

□ Reading time: 12 min.

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

Previous article: [The preventive system \(2/7\). The dialogue with the teacher Francesco Bodrato](#)

The classic text: the Nice Maritime appendix

1877 is a decisive year. The first General Chapter is celebrated in Lanzo; the Regulations are published; and in August the Salesian Bulletin is born. In the same month, the bilingual Italian-French pamphlet on the inauguration of the Patronage of St. Peter in Nice Maritime is printed, with an appendix – Italian text on the left, French on the right – containing the pages entitled *The preventive system in the education of youth*. Don Bosco himself defined it as “the index of a booklet” that he would have liked to prepare, but which he never completed.

These are the only organic pages that Don Bosco ever published on his own method, and it is here that the formula destined to become common heritage appears: reason, religion, loving-kindness. It is worth noting the original intended audience. It is not an internal document. It is addressed to benefactors and French public opinion, in a country traversed by the educational question, to explain what the Salesian works are and by what criteria they operate. It is an apologetic and promotional text.

Then something significant happens. In November of the same year, the very same pages are placed as an introduction to the *Regulation for the houses of the Society of St. Francis de Sales (MB XIII, 918-923)*: from a presentation to the external public, they become an internal rule. Within three months, the preventive system passes from the status of a calling card to that of a constitutional charter. The series will account for both placements, because the change in function is part of the meaning.

Let us read the context set out by Fr. Eugene Ceria (MB XIII, 112-115):

“Don Bosco’s speech seemed so remarkable that it gave rise to the idea of publishing it, so that the work of the Patronage might be better known in France. The thought did not displease him; indeed, as usually happens, upon reflecting on it, he broadened the design. In fact, during the return journey, he compiled a fine little pamphlet, which he had printed in the Oratory’s typography under the title: *Inauguration of the Patronage of St. Peter in Nice Sea*. Having briefly described the feast there, he placed the speech, somewhat reworked in form, and followed it with a novelty that was a splendid first fruit: a series of articles on the preventive system, which with some variations reappeared shortly afterwards at the head of the Regulation of the houses. Later, speaking of all this little work, he said that it had cost him several days of effort and that he had done and redone it three times. “I was almost complaining to myself,” he added, “that I could not find these writings of mine to my liking. Once I would throw away entire pages, and never return to them; now instead I write, correct, rewrite, recopy, redo for the fourth and fifth time, and still, I do not like my work.” He believed, however, that the pamphlet was apt to do great good in France.

In France and everywhere, then and at all times, the humble pamphlet was to do good because of that appendix placed there almost as a simple filler, almost as if the author himself did not measure its full scope. Contemporary pedagogy theorised much, but operated very little. Its scarce fruitfulness derived from the fact that it drew its elements from the pure dictates of natural philosophy. Hence, rationalistic principles and a positivistic spirit informed and weakened its direction. Don Bosco, without any doctrinal haughtiness, without the slightest pretension of having discovered the secret of the educational art, drawing inspiration from the Gospel and the teachings of the Church, knew how to harmoniously combine the supernatural means of Grace with the norms of natural philosophy, thus giving life to a method that in the field of pedagogy has produced and produces highly abundant fruits. What he had implemented for so many years, he condensed into the few short pages of his little writing. Let us consider even just one point: the great question of authority and of rewards and punishments. A leader of the naturalistic tendency of the time, the famous Raffaello Lambruschini, devoted at least two-thirds of his book *On Education* to it, saying many beautiful things,

unfortunately mixed with theoretical errors. But due to the defect lamented earlier, he remained a thousand miles away from the effectiveness achieved by Don Bosco, who, by proceeding by way of reason and Faith, practically and fully resolved the arduous problem in a few masterstrokes.

