 Reading time: 12 min.

(continuation from previous article)

The market for young workers

The historical time in which Don Bosco lived was not one of the happiest. In the neighbourhoods of Turin, the saintly educator discovered a real “market for young workers”: the city was becoming more and more full of inhumanly exploited minors.

Don Bosco himself remembers that the first boys he was able to approach were “stonemasons, bricklayers, plasterers, flint makers and others, who came from distant towns. They were employed everywhere, unprotected by any law.” They were “peddlers, match sellers, shoe shiners, chimney sweeps, stable boys, street sweepers, shopkeepers at the market, all poor boys living by the day.” He saw them climbing on bricklayers’ scaffolds, looking for a job as an apprentice in the shops, wandering around calling themselves chimney sweeps. He saw them playing for money on street corners: if he tried to approach them, they would turn away wary and contemptuous. They were not the boys from the Becchi, looking for tales or sleight of hand. They were the “wolves” of his dreams; they were the first effects of a revolution that would shock the world, the industrial revolution.

They arrived by the hundreds from small towns in the city, looking for work. They found nothing but squalid places in which the whole family was crammed, without air, without light, fetid from dampness and sewers. In the factories and workshops, no hygienic measures, no regulations except those imposed by the master.

Escape from the poverty of the countryside to the city also meant accepting poor wages or adapting to a risky standard of living in order to have something to gain. It was only in 1886 that early legislation was made, thanks also to the zeal of the artisans’ priest, which in some way regulated child labour. In the building sites under construction, Don Bosco saw “*children from eight to twelve years old, far from their own country, serving the masons, spending their days up and down unsafe scaffolding, in the sun, in the wind, climbing steep ladders laden with lime, with bricks, with no other educational help than rude ramblings or beatings.*”

Don Bosco quickly drew the line. Those boys needed a school and a job that would open up a more secure future for them: they needed to be boys first and foremost, to live the exuberance of their age, without moping on the pavements and crowding the prisons. The social reality of our own times seems to resonate with that of yesterday: other immigrants, other faces knock like a river in flood at

the doors of our consciences.

Don Bosco was an educator gifted with intuition, a practical sense, reluctant towards solutions arrived at around a table, abstruse methodologies and abstract projects. The educational page is written by the saint with his life, before it was by his pen. It was the most convincing way to make an educational system credible. To deal with injustice, with the moral and material exploitation of minors, he created schools, organised trade workshops of all kinds, invented and promoted contractual initiatives to protect children, encouraged consciences with qualified proposals for job training. He responded to empty palace politics and street demonstrations with efficient reception structures, innovative social services, the object of respect and admiration even of the most ardent anticlericals of the time. And today's story is not so different from yesterday's; moreover, history wears the dress that its tailors make with their own hands and ideas.

Don Bosco believed in the boy, he relied on his abilities, whether they were few or many, visible or hidden. A friend of so many street children, he knew how to read the hidden potential for goodness in their hearts. He was able to dig inside the life of each one and pull out precious resources to tailor the dress to the dignity of his young friends. A pedagogy that does not touch the essence of the person and does not know how to combine the eternal values of each creature, outside of all historical and cultural logic, runs the risk of intervening on abstract persons or only on the surface.

The impact he made was crucial. He looked around, everywhere: he saw and created the impossible to realise his holy utopias. He came into contact with the extreme realities of juvenile delinquency. He entered prisons: he was able to look inside this scourge with courage and a priestly spirit. It was the experience that marked him deeply. He approached the city's ills with keen and active involvement: he was aware of the so many youngsters waiting for someone to take care of them. He saw with his heart and mind their human traumas, he even cried, but he did not stop at the prison grill; he managed to shout with the strength of his heart, to those he met, that prison is not the home to be received as a gift from life, but that there is another way of living. He shouted this with concrete choices to those voices coming from the unhealthy cells, and with gestures of closeness to the multitude of boys on the streets, blinded by ignorance and frozen by people's indifference. It was the nagging of a lifetime: to prevent so many from ending up behind bars or hanging from the gallows. It is not even conceivable that his Preventive System had no connection with this bitter and shocking youthful experience. Even if he wanted to, he could never have forgotten that last night spent next to a young man condemned to be hanged, or the escorting of condemned men to death and the

fainting spell when he saw the gallows. How is it conceivable that his heart did not have a reaction, as he passed among the people, perhaps smug, perhaps pitying, and saw a young life snuffed out by human logic, which settles the score with those who have ended up in a ravine and do not bend down to reach out a hand to pull them out? The farmer of the Becchi, with a heart as big as the sand of the sea, was a hand always stretched out towards poor and abandoned youth.

