 Reading time: 13 min.

Following the paths of the heart

Don Bosco wept at the sight of the boys who ended up in prison. Yesterday, as is the case today too, evil's timetable is relentless: fortunately, so is the schedule for good. And even more so. I feel that yesterday's roots are the same as today's. Like yesterday, others today find a home on the streets and in prisons. I believe that the memory of the priest for so many boys without a parish is the irreplaceable thermometer for measuring the temperature of our educational intervention.

Don Bosco lived at a time of striking social poverty. We were at the beginning of the process of large groups of youths coming together in the great industrial metropolises. The police authorities themselves denounced this danger: there were so many "young children brought up without principles of Religion, Honour and Humanity, who were ending up rotting totally in hatred", we read in the chronicles of the time. It was the growing poverty that drove a great multitude of adults and young people to live by expediency, and in particular by theft and from alms-giving.

The urban decay caused social tensions to explode, which went hand in hand with political tensions; disorderly boys and misguided youth, towards the middle of the 19th century, drew public attention, shaking governmental sensibilities.

Added to the social phenomenon was a clear lack of education. The breakdown of the family caused concern above all in the Church; the prevalence of the repressive system was at the root of growing youthful unease and it affected the relationship between parents and children, educators and those being educated. Don Bosco had to confront a system made up of "bad traits", proposing loving kindness instead.

The life of so many parents lived on the borders of illegality, the need to procure the necessities for survival, would lead a multitude of youngsters to be uprooted from their families, and to leave the place they lived in. The city became more and more crowded with boys and young adults on the hunt for a job; for many who come from afar there was also a lack of a corner to sleep in.

It as not uncommon to meet a lady, such as Maria G., begging, using children artfully placed at strategic points in the city or in front of church doors; often, parents themselves entrusted their children to beggars, who used them to arouse the pity of others and receive more money. It sounds like a photocopy of a tried and tested system in a large southern city: the renting out of other people's children, so the passer-by would take pity and begging become more profitable.

However, theft was the real source of income: it was a phenomenon that grew and became unstoppable in 19th century Turin. On 2 February 1845, nine young urchins aged between eleven and fourteen appeared before the police commissioner of the Vicariate, accused of having robbed a bookseller's shop of numerous volumes ... and various stationery items, using a picklock. The new breed of *borsajuoli'*attracted constant complaints from the people. They were almost always abandoned children, without parents, relatives or means of subsistence, very poor, chased away and abandoned by everyone, who ended up stealing.

The picture of juvenile deviance was impressive: delinquency and the state of abandonment of so many boys was spreading like wildfire. The growing number of "rascals", "reckless purse-snatchers" in the streets and squares was however only one aspect of a widespread situation. The fragility of the family, strong economic malaise, the constant and strong immigration from the countryside to the city, fuelled a precarious situation which the political forces felt powerless to tackle. The malaise grew as crime organised itself and penetrated public structures. The first manifestations of violence by organised gangs began, acting with sudden and repeated acts of intimidation designed to create a climate of social, political and religious tension.

This was expressed by the gangs known as the *cocche*, which spread in various numbers, taking different names from the neighbourhoods where they were based. Their sole purpose was "to disturb passers-by, mistreat them if they complained, commit obscene acts on women, and attack some isolated soldier or provost." In reality, it was not a question of criminal associations, but more of gangs formed not only by people born in Turin, but also by immigrants: young people aged between sixteen and thirty who used to gather in spontaneous meetings, especially in the evening hours, giving vent to their tensions and frustrations of the day. It was in this situation in the mid 19th century that Don Bosco's activities were inserted. It was not the poor boys, friends and childhood companions of his place at the Becchi in Castelnuovo, not the valiant young men of Chieri, but "the wolves, the squabblers, the unruly types" of his dreams.

It is in this world of political conflict, in this vineyard, where the sowing of darnel is abundant, among this market of young arms hired out for depravity, among these youngsters without love and malnourished in body and soul, that Don Bosco was called to work. The young priest listened, went out into the streets: he saw, was moved, but, as practical as he was, he rolled up his sleeves; those boys needed a school, education, catechism, training for work. There was no time to waste. They were young: they needed to give meaning to their lives, they had a right to have time and means to study, to learn a trade, but also time and space to

be happy, to play.

Go, look around!

Sedentary by profession or by choice, computerised in thought and action, we risk losing the originality of “being”, of sharing, of growing “together”.
Don Bosco did not live in the era of test-tube preparations: he left humanity the pedagogy of ‘companionship’, the spiritual and physical pleasure of living next to a youngster, small among the small, poor among the poor, fragile among the fragile.

