



Prevention or repression

Some reflections on early Salesian Education and modern theories of Empowerment

At the heart of the Salesian tradition of education is the so called Preventive System. This was the name given to Don Bosco's style of education after a lecture that Don Bosco gave to his French Cooperators in 1887 in which he contrasted the Preventive System with what he characterised as the Repressive System. Empowerment is a modern term used in educational discussion to focus on enabling the learner to become independent and self-motivated.



In that lecture Don Bosco wisely took the view that fear as a motivating force for children was disabling and hence a system based on punishments failed to win over or change the hearts of the young or help them to learn. Therefore, he counselled the educator to look to win over the hearts of the young by becoming an animating presence among them. He should always begin with what they enjoyed, especially in terms of games and active recreations as well as music, singing and theatre, and bring them gradually to a deeper awareness of the beautiful, the true and the good and thus to God, the Giver of all that is Good.

The context in which Don Bosco first evolved his System was that of the Oratory which was of its nature both a voluntary and fast flowing youth activity. The pace of activities had to match the relatively short span of attention of youngsters who were used to manual rather than intellectual activities, and for whom Don Bosco evolved the Oratory model. Assistance in that context meant getting the youngsters involved in the various activities and seeing when they were losing interest and moving them on to something else, gradually seeing the opportunity for a word in the ear and the catechism and worship which was at the heart of the activities.

The early stories of the clerics Rua and Cagliari shocking the Turinese clergy by running through the streets on the way to their various assignments in the city's oratories speak of a freshness of approach and an energy and vigour that characterised the emergence of the preventive style of education. Sensitive leadership was the principle that guided the young Salesians and quickly involved them in looking after and leading others. Those famous sodalities actually were training sessions for peer mentors or youth leaders who were engaged in the same apostolic enterprise with Don Bosco.

When this model was transferred to the much more institutionalised and stable environment of a large boarding school, what had begun as a flexible style of youth-work rather like a skilled sailor matching the wind and the waves with his sails and rudder, was in danger of becoming a rigid system, of almost total control. When the voluntary element diminished or disappeared then the danger of the system becoming repressive was very strong.

In Don Bosco's practice this presence/assistance among the young was, no doubt, a creative and active way of engaging young people at the Oratory in a friendly relationship, and where, till his late middle age, Don Bosco would run races and be actively engaged in recreation with his boys. It is also clear that with the advent of boarding schools as the predominant Salesian apostolate, what began as a technique for outreach to young people from the streets that had lost their trust and confidence in adults, became a form of almost complete supervision and control.

Sadly the title that Don Bosco gave to his lecture *The Preventive System* narrowed the educational focus of a style which was really still evolving. The focus on prevention, apart from Don Bosco's equal emphasis on reason, religion and loving kindness as the basis of an educational relationship, could easily put a very exaggerated emphasis on control. This was made even more unbalanced when it was read in the light of his famous summing up of the Preventive System as "letting the youngsters know the rules of the Institute and then assisting them without respite, by advising them, by guiding them, and correcting them" or in other words, as he concluded awkwardly, "in putting them in the impossibility of committing faults (mancanze, which could also be translated as sins)." (Quoted in F Desramaut *Spiritualita Salesiana: Cento Parole Chiave* LAS, Roma, 2001, p573)

This concern with putting youngsters in the impossibility of committing sin soon became an unhealthy preoccupation in some Salesian boarding schools. The insistence that the Salesians constantly supervise the youngsters meant that not only was any exercise of personal freedom immensely limited but the Salesians themselves became negatively preoccupied, with unhealthy consequences for their own mental state. Such a quasi-totalitarian approach was resisted strongly by the early English and Irish Salesians.

In the first formal Canonical visitation of the English Province in 1908, Fr Paul Virion, the Provincial of Paris from 1902-1919, commented specifically on the lack of acceptance of the Salesian idea of assistance, the traditional Salesian word for looking after youngsters in unstructured situations. He wrote in his report:

"Moreover one can say that there is no supervision. They say that assisting as it is conceived in general in Salesian houses is repugnant to the English character, which prefers to be left to its own initiative and conscience. It is true in part and agrees with the education that is given in the families and in the other Colleges in this country. But the other thing they dislike is the hard work and self-denial which is needed to give an acceptable assistance which is not indiscreet nor humiliating for the boys and which nonetheless assures morality among them. Particular friendships are flourishing." (ibid p574)

We can sum up by saying that the Salesian preventive system, especially in its reductionist form ran into serious opposition among many of the English and Irish confreres who saw it as a foreign interference in the natural freedom in which youngsters should grow up. This opposition was in serious danger of being misinterpreted by some of the Italian Salesians as laziness or some sort of complicity in sins against Holy Purity. In this regard see Fr Albera's circular letter of 1917 which repeated the old formula but strengthened it by saying: "In second place this optimism can even be the cause that leads to a lack of that vigilance with the pupils that the preventive system itself suggests in order to put them in the moral impossibility of offending God." (ibid) Such an extravagant claim, however well intentioned, does clearly attempt to rob the individual young person of a fundamental moral freedom and does a terrible disservice to those who tried to implement it.

In conclusion we have to re-vision the Salesian Preventive System for a very different era, where youngsters are immensely conscious of their personal freedom and where concerns about child protection might well discourage efforts to accompany young people at all. We need then, to recover that zeal for souls (*Da mihi animas*) which drove Don Bosco and the early Salesians to find new ways of reaching out to young people with an offer of genuine friendship which supports their learning, their search for meaning and true freedom which is always at the heart of the Salesian Educational approach.