer, community, the common good and a capacity to be for others.

We also believe that the contemporary crisis of truth is a crisis of faith, a crisis of choice, a crisis of self-centred individualism, a crisis of commitment and a crisis of self-transcendence. With Don Bosco we want to create and support contexts in which a loving God's active presence in human affairs is recognised and celebrated. We want to create a context where human dignity and human life is set before everyone as worthy of respect. We also want to deal with the prevailing timidity of many Christians in the face of the categories of the good, the true, the beautiful and the delightful. We want to challenge the aimless pursuit of novelty and entertainment, even in spirituality.

We want to question approaches to moral education based on risk. We believe in what Benedict XVI calls intellectual charity:<sup>6</sup> our responsibility as educators after heart of Don Bosco to lead young people to truth is nothing less than an act of love, a prophetic act energised by a heart that is a furnace of love, a well of service. We want to uphold the unity of knowledge in difficult times of fragmentation. We want to uphold its depth in a time of shallowness and superficiality.

As followers of Don Bosco, as mystics, prophets and servants, we believe that the sacred has an educative function. We believe that the absence of the sacred, the exclusion of the sacred, not only impoverishes a culture; more to the point, it impoverishes the lives of the young. We set ourselves in loving contrast to educators, who, in the name of a desacralized world, not only deprive the young of access to the sacred, but leave the door open to a welter of contemporary idols: consumerism, relativism, reductive materialism, self-centred visions of humanity, and the cult of celebrity to name but a few.

### **Don Bosco's Preventive System**

Don Bosco developed a true system of education. It views the young person as someone whose identity and freedom are still developing, who still needs the support and encouragement of education. Don Bosco was sensitive to the fact that young people need ongoing assistance and guidance in their development and growth. They need support and patience, acceptance and affection in keeping with their levels of awareness, maturity, and motivation.

The Letter from Rome (1884) shines a light on the heart of Don Bosco's approach: educative love, what Don Bosco summarised in the word, *amorevolezza*, loving kindness: the assurance of unconditional love lived in a warm network of family style relationships supported by understanding, acceptance and credible conversation.

What Don Bosco discovered is a joyful, creative love that responds to the lives and dreams and hopes of the young, to their dramas and tragedies, to their

anxieties and loneliness, to their loss of meaning and emptiness, to their complex and cumulative forms of poverty; in a word, to their demand for caring pastoral-educative accompaniment.

All of these factors are best offered in a familiar context which values. The repressive systems to which Don Bosco compared his approach view the young person as already fully constituted in his or her identity, freedom and responsibility: a young adult fully responsible for his or her actions.

Don Bosco did not develop a fully worked out theory of education. His method is operative, practical and project-based, an effective proposal open to development rather than a theory. In its origins it was assistential and social, a characteristic that is coming back into play today. It served a variety of interweaving purposes in Valdocco. Don Bosco's response in the Oratory was educational and re-educational, but it was also pastoral, a pastoral-educative response to the profound social changes taking place at the time that led him to use four intriguing words to describe the young people he himself met: poor, abandoned, in danger, and dangerous, a word we shy away from today.

The phenomenon of youth marginalization, aggravated by economic, social, cultural, affective, moral and spiritual poverty encountered by Don Bosco formed a cumulative complex of forces that still exists and oppresses young people in many places today. Think for a moment of boy soldiers and the industrial exploitation of children, think of child hunger and mortality, and then reflect critically on the prophetic, servant nature of contemporary Salesian responses. Are such responses possible in the absence of mystic fire? Don Bosco would say no.

Don Bosco's focus is on tried and trusted methods that accord with principles of action grounded in his own personal knowledge, experience and study. In this way he developed an approach to education that gave the young a relatively complete Christian and human formation inside and outside of the classroom, in the school and in the youth centre. Over time he was able to offer those who worked with him an organic and unified pastoral-educative proposal.<sup>7</sup> Note the word proposal in Braido's description. It sums up so much of Don Bosco's approach as an educator and helps us understand a key element of his style.<sup>8</sup>

Don Bosco's approach<sup>9</sup> makes use of three interactive forms of educative conversation. A close examination of them helps us understand why he is a mystic, prophet and servant of the young.