Valuable legacy

Everyone always leaves a trace of their passage on earth. Don Bosco left history with the embodiment of an educational method that is also a spirituality, the fruit of an educational wisdom experienced in daily toil, alongside the young. Much has been written about this precious inheritance!

The educational field today is as complex as ever, because it moves in a disjointed cultural fabric. There is a very wide methodological pluralism of operational interventions, both socially and politically.

The educator is faced with situations that are difficult to decipher and often contradictory, with models that are sometimes permissive, sometimes authoritarian. What is to be done? Woe to the uncertain educator, held back by doubt! Those who educate cannot live undecided and perplexed, wavering one or other way. Educating in a fragmented society is not easy. With a large class of marginalised people divided into so many fragments it is not easy to shed light; subjectivity, the self-interest, the tendency to take refuge in ephemeral and transitory ideals prevails. From the years when the tendency towards active involvement prevailed, we have moved on to rejection of or disinterest in public life, in politics: little participation, little desire for involvement.

In addition to the absence of a centre providing stable points of reference, there is the absence of a foundation of certainties, giving young people the will to live and the love of service for others.

And yet, in this world of provisional hegemonies, lacking a unified culture, with heterogeneous and isolated elements, new needs emerge: a better quality of life, more constructive human relations, the affirmation of solidarity centred on voluntary work. Needs for new open spaces for dialogue and encounter emerge: young people decide how, where and what to say to each other.

In the age of bioethics, of remote control, of the search for beautiful and simple things of the earth, we are looking for a new face for pedagogy. It is the pedagogy that dresses itself in welcome, in availability, in the spirit of family that generates trust, joy, optimism, sympathy, that opens propositional horizons of hope, that searches for the means and ways to work the newness of life. It is the

pedagogy of the human heart, the most precious inheritance that Don Bosco left to society.

On this fabric, open and sensitive to prevention, a better future for today's disturbed children must be built with courage and will. It is always possible to make Don Bosco's pedagogical intervention present, because it is founded on the natural essence of every human being. These are the criteria of reason, religion and loving-kindness: the threefold approach on which so many young people have been formed "as upright citizens and good Christians".

It is not a method of study, we repeat, but a way of life, the adherence to a spirit, which contains values that come from the human being created in the image and likeness of the Creator. Extraordinary predilection for the young, profound respect for them as individuals and their freedom, the concern to combine material needs with those of the spirit, the patience to live the rhythms of growth or change in the child as an active, not passive, subject of every educational process, are the sum total of this "valuable legacy".

And there is another aspect. There is an open account with society: the young people of the future demand a "universal" Don Bosco, beyond the margins of his apostolic family. How many of our youngsters have never heard of Don Bosco!

There is an urgent need to re-launch his message, which is still alive: to disregard this natural process of re-actualisation, one also runs the risk of killing off the positive signs found in today's culture, which, albeit with different sensitivities and opposing goals and motivations, has at heart the human promotion of the child.

Don Bosco's pedagogy, before being translated into reflective documents, into systematic writings took on the face of the very many young people he educated. Every page of his educational system has a name, a fact, an achievement, perhaps even failures. The secret of his holiness? The young people! "For you I study, for you I work, for you I am willing to give my life."

To young people without love, Don Bosco gave love back. To young people without a family, because it did not exist or was physically and spiritually distant from them, Don Bosco sought to build or rebuild the family atmosphere and environment. A man endowed with a profound willingness to improve through continuous change, Don Bosco allowed himself to be guided by the certainty that all young people, practically speaking, could become better. The seed of goodness, the possibility of success was in every young person; all that was needed was to find the way: "*He took to heart the fate of thousands of little vagabonds, thieves because of abandonment or misery, starving and homeless boys and girls*."

Those whom society put on the margins, were in first place for Don Bosco; they were the object of his faith. The youngsters rejected by society even

represented his glory; it was the challenge at a time in history when the attention and educational care from society and organisations was directed towards good children, in fact as much as possible.