A deserved and worthy recognition of the pedagogical value that enriches this "Preventive Method" is the fact that the Italian Ministry of Public Education assigned it for study in teacher training schools. In this regard, the former minister Fedele, a senator of the kingdom and professor of history at the University of Rome, pronounced these words on a solemn occasion: "*Without the supernatural, Don Bosco's work cannot be explained.* And this work is the external blossoming of his internal virtues. He stood against the materialism corrupting the youth and stopped the Italian people in time on the slope of the fatal path. When I proposed the study of Don Bosco's pedagogical doctrine, some idealist philosophers smiled. Today, time has proven me right."

This is the place to report an older testimony on Don Bosco's educational system, made public in 1878. The Perugian Count Carlo Conestabile della Staffa printed a pamphlet of his that year, in which he recounts how he saw his pedagogical method implemented by the Servant of God even before the latter thought of formulating it in writing. One day the Count, having gone to visit Don Bosco, found him at his desk looking over a short note bearing some names. – Here are, he said, some of my little rascals, whose conduct leaves something to be desired. – It came naturally to the visitor to ask him what punishment he reserved for them. – No punishment, he replied; but here is what I will do. This one, for example (and he pointed to one of the names) is the biggest little rascal of all, although he has a good heart. I will meet him during recreation and ask him for news of his health; he will undoubtedly answer that he is well. "But are you really happy?", I will say to him then. He will first be surprised; then he will lower his eyes, blushing. I will insist affectionately: "Eh, you have something that is not right; if the body enjoys good health, the soul perhaps is not happy!...

It has been a long time since you went to confession, hasn't it?" Within a few minutes, this young man will be at the tribunal of penance, and I am almost certain that I will never again have to complain about him. – The Count listened in silence, enchanted by the sweetness of his speech, and here he comments: "I had discovered the secret of the great works that this humble priest was able to bring to completion. Very often afterwards, when at the sight of the evils by which this age of ours is troubled, I felt a bitter sadness take hold of my soul, that priestly voice

returned to my memory, and made me confident in the future of a society to which God sends such reformers'."

3/7. An appendix to the bilingual pamphlet: "Inauguration of the Patronage of St Peter in Nice at Sea"

(August 1877, also in MBXIII, 918-923)

"Inauguration of the patronage of St Peter in Nice at Sea, purpose of the same

set out by the Priest John BOSCO

with an appendix on the preventive system for the education of the youth

1877

Salesian Typography and Bookshop

San Pier d'Arena-Turin-Nice Maritime

[...]

The preventive system in the education of the youth

Several times I was asked to express verbally or in writing some thoughts concerning the so-called preventive system that is customarily used in our houses.

For lack of time, I have not been able to satisfy this desire until now, and presently I give a brief outline of it here, which I hope will be like the index of what I intend to publish in a small work expressly prepared, if God will give me enough life to be able to carry it out, and this solely to benefit the difficult art of youth education. I shall therefore say: in what the Preventive System consists and why it should be preferred; its practical application and its advantages.

I. In what the Preventive System consists and why it should be preferred

There are two systems used at all times in the education of the youth: Preventive and Repressive. The Repressive system consists in making the law known to the subjects, then supervising to identify the transgressors and inflicting, where necessary, the deserved punishment. In this system, the words and the appearance of the Superior must always be severe and rather threatening, and he himself must avoid all familiarity with his subordinates.

The Director, to increase the value of his authority, will have to be found rarely among his subjects and mostly when it is a matter of punishing or threatening. This system is easy, less tiring, and is especially useful in the military and in general among adult and sensible people, who must by themselves be in a position to know and remember what is in accordance with the laws and regulations.

Different, and I would say opposite, is the Preventive system. It consists in making the prescriptions and regulations of an Institute known and then supervising in such a way that the pupils always have upon them the vigilant eye of the Director or the assistants, who, like loving fathers, speak, serve as a guide in every eventuality, give advice and lovingly correct, which is to say: putting the pupils in the impossibility of committing faults.