A priest friend and spiritual guide of his, Fr Cafasso, knew Don Bosco, knew his zeal for souls, sensed his passion for this multitude of boys; he urged him to go out into the streets. “Go, look around.” From the first Sundays, the priest from the countryside, the priest who had not known his father, went out to see the misery of the town’s suburbs. He was shocked. “*He met a large number of young people of all ages*,” testified his successor, Fr Rua, “*who were wandering around the streets and squares, especially in the outskirts of the town, playing, brawling, swearing and even doing worse.*“

He entered building sites, talked to workers, contacted employers; he felt emotions that would mark him for the rest of his life when he met these boys. And sometimes he found these poor “bricklayers” lying on the floor in a corner of a church, tired, asleep, unable to tune into meaningless sermons about their vagabond lives. Perhaps that was the only place where they could find some warmth, after a day of toil, before venturing off in search of somewhere to spend the night. He went into the shops, wandered around the markets, visited the street corners where there were many boys begging. Everywhere, badly dressed and undernourished boys; he witnessed scenes of malpractice and transgressions: all carried out by boys.

After a few years, he moved from the streets to the prisons. “For a full twenty years I assiduously visited Turin’s city prisons. I continued my visits later, though not as regularly. …”. (BM XV, 600)

How many misunderstandings at the beginning! How many insults! A “cassock” was out of tune in that place, frowned upon. He approached those abid and distrustful “wolves”; he listened to their stories, but above all he made their suffering his own.

He understood the drama of those boys: clever exploiters had pushed them into those cells. And he became their friend. His simple and humane manner restored dignity and respect to each of them.

Something had to be done and soon; a different system had to be invented, to stand by those who had gone astray. “*Whenever he had the time, he would*

spend entire days in the prisons and several times he conducted spiritual retreats there. He regularly visited the inmates on Saturdays, his pockets bulging with tobacco or bread. He was especially interested in the juveniles whom misfortune had brought there. … By helping and befriending them, he sought to draw them to the festive oratory after their release from prison." (MB II, 136-137)

In the "Generala", a House of Correction opened in Turin on 12 April 1845, as stated in the regulations of the Penal House, "young people condemned to a correctional sentence for having acted without discernment in committing the crime and young people supported in prison by paternal love" were "gathered and governed by the method of working together, in silence and segregated by night in special cells." This was the context for the extraordinary excursion to Stupinigi organised by Don Bosco alone, with the consent of the Minister of the Interior, Urban Rattazzi, without guards, based only on mutual trust, a commitment of conscience and the fascination of the educator. He wanted to know the "reason why the State does not have the influence" of the priest over these young people. "The force we have is a moral force: unlike the State, which knows only how to command and punish, we speak primarily to the heart of the youth, and our word is the word of God."

Knowing the system of life adopted inside the Generala, the challenge thrown down by the young Piedmontese priest took on incredible value: to ask for a "Free Release" day for all those young inmates. It was madness yet such was Don Bosco's request. He obtained permission in the spring of 1855. The whole thing was organised by Don Bosco alone, with the help of the boys themselves. The consent he received from Minister Rattazzi was certainly a sign of esteem for and trust in the young priest. The experience of leading boys out of that House of Correction in complete freedom and managing to bring them all back to prison, despite what ordinarily took place inside the prison structure, was extraordinary. It was the triumph of an appeal to trust and conscience, the testing of an idea, an experience, that would guide him throughout his life to rely on the resources hidden in the hearts of so many young people doomed to irreversible marginalisation.

Onward, and in shirt sleeves

Even today, in a different cultural and social context, Don Bosco's grasp of things is not all all outdated, but still works. Especially surprising, in the dynamics of rehabilitating children and young people who have entered the penal circuit, is the inventive spirit in creating concrete job opportunities for them.

Today we encounter problems offering employment opportunities for our minors at risk. Those who work in the social sector know how hard it is to overcome

bureaucratic mechanisms and gears in order to realise, for example, simple work grants for minors. Don Bosco used agile approaches and structures, having boys "fostered" by employers, under the educational tutelage of a guarantor.

The first years of Don Bosco's priestly and apostolic life were marked by a continuous search for the right way to take boys and young men away from the dangers of the street. The plans were clear in his mind, as ingrained in his mind and soul was his educational method. "Not with blows but by gentleness". He was also convinced that it was no easy feat to turn wolves into lambs. But he had Divine Providence on his side.

And when faced with immediate problems, he never backed down. He was not the type to enter into discussion about the sociological condition of minors, nor was he the priest for political or formal compromises; he was saintly stubborn in his good intentions, but was strongly tenacious and concrete in realising them. He had great zeal for the salvation of youth and there were no obstacles that could restrain this holy passion, which marked every step and punctuated every hour of his day.

