

□ Reading time: 5 min.

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

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To the government of the Kingdom: the letter to Francesco Crispi

The date warrants a second look. On 9 January 1878, Victor Emmanuel II had died, on 7 February Pius IX; on 20 February Leo XIII had been elected. Don Bosco writes the day after, being in search of premises to open a home for boys in Rome. Francesco Crispi sits at the Ministry of the Interior, in the Depretis government. The historical Left has been in power for two years and is discussing the reform of prisons and reformatories for minors.

Here the preventive system is translated into administrative language: not educational spirituality, but a public policy proposal for “youths at risk”. Festive oratories, education, preparation for work, assistance; measures that precede the crime instead of following it. The document is both audacious and realistic, and retains its harshness. Don Bosco is much more confident in preventing than in rehabilitating those who have already known prison. The proposal was not followed up either by Crispi or by his successors, and this too says something. The 1854 text and the 1878 one are the two ends of a long, polite, fruitless conversation with the Italian State.

Letter to the Minister of the Interior Francesco Crispi

(21 February 1878, MB XIII, 555-557)

“Your Excellency,

I have the honour of presenting to Y. E. the foundations upon which the preventive system applied among youths at risk in the public streets and in educational homes and hospices can be regulated.

At the same time, anxious to support the goodwill expressed by Y. E., I make bold to name some locations in Rome that can serve this purpose and which are dependent on the Government itself.

These premises would be:

1st The building and courtyard in front of the Parish of St. Bernard occupied by the Military Command of the 200th Cavalry which they say is to be relocated elsewhere. In the plan I enclose it is indicated in green. Once this building is obtained from the government, Marquis Berardi will cede that portion of land that might be needed for the requirement and development of the pious project.

2nd Building, courtyard of the renowned institute of San Michele a Ripa.

3rd Building and site formerly occupied by the Franciscans, known under the name of Convent for the Foreign Missions. It is located between the Four Fountains and Saint Mary Major.

4th San Caio with land and annexed houses a short distance from the Four Fountains.

5th Convent of Saint Agatha, formerly inhabited by the Doctrinarian Religious in Trastevere.

6th San Nicola of the Cesarini, house and courtyard formerly inhabited by the Carmelites. It is in the square of this name.

Whichever of these premises the Government should please to leave at my disposal, I would destine it exclusively for the benefit of poor and at-risk children, and I have full confidence that this can be carried out with slight disturbance to the

Government's finances. In this way, it would provide for a large number of poor children who ask to be sheltered, and an end would also be put to the grave and expensive inconvenience of sending a multitude of abandoned boys from this city to the Hospice of Turin or Sampierdarena.

With full confidence and with profound gratitude, I pray God to preserve you and I profess myself

Of Y. E.

Rome, 21 February 1878.

Humble suppliant

Fr. John Bosco.

The preventive system in the education of youth

There are two systems in the moral and civil education of youth: *repressive* and *preventive*.

Both are applicable in the midst of civil society and in educational homes. We will give a brief general outline of the Preventive system to be used in civil society; then how it can be successfully practised in boarding schools, hospices, and in the educational institutes themselves.

Preventive and repressive system in the midst of society

The repressive system consists in making known the laws and the penalty they establish; then the authority must watch to know and punish the guilty. This is the system used in the military and generally among adults.

But youths, lacking education, reflection, excited by companions or by thoughtlessness, often let themselves be blindly dragged into disorder for the sole

reason of being abandoned.

While the laws watch over the guilty, great care must certainly be taken to reduce their number.

Which children must be called dangerous

I believe that those who can be called not bad, but in danger of becoming so, are those who:

1st From the cities or from the various towns of the State go to other cities and towns in search of work. Mostly they bring with them a little money, which they consume in a short time. If they then do not find work, they are in real danger of giving themselves over to thievery and beginning the path that leads them to ruin.

2nd Those who, orphaned of their parents, have no one to assist them, therefore remain abandoned to vagrancy and the company of scoundrels, whereas a friendly hand, a charitable voice could have set them on the path of honour and of the honest citizen.

3rd Those who have parents who cannot or will not take care of their offspring; therefore, they expel them from the family or abandon them absolutely. Of these unnatural parents, unfortunately, the number is great.

4th Vagabonds who fall into the hands of public security, but who are not yet scoundrels. If these were welcomed into a hospice, where they are educated, prepared for work, they would certainly be removed from the prisons, restored to civil society.

Measures

Experience has shown that one can effectively provide for these four categories of children:

1st With festive recreation gardens. With pleasant recreation, with music, with gymnastics, with jumping, with declamation, with the little theatre they are

gathered with great ease. Then with the evening and Sunday school, and with catechism, the proportionate and indispensable moral nourishment is given to these poor children of the people.

2nd In these gatherings, make inquiries to know those who are without a master, and ensure that they are occupied and assisted throughout the week.

3rd Then one meets those who are poor and abandoned, having neither how to dress, nor how to feed themselves, nor where to sleep at night. For these one cannot otherwise provide, except with hospices and houses of preservation, with arts and trades and also with agricultural colonies.

Government involvement

The Government, without taking on a detailed administration, without touching the principle of legal charity, can cooperate in the following ways:

1st Supply gardens for festive entertainments; help and furnish the schools and gardens with the necessary equipment.

2nd Provide premises for hospices, furnish them with the necessary tools for the arts and trades to which the sheltered children would be applied.

3rd The Government would leave the acceptance of pupils free, but would give a daily allowance, or monthly subsidy for those who, finding themselves in the conditions described above, were sheltered. This would be established either by certificates from the civil authority, or by the facts of the police headquarters which very frequently encounter youths who are precisely in this condition.

This daily subsidy would be limited to a third of what a youth would cost in the State reformatories. Taking the correctional prisons of Turin as a basis, and reducing the total expense of each individual, it can be calculated at 80 centesimi a day.

In this way, the government would help, but would leave free the contribution of the private charity of citizens.

Results

Supported by the experience of thirty-five years, it can be stated that:

1st Many boys released from prison easily set out on a trade with which to honestly earn the bread of life.

2nd Many who were in extreme danger of becoming scoundrels, were beginning to cause annoyance to honest citizens, and were already giving no slight disturbances to the public authorities, these withdrew from danger and set themselves on the path of the honest citizen.

3rd From the registers it appears that no fewer than one hundred thousand youths assisted, gathered, educated with this system, learned some music, some literary science, some an art or trade, and have become virtuous artisans, shop assistants, shop owners, schoolmasters, hard-working clerks, and not a few have honorary ranks in the military. Many also, endowed by nature with no ordinary intellect, were able to complete university courses and graduated in Letters, in Mathematics, Medicine, Law; Engineers, Notaries, Pharmacists, and the like."