

□ Reading time: 4 min.

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

Previous article: [The preventive system \(5/7\). Invitation to read the book by Alberto DU BOYS, "Don Bosco and the Pious Salesian Society"](#)

To a formator of priests: the reply to rector Dupuy

On 2 July 1886, the superior of the major seminary of Montpellier, Dupuy, wrote to Turin (MB XVIII, 655-657). He had already asked Don Bosco how he managed, with so few collaborators, to educate so many young people, and had been told that it all lay in instilling the holy fear of God. This was not enough for him. The fear of God, he objected, is the *beginning* of wisdom; he wanted to know the method for leading souls to the love of God.

When the letter was read to him, Don Bosco reacted with a quip that is worth a treatise. They want him to expound his method, and he is the first to confess: "I don't even know it myself". He always went forward as the Lord inspired him and circumstances required.

It is the text that closes the arc in the most fitting way. After thirty years of formulations, the founder refuses to systematise. The preventive system is not a theory to be applied, but a practice docile to the Spirit and to reality. Alongside this, it is worth reading the very brief formulation in MB X, 649, which says in a few lines what elsewhere requires pages.

Charity, the holy fear of God instilled in hearts

(1886, MB VI, 381)

"Many people asked Don Bosco at various times what his system of education was

to lead young people so happily along the path of virtue. Don Bosco used to reply: - The preventive system: charity! - Pressed to give further explanations and to suggest the means that could be used to make this charity triumph, he once replied: - The holy fear of God instilled in hearts. - But the holy fear of God is only the beginning of Wisdom, the Rector of the Seminary of Montpellier wrote to him in 1886; please explain your secret to me, so that I may use it for the good of my Seminarians. - Don Bosco, reading this letter, said to the members of the Chapter who were around him: *They want me to expound my system! But I don't even know it myself! I have always gone forward without systems, as the Lord inspired me and circumstances demanded.* However, we observe that he had a system of his own, which in a few words can be sketched as follows: charity, fear of God, confidence in the superior, frequentation of the Holy Sacraments of Confession and Communion, very great convenience for the young to be able to confess. It is true that, as we have seen and as we shall see, God assisted him continuously. This special assistance, which formed the basis of his system, was not something that others could be expected to have. However, in what can be called ordinary and human means, he appears easily imitable by a Priest Director, fully aware of his imperative duty to save souls."

They want me to expound my system! But I don't even know it myself!

(1886, MB XVIII, 126-127)

"That hospitality offered to him so cordially in the Seminary of Montpellier had a sequel, of which we cannot fail to speak. To Mr. Dupuy, superior of the Seminary, Don Bosco had sent from Turin, along with his thanks, some of his publications, among others the *Life of St. Vincent de Paul*. Replying on 2 July, after thanking him, he said: 'The Seminary of Montpellier still retains the most pleasant impression of your visit. The good inhabitants of the city, who gave you such a fine welcome, would be willing to renew it and I would offer myself again to support you and shield you from the assault of the crowd. And indeed, I had to sweat quite a bit to contain the impetus of the people, who wanted to kiss the hand of a priest poor among the poor and full of ailments'. But nevertheless, he had remained with a grave regret.

Having left him entirely at the disposal of others, he had never been able to procure the opportunity to converse with him one-to-one, whereas he would have had a great desire to question him on the method he used to bring souls to God. He had indeed asked him how he managed with such a scarce number of helpers to govern so many young people, and Don Bosco had replied that the whole secret lay in instilling in them the holy fear of God; but the Superior was not satisfied with this reply. 'The fear of God', he observed in the same letter, 'is only the beginning of wisdom. I instead would like to know what your method is for guiding souls to the height of wisdom, which is the love of God'.

When the letter was read to him, Don Bosco exclaimed: They want me to expound my method. Well!... I don't even know it myself. I have always gone forward as the Lord inspired me and circumstances demanded.

– What he replied or had replied is not known; but certainly, these words mean a lot in their simplicity. They do not mean that it was his custom, as Fr. Fascie notes, to go without knowing where, but that he had not rigidified himself into a stereotyped system, which 'would cut off his freedom of movement in the face of new initiatives or new needs'. In fact, his eminently practical spirit shied away from abstractions. Don Bosco truly made his own, the so-called preventive method, but drawing its elements from 'human and Christian tradition' and from the study of the souls of the young, far therefore from the field

of theoretical Pedagogy."

Appendix: "Remember never to put the young in a position where they can commit a fault: here is Don Bosco's preventive system"

(MB X, 649)

"In a boarding school, they had bought some fresh and beautiful apples, and had placed the little basket next to the pantry window. Lo and behold, suddenly, all the apples disappeared!... The Superior sees Don Bosco, approaches him, and says to him:

– Do you know, Father, what the young people did to us this morning? We had

provided some beautiful apples for the guests' lunch [it was a feast day for the boarding school], and they stole them all from us!...

And he, with his usual calm:

- The fault is not the young people's, but yours. Call the prefect, and tell him that Don Bosco said to have a grille put on that window immediately... Remember never to put the young in a position where they can commit a fault. Here is Don Bosco's preventive system!

He was, in any case, the good father and the exemplary teacher!"