"*In the prisons he saw a great number of boys, ranging between twelve and eighteen years of age, [basically] healthy, sturdy and intelligent. He was horrified to see them inactive, bitten by insects, hungry for both spiritual and material food while they served time, expiating through detention, and even more through remorse, their precocious depravity. They were a blot on their country, the dishonor of their families, an infamy to themselves. They were above all, souls that, redeemed by the blood of Christ, were now reduced to slaves of vice, and in the greatest danger of eternal perdition.Who knows, if these boys had had a friend who had taken loving care of them by helping them and by giving them religious instruction on holy days, perhaps they would have avoided coming and returning to these prisons. Certainly, the number of these young prisoners would be diminished.*" (MB II, 49-50)

He rolled up his sleeves and gave himself body and soul to the prevention of these evils; he gave all his contribution, his experience, but above all his insights in launching his own initiatives or those of other associations. It was the release from prison that worried both the government and private "societies". It was precisely in 1846 that an associative structure authorised by the government was set up, which resembled, at least in its intentions and in some ways, what is happening today in the Italian juvenile penal system. It was called the "Royal Society for the Patronage of Young People Released from the House of Correctional Education". Its purpose was to support young people released from the Generala.

A careful reading of the Statutes brings us back to some of the penal measures that are nowadays provided for as alternative measures to prison.

The Members of the Society were divided into “operatives”, who took on the office of guardians, “paying members”, and “paying operatives”. Don Bosco was an “operative member”. Don Bosco accepted several, but with discouraging results. Perhaps it was these failures that made him decide to ask the authorities to send the boys to him before they ended up like that.

It is not important here to deal with the relationship between Don Bosco, the houses of correction and collateral services, but rather to recall the attention the Saint paid to this group of minors. Don Bosco knew the hearts of the young men of the Generala, but above all he had more in mind than remaining indifferent to the moral and human degradation of those poor and unfortunate inmates. He continued his mission: he did not abandon them: “Ever since the Government opened that Penitentiary, and entrusted its direction to the Society of St Peter in Chains, Don Bosco was able to go from time to time among those poor youngsters […]. With the permission of the Director of the prisons he instructed them in catechism, preached to them, heard their confessions, and many times entertained them amicably in recreation, as he did with his boys at the Oratory” (BS 1882, n. 11 p. 180).

Don Bosco’s interest in young people in difficulty was focused over time in the Oratory, a true expression of a preventive and recuperative pedagogy, being an open and multifunctional social service. Don Bosco had direct contact with quarrelsome, violent youth bordering on delinquency around 1846-50. These are the encounters with the *cocche*, gangs or neighbourhood groups in ongoing conflict. The story is told of a fourteen-year-old boy, son of a drunkard and anticlerical father who, having happened to be in the Oratory in 1846, threw himself headlong into the various recreational activities, but refused to attend religious services, because according to his father’s teachings, he did not want to become a “mouldy old cretin”. Don Bosco attracted him with his tolerance and patience, which made him change his behaviour in a short time.

Don Bosco was also interested in taking on the management of re-educational and correctional institutions. Proposals in this sense had come from various quarters. There were attempts and contacts, but drafts and proposals for agreements came to nothing. All this is sufficient to show how much Don Bosco had the problem discarded children at heart. And if there was resistance, it always came from the difficulty of using the preventive system. Wherever he found a “mixture” of the repressive and preventive system, he was categorical in his refusal, as he was also clear in his rejection of any group or structure that brought back to the idea of the “reformatory”. A careful reading of these attempts reveals the fact that Don Bosco never refused to help the boy in difficulty, but he was against the management of institutes, houses of correction or directing works with an obvious

educational compromise.

The conversation that took place between Don Bosco and Crispi in Rome in February 1878 is very interesting. Crispi asked Don Bosco for news about the progress of his work and in particular spoke about the educational systems. He lamented the unrest that was taking place in the correctional prisons. It was a conversation in which the Minister was fascinated by Don Bosco's analysis; he asked him not only for advice but also for a programme for these houses of correction (MB XIII, 483).

Don Bosco's replies and proposals found sympathy, but not willingness: the rift between the religious and political worlds was strong. Don Bosco expressed his opinion, indicating various categories of boys: the unruly, dissipated and good. For the saintly educator there was hope of success for all, even for the unruly, as he then used to refer to what we nowadays call at-risk boys.

"*Let them not become worse.*" "*…In time let the good principles acquired produce their effect later … many will come to their senses.*" This is an explicit answer and perhaps the most interesting.

After mentioning the distinction between the two educational systems, he determined which children must be considered to be in danger: those who go to other cities or towns in search of work, those whose parents cannot or do not want to take care of them, vagabonds who fall into the hands of the public security'. He points out the necessary and possible measures: "*Weekend recreations areas, care of those placed at work hospices and preservation houses with arts and crafts and with agricultural colonies.*"

It proposes not direct government management of educational institutions, but adequate support in buildings, equipment and financial grants, and presents a version of the Preventive System that retains the essential elements, without the explicit religious reference. Besides a pedagogy of the heart could not have ignored the social, psychological and religious problems.

Don Bosco ascribes their misguidance to the absence of God, to the uncertainty of moral principles, to the corruption of the heart, to the clouding of the mind, to the incapacity and carelessness of adults, especially parents, to the corrosive influence of society and to the intentional negative action of "bad companions" or the lack of responsibility of educators.

Don Bosco played a lot on the positive: the will to live, the fondness for work, the rediscovery of joy, social solidarity, family spirit, healthy fun.

(continued)

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