Don Bosco sensed the power of the educator's love. He was not at all concerned with adapting and conforming to the systems, methods and pedagogical concepts in use at his time. He was an open enemy of an education that emphasised authority above all, that preached a cold and detached relationship between educators and pupils. Violence punished the bad ones momentarily, but did not cure the bad ones. And so he did not accept and never allowed punishment just to give an "example", which was supposed to have a preventive effect, instilling fear, anxiety and anguish.

He understood that no education was possible without winning the youngster's heart; his was an educational method that led to consent, to the youngster's participation. He was convinced that no pedagogical endeavour would bear fruit until it had its foundation in the readiness to listen.

There is one characteristic that concerns the sphere in which education takes place and is typical of Don Bosco's pedagogy: the creation and preservation of "joyfulness" whereby every day becomes a celebration. It was a cheerfulness that only exists, and it could not be otherwise, by virtue of creative activity, which excludes all boredom, all sense of ennui at not knowing how to occupy time. In this area Don Bosco possessed an inventiveness and skill that allowed him, with extraordinary ability, not only to entertain, but to draw young people to him through games, recitations, songs, walks: the sphere of cheerfulness represented an obligatory passage for his pedagogy.

Young people, of course, have to discover where their error lies, and for this they need the educator's help, including through disapproval, but this need not at all be accompanied by violence. Disapproval is an appeal to conscience. The educator must be the guide to values, not to his or her own person. In educational intervention, an excessively strong bond of the pupil to the educator can threaten the favourable effect of the educator's educational activity; a myth, generated by emotionalism, can easily arise to the point of making an absolutised ideal. Young people must not be willing to do our will: they must learn to do what is right and meaningful for their human and existential growth. The educator works for the future, but he cannot work on the future; he must accept, therefore, to be continually exposed to the revision of his work, of his methodologies and above all he must be continually concerned to discover more and more deeply the reality of the one being educated, in order to intervene at the right moment.

Don Bosco used to say: "*it is not enough for the first circle, that is the*

family, to be healthy, it is also necessary for the inevitable second circle, which is formed by the child's friends, to be healthy. Start by telling him that there is a big difference between companions and friends. Companions he cannot choose; he finds them in the school desk and in the workplace or at gatherings. Friends, on the other hand, he can and must choose.… Do not hinder the natural vivacity of the child and do not call him bad because he does not stand still."

But this is not enough; play and motion may occupy a good part, but not all of the child's life. The heart needs its own nourishment, it needs to love.

"One day, after a series of considerations on Don Bosco, I invited the boys at our centre to express with a drawing, with a word, with a gesture the image they had made of the Saint.

Some reproduced the figure of the priest surrounded by boys. Another drew a set of prison bars: a boy's face was sketched on the inside, while from the outside a hand tried to force a bolt. Yet another, after a long silence, sketched two hands clasping. A third drew hearts in a variety of shapes and in the centre a half-bust of Don Bosco, with lots and lots of hands touching these hearts. The last one wrote a single word: father! Most of these boys don't know Don Bosco."

"I had long dreamed of accompanying them to Turin: circumstances had not always been favourable to us. And after several unsuccessful attempts, we had managed to put together a group of eight boys, all with criminal convictions. Two boys had been allowed out of prison for four days, three were under house arrest, the others were subject to various prescriptions.

"I wish I had an artist's pen to describe the emotions I read in their eyes as they listened to the story of their peers helped by Don Bosco. They wandered around those blessed places as if reliving their stories. In the Saint's rooms they followed the Holy Mass with moving recollection. I see them tired, leaning their heads against Don Bosco's casket, staring at his body, whispering prayers. What they said, what Don Bosco said to those boys I will never know. With them I enjoyed the joy of my own vocation."

In Don Bosco we find a supreme wisdom in focusing on the concrete life of every boy or young man he met: their life became his life, their sufferings became his sufferings. He would not rest until he had helped them. The boys who came into contact with Don Bosco felt they were his friends, they felt he was at their side, they perceived his presence, they tasted his affection. This made them safe, less alone: for those who live on the margins, this is the greatest support they can receive.

In a primary school handbook, yellowed and worn by the years, I read a few sentences, written in ink, at the bottom of the story of the Becchi juggler. Whoever had written them was the first time he had heard of John Bosco: "*Only God, his*

Word, is the immortal rule and guide for our behaviour and actions. God is there despite the wars. The earth despite the hatred continues to give us bread to live on."

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