This system rests entirely upon reason, religion, and upon loving-kindness, therefore it excludes all violent punishment and seeks to keep away even slight punishments. It seems that this is preferable for the following reasons:

1. The pupil forewarned does not remain disheartened by the faults committed, as happens when they are reported to the Superior. Nor does he ever become angry at the correction made or the punishment threatened or inflicted, because in it there is always a friendly and preventive warning that reasons

with him and mostly succeeds in winning his heart, so that the pupil knows the necessity of the punishment and almost desires it.

2. The most essential reason is youthful fickleness, which in a moment forgets the disciplinary rules, the punishments that they threaten. Therefore, often a child makes himself guilty and deserving of a penalty, to which he has never paid attention, which he did not remember at all in the act of the fault committed, and which he would certainly have avoided if a friendly voice had admonished him.
3. The Repressive system can prevent a disorder, but will hardly make the offenders better. It has been observed that youngsters do not forget the punishments suffered and mostly retain bitterness with a desire to shake off the yoke and even to take revenge for it. It sometimes seems that they pay no attention to it, but whoever follows their ways knows that the reminiscences of youth are terrible; and that they easily forget the punishments of their parents, but with great difficulty those of their educators. There are facts of some who in old age brutally avenged certain punishments justly received in the time of their education. On the contrary, the Preventive system makes a friend of the pupil, who recognises in the assistant a benefactor who advises him, wants to make him good, to free him from displeasures, from punishments, from dishonour.
4. The Preventive system makes the pupil affectionate in such a way that the educator will still be able to speak with the language of the heart both during the time of education and after it. The educator, having won the heart of his protégé, will be able to exercise great efficacy over him, advise him, counsel him, and even correct him when he will find himself in employments, in civil offices, and in commerce. For these and many other reasons it seems that the Preventive system should be preferred to the Repressive one.

II. Application of the Preventive system

The practice of this system is entirely based upon the words of St Paul who says: *Charitas benigna est, patiens est; omnia suffert, omnia sperat, omnia sustinet.* Charity is kind and patient; it suffers all things, but hopes all things and endures any disturbance. Therefore, only the Christian can successfully apply the Preventive system. Reason and Religion are the instruments of which the educator must constantly make use; teach them, practise them himself, if he wishes to be obeyed and attain his end.

1. The Director must therefore be entirely consecrated to his pupils, nor ever take on commitments that distance him from his office, indeed always be with his dependents every time they are not obligatorily bound by some occupation, except when they are duly assisted by others.
2. The teachers, the workshop masters, the assistants must be of known morality. The going astray of just one can compromise an educational Institute. Let it be done in such a way that the pupils are never alone. As far as possible, let the assistants precede them to the place where they are to gather; let them remain with them until they are assisted by others; let them never leave them unoccupied.
3. Let ample liberty be given to jump, run, make a noise at will. Gymnastics, music, declamation, the little theatre, walks are most effective means to obtain discipline, to benefit morality and health. Let care only be taken that the subject matter of the entertainment, the persons who intervene, the conversations that take place are not blameworthy. Do whatever you wish, said the great friend of youth St. Philip Neri, it is enough for me that you do not commit sins.
4. Frequent confession, frequent communion, daily mass are the columns that must support an educational edifice, from which one wishes to keep away the threat and the whip. Never bore nor oblige the youngsters to frequent the holy Sacraments, but offer them the convenience of profiting from them. Then in cases of spiritual retreats, triduums, novenas, preachings, catechisms, let the beauty, the greatness, the holiness of that Religion be highlighted which proposes means so easy, so useful to civil society, to the tranquillity of the heart, to the salvation of the soul as indeed the holy Sacraments are. In this way the children remain spontaneously drawn to these practices of piety, and they will approach them willingly.
5. Let the utmost vigilance be used to prevent companions, books or persons who make bad conversations from being introduced into the Institute. The choice of a good doorkeeper is a treasure for a house of education.
6. Every evening, after the ordinary prayers and before the pupils go to rest, let the Director, or whoever acts for him, address a few affectionate words in public giving some advice or counsel concerning things to be done or to be avoided. And let him study to draw maxims from events that have occurred during the day in the Institute or outside; but let his speaking never exceed two or three minutes. This is the key to morality, to the good running and to the good success of the education.
7. Let the opinion of anyone who would wish to defer first communion to a too

