

STUDI

HUMAN NATURE IN THE EDUCATIONAL OUTLOOK OF ST. JOHN BOSCO

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to highlight the underlying mindset and more particularly the theological assumptions implied by the educational practice and theory of St. John Bosco.

Since Don Bosco was first of all a practitioner rather than a theorist, though he was occasionally forced to articulate his outlook, yet his way of acting and educating can hardly be described as a true theory of education, a discipline in which, in any case, he had no formal training. Given his own roots in the popular and unsophisticated culture of his day, it is not surprising that some of his inspiration should come from that source, but far more important in shaping his outlook is his own personal sensitivity and engagement with the problems of his own situation.

To highlight his underlying assumptions and outlook involves a somewhat complex approach, for it is necessary not only to study the central ideas expressed in the large number of writings he has left us, but also to examine those ideas against the background of the spiritual writings and popular literature of the three centuries shaped by the Catholic Counter Reformation under whose influence he was brought up and to compare these with his actual practice.

Abréviations

ACS	Archivio centrale salesiano (Rome)
CSDB	Centro studi Don Bosco (Rome)
E	CERIA Eugenio [a cura], <i>Epistolario di S. Giovanni Bosco</i> , 4 vol. (Turin 1955-1959)
ISS	Istituto storico salesiano (Rome)
MB	LEMOYNE G.B.-AMADEI A.-CERIA E., <i>Memorie biografiche di Don (del beato/di san) Giovanni Bosco</i> , 19 