- Living witness that gave the young opportunities to observe and interiorize things of value to their lives;
- Narratives of many different kinds that helped the young understand underlying principles;

- Simple but principled accounts meant to inspire the young and guide their life choices.

As we try to come to terms with what it means to be mystics, prophets and servants among the young today we need to meditate deeply on the three terms Don Bosco used to describe his preventive method: reason, religion, and loving kindness, words pregnant with meaning, symbolic words, root metaphors that ground the meaning of every other metaphor in our Salesian spirituality. Let us play with them reflectively for a moment.

Reason: rational, reasonable, persuasive, wise, logical, intelligent, sound, realistic, well-based, level-headed, serene, even-handed, fair, open, sensible, prudent, discreet, discerning. What other words would you add to the list?

Religion: God, spirituality, charity, faith, hope, fire, joy, conviction, belief, mystical, prophetic, holiness, trust, assurance, passion, happiness, prayer, worship, church, reverence, veneration, fidelity. What other words would you add to the list?

Loving kindness: sincerity, affection, care, acceptance, concern, warmth, openness, welcome, hospitality, approval, kindness, gentleness, compassion, thoughtfulness, benevolence, service, understanding. What other words would you add to the list?

## **Summary**

### **Totality**

Don Bosco's idea of the educator is total: total in terms of his pastoral-educative activities, total in terms of his vision of the need for Christian education.<sup>10</sup> More to the point, he understood the educator as someone consecrated to the wellbeing of his students. It should come as no surprise that for Don Bosco education included everything: food to eat, shelter, clothes to wear, teaching a trade, playing games, teaching class, catechising, singing songs, going for walks, praying, hearing confessions, preaching, celebrating the Eucharist. They were all elements of Don Bosco's vision of pastoral-educative assistance. In all of these interweaving activities loving kindness played the central role and all were focussed on the human and spiritual wellbeing of the young.

### **Wellbeing**

For Don Bosco the wellbeing of the young person is not brought about by a pedagogical strategy. It requires something more, and that more, for Don Bosco, derives from a vision of the world grounded in faith and reason. Informed by 1 Corinthians 13, Don Bosco wove together the language of the heart and the

language of attentive, caring friendship: a friendly word, a kindly correction, win the heart, win their affection, a word in the ear, such were common phrases used in the pastoral-educative guidance Don Bosco gave young Salesians.

### **Loving-Kindness**

For Don Bosco educative loving kindness is the supreme principle of his pedagogical approach, a loving kindness that the young need to see, an educative- pastoral love they are well capable of recognising. Even corrections were seen in a similar light: sensible, reasonable and friendly words of advice intended primarily to help, intended to win the heart, intended for the young person's wellbeing. Loving kindness allows the educator to accept the condition of the young and to respond to it with attentive kindness and persuasive gentleness.

### **Spirituality**

For Don Bosco education was always a thing of the heart, something grounded in the educator's spirituality, something taught by God the true Master. Don Bosco reminds us that we will achieve nothing as educators if God does not first give us the key and that key leads us to the name Don Bosco gave his pastoral-educative approach: preventive.

### **Preventive**

The term preventive refers to gospel-inspired near-ness, the being near of an adult who bears real traces of God's loving presence, an adult whose being near is wholesome, dependable, mature, balanced, open, motivated by rich ideals and life-choices, but most of all consistent and congruent, integrated and whole. Such being near is a question of divine vocation, of call and response.

### **Goodness in the Young**

Don Bosco recognised the spontaneous move towards the good evident in the young and sought to encourage this inner disposition with all the kind-heartedness and warmth at his disposal. For Don Bosco the educator's task is to uncover this point of goodness and build on it. Yet he also knew that an educator could love much and yet achieve little if the young do not see that the affectionate concern educators have for them is real, that their being near is honest. Trust and perception played and continue to play key roles here. So does caring presence, committed presence, nearness with a heart.<sup>11</sup>

### **Open**

There is another characteristic of Don Bosco's we should not forget: his desire to be at the forefront when it came to making use of whatever proved educationally helpful. Remember his saying "in the things that are of advantage to young people in danger or which serve to win souls for God I run ahead even to the point of temerity."<sup>12</sup> The implications for us today are not difficult to discern.

## **A Concluding Examen**

Are we reasonable in our conversations with the young? Are our modes of persuasion reasonable? Do we offer friendly advice and make friendly proposals? Or do we prefer dominator or autocratic styles that simply demand obedience and make no effort to understand?

Do we value religion as an essential component in Don Bosco's life and approach? Is religious faith a personal value for us? Do we care for our own interiority and spirituality? Do we have a personal relationship with God? Or have we self-secularised?

Have we an awareness of the "little virtues" that underpin Don Bosco's understanding of loving kindness, especially wholesome affectionate presence, sincerity, and a readiness to share in the world of the young? What about the "great virtues", especially justice, charity, respect, readiness to encounter the face of the other, non-exploitive and non-manipulative modes of relating? Are we aware of the power gradients in teacher-student relationships? Do we understand that loving kindness requires the presence of reason and religious commitment? Finally, are we aware that for Don Bosco religion always grounds loving kindness, giving it the qualities of respect, fidelity and hope?

What do we understand by good Christian and honest citizen today? How alert are we to the pastoral-educative challenges of globalization and the revolution in the social media? How aware are we of the challenges to social and ecological solidarity? How aware are we of the need to educate people to austerity in the use of the world's resources and of the human need to walk lightly on the planet? In our pastoral-educative work what do we do to go beyond mere descriptions of injustice, especially in our work with the Salesian family and adults? Or are we content with moralizing? If that is the case where is the mystic fire, the prophetic commitment, the servant spirituality?

## **Some Further Questions:**

How do we honour soul in the classroom, youth centre, or parish? What signs indicate the presence of soul? Do you notice and acknowledge tones, gestures, flickers of feeling, the dropping of masks, the sharing of joys and talents, hints of inner life, hints of depth, the longing for something beyond a fragmented existence? How do we honour the voice of the young? How do we deal with questions of meaning and purpose and the big questions of life? How do we support deep connection with self, the other, community, heritage, nature, the Divine? How do we honour the weave of silence and stillness and solitude and spiritual intelligence? What happens when we meet resistance?

What about rites of passage and ritual? Do we encourage joy and delight, gratitude and celebration? What happens when joy and sorrow meet? How do we deal with suffering and death? How do we encourage awe, wonder and reverence for life? How open are we to joyful play, movement and rhythm? How do we support the transforming power of creativity? Are we able to recognise and respect flashes of intensity and deep absorption? How do we support transcendence: self-transcendence, transcending prejudice, stereotyping and gender polarizations? What about the hurtful words and actions of teachers and elders?

*May God's creative love enfold you in light!*

*May the love of Jesus curl warmly around you and open every heart for you! May Spirit clasp you by the hand and move you to wonderful deeds for the young! May you experience God there with you as you rise up and lie down!*

*May you experience Jesus there with you, protecting you in every encounter! May you experience Spirit kindling your heart anew today and every day! May you experience Mary's wise presence guiding you in all your ways!*

*And may angels guard your every step along the sacred way!*

#### **END NOTES:**

1. See for example, Don Bosco's *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, at [http://www.sdb.org/index.php?ids=10&sott=6&doc=Documenti/2004/\\_1\\_10\\_6\\_4\\_1\\_.htm&ty=3](http://www.sdb.org/index.php?ids=10&sott=6&doc=Documenti/2004/_1_10_6_4_1_.htm&ty=3) (accessed 10/09/2012)
2. Bosco Giovanni, *Rimembranza storico-funebre dei giovani dell'Oratorio di san Francesco di Sales verso al Sacerdote Caffasso Giuseppe* (Torino: Paravio e comp., 1860) 24.
3. Ibid. 51
4. You can read Don Bosco's accounts online (in Italian) at [http://www.sdb.org/it/e\\_sdb/Don\\_Bosco](http://www.sdb.org/it/e_sdb/Don_Bosco) (accessed 10/09/2012)
5. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j\\_p-ii\\_enc\\_15101998\\_fides-et-ratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j_p-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html) (accessed 07/09/2012)
6. Address to Catholic Educators, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., April 17, 2008 <http://www.zenit.org/article-22328?l=english> (accessed 07/09/2012).
7. Pietro Braido, *Prevenire non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di Don Bosco* (Roma: LAS, 1999) 8.
8. Those with Italian who are interested in what Don Bosco himself has to say about his preventive system should consult Braido's critical edition: Pietro Braido, *Don Bosco educatore: scritti e testimonianze* (Roma: LAS, 1992)

9. See Michele Pellerrey and Dariusz Gradziel, *Educare: Per una pedagogia intesa come scienza pratico-progettuale, seconda edizione* (Roma: LAS, 2011) 168.  
For a more complete discussion of Don Bosco's educative approach and experience see Francesco Casella, *L'esperienza educativa preventiva di Don Bosco. Studi sull'educazione salesiana fratraddizione e modernità* (Roma: LAS, 2007).
10. For a recent overview of key ideas in Salesian pedagogy see Guglielmo Malizia, Mario Tonini e Laretta Valente, a cura di, *Educazione e cittadinanza: verso un nuovo modello culturale ed educativo*. Prefazione di S. Em.za Card. Tarcisio Bertone (Milano: Franco Agnelli, 2008).
11. MB XIII, 629.
12. MB XIV, 662.

## **Suggestions for Use of this Guide**

### **With the Young**

Don Bosco lived out of his conviction that young people needed to slowly and carefully craft their own identities and understand their rights to freedom.

- Invite a group of young people to meet with the Educating Pastoral Community at a Council meeting in order to share some of the concerns this generation of young people face each day. Urge them to offer a presentation for this Council to better understand their culture, their fears, and their hopes.
- Invite a gathering of young people to identify the heroic leaders among their peers.
- Along with these named persons, assist them in identifying those virtues and values which have shaped those persons. Identify the qualities which offer opportunities for interiorizing those things that last, those values to guide their lives.

### **Cooperators**

As Cooperators the Salesian Family is offered a variety of lived-responses to the Salesian Mission for educating the young.

- How can the local group of Cooperators realistically and practically propose holiness to young people in your area?
- In the creation of the Cooperators' Pastoral Plan complementing the Provincial Organic Plan, examine those goals that involve educating parents and young people to social uprightness, justice, steadfast love and commitment, mercy, faithfulness, and personal knowledge of God.



- Foster ongoing spiritual education within the group by fostering Salesian formation in Salesian Pedagogy.

### **Community Days**

There are many deep and challenging questions offered by Fr. Jack Finnegan throughout this reflection.

- Make a list of the questions to give out to all the confreres.
- Choose to discuss these questions throughout this study year.
- Encourage each individual to use the same set of questions as a personal examination of conscience on a regular basis.
- Discuss: How might our institutions be re-ignited by “the divine fire that purifies and transforms?”

### **Colleagues**

Educators need education and formation! Urge your administration to take advantage of every opportunity to explore more deeply the Pedagogy of Don Bosco.

- Perhaps the collaborators at your apostolic site can suggest days of reflection and study
- Contact the Salesian Administrators to explore possible presenters for such occasions.
- Form study groups for reading and reflecting on The Memoirs of the Oratory, Don Bosco’s auto- biographical work.
- Integrate prayer with your work of education by fostering moments of shared prayer, days of retreat, moments of recollection.
- As professional educators, examine your own motivations and renew your commitment to the salvation of young people. This goal is best served by striving for renewal and reconversion in your own spiritual life.