advanced age be kept away like the plague, when mostly the devil has taken possession of the heart of a youngster to the incalculable detriment of his innocence. According to the discipline of the primitive Church, it was customary to give children the consecrated hosts that were left over in the Easter communion. This serves to make us know how much the Church loves that children be admitted early to holy Communion. When a youngster knows how to distinguish between bread and bread and reveals sufficient instruction, let no more attention be paid to age and let the Heavenly Sovereign come to reign in that blessed soul.

8. The catechisms recommend frequent communion; St Philip Neri advised it every eight days and even more often. The Council of Trent says clearly that it highly desires that every faithful Christian, when he goes to hear holy Mass, should also make communion. But let this communion be not only spiritual, but indeed sacramental, so that greater fruit may be derived from this august and divine sacrifice. (Council of Trent, sess. XXII, chap. VI).

III. Usefulness of the Preventive System

Someone will say that this system is difficult in practice. I observe that on the part of the pupils it proves much easier, more satisfying, and more advantageous. On the part of the educators, it does contain some difficulties, which however are diminished if the educator sets to his work with zeal. The educator is an individual consecrated to the good of his pupils. He must be ready to face every trouble, every fatigue to achieve his end, which is the civil, moral, and scientific education of his pupils.

In addition to the advantages set out above, it is further added here that:

1. The pupil will always be a friend of the educator and will ever remember with pleasure the guidance received, still considering his teachers and other superiors as fathers and brothers. Wherever these pupils go, they are for the most part the consolation of their family, useful citizens, and good Christians.
2. Whatever the character, disposition, or moral state of a pupil at the time of his acceptance, his parents can live assured that their son will not be able to worsen, and it can be taken for certain that he will always achieve some

improvement. Indeed, certain children, who for a long time were the scourge of their parents and even rejected by correctional houses, cultivated according to these principles, changed their disposition and character, gave themselves to a moral life, and presently occupy honoured offices in society, thus becoming the support of their family and the pride of the town in which they dwell.

3. Pupils who by chance might enter an Institute with bad habits cannot harm their companions. Nor will the good youths be able to receive harm from them, because there is neither time, nor place, nor opportunity, since the assistant, whom we suppose to be present, would promptly remedy it.

A word on punishments

What rule should be kept in inflicting punishments? Where possible, punishments should never be used; where necessity demands repression, the following should be borne in mind:

1. The educator among the pupils should seek to make himself loved, if he wishes to make himself feared. In this case, the withdrawal of benevolence is a punishment, but a punishment that excites emulation, gives courage, and never degrades.
2. With the young, punishment is whatever is made to serve as punishment. It has been observed that an unloving look upon some produces a greater effect than a slap. Praise when a thing is well done, blame when there is negligence, is already a reward or a punishment.
3. Except in very rare cases, corrections and punishments should never be given in public, but privately, far from companions, and the utmost prudence and patience should be used to make the pupil understand his wrong through reason and religion.
4. The Director should make well known the rules, rewards, and punishments established by the laws of discipline, so that the pupil cannot excuse himself by saying: I did not know that this was forbidden.

The Institutes that put this system into practice, I believe, will be able to obtain great advantages without resorting either to the whip or to other violent punishments. For about forty years, I have dealt with youth, and I do not remember

having used punishments of any sort, and with the help of God, I have always obtained not only what was my duty, but even what I simply desired, and this from those very children for whom the hope of a good outcome seemed lost.

V. nihil obstat.

Taurini, 3 Augusti 1877.

Joseph Zappata Vic. Gen."