

□ Reading time: 4 min.

We continue with the second instalment on the main texts of Don Bosco's preventive system.

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Before a teacher: the dialogue with Francesco Bodrato

Don Bosco is in Mornese, in the Alto Monferrato, during one of his famous autumn walks – the same stop that paves the way for the meeting with Mary Domenica Mazzarello and the future Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Approaching him is Francesco Bodrato, the town's municipal teacher: a school professional, a widower, and a family man. He would enter the Society the following year, become a priest in 1869, and lead the second missionary expedition to Argentina, where he would die in 1880.

The dialogue is technical, between experts. Bodrato asks what every teacher asks: how to achieve discipline without threats. Don Bosco's answer dismantles the traditional desk-bound model and proposes assistance, presence during recreation, familiarity, and the prevention of the occasion. It is the most "practical" text of the series and, not by chance, the one that speaks most directly to today's teachers. It demonstrates that the method is not exclusive to the oratory, but is transferable to the public school of a hillside town.

2/7. The dialogue on the preventive system with the municipal teacher Bodrato (7 October 1864, MB VII, 761-763)

"To this end, having asked D. Bosco for a private audience, which he was granted immediately, he asked what secret he had to so master such a large number of youths, who are by nature intolerant of discipline. D. Bosco replied to him:

- Religion and reason are the two mainsprings of my entire system of education. The educator must convince himself that all or almost all of these dear youths have a natural intelligence to recognise the good that is done to them personally, and at the same time they are endowed with a sensitive heart that is easily opened to gratitude. When, with the help of the Lord, one has managed to make the principal mysteries of our Holy Religion penetrate their souls, which, being all love, reminds us of the immense love that God has borne for man. When one manages to make the chord of gratitude vibrate in their hearts, which is owed to Him in return for the benefits He has so generously shared with us; when finally, with the mainspring of reason, they have been persuaded that true gratitude to the Lord must be expressed by carrying out His will, by respecting His precepts, especially those that inculcate the observance of our mutual duties, believe me that a great part of the educational work is already done. Religion in this system acts as the bit placed in the mouth of the fiery steed that tames and masters it. Reason then acts as the bridle which, pressing on the bit, produces the desired effect. True religion, sincere religion that governs the actions of youth, reason that rightly applies those holy dictates to the rule of all their actions, here in a few words is summarised the system I apply, of which you wish to know the great secret.

At the end of this discourse Bodrato, after a brief reflection, resumed, smiling in his turn: - Reverend Sir, with the simile of the wise tamer of young colts, you spoke to me of the bit of religion and the good use of reason to direct all their actions. This is all very well. It seems to me, however, that you have kept silent about a third means that always accompanies the office of the horse tamer. I mean the inseparable whip, which is like the third element of his success.

To this observation by the teacher Bodrato, D. Bosco added: - Ah, my dear sir, allow me to point out that in my system the whip, which you say is indispensable, that is, the salutary threat of future punishments, is absolutely not excluded. Please reflect that many and terrible are the punishments that religion threatens to those who, disregarding the precepts of the Lord, dare to despise His commands; severe and terrible threats which, if frequently recalled, will not fail to produce their effect, all the more just inasmuch as it is not limited to external actions, but also strikes the most secret ones and the most hidden thoughts. To make the persuasion of this truth penetrate more deeply, let the sincere practices of religion, the frequentation of the Sacraments, and the insistence of the educator be added. It is certain that with the help of the Lord it will be easier to succeed in reducing to good Christians very many even among the most obstinate. Moreover, when the young come to be

persuaded that the one who directs them sincerely loves their true good, a more reserved demeanour will very often suffice as an effective punishment for the recalcitrant, demonstrating the internal displeasure of seeing his paternal care poorly reciprocated. Believe me, my dear sir, that this system is perhaps the easiest and certainly the most effective, because with the practice of religion it will also be the most blessed by God. To give you tangible proof of this, I make bold to invite you for a few days to see its practical application in our houses. I leave you free to come and spend a few days with us and I hope that at the end of the experiment you will be able to assure me that what I have told you is experientially the most practical and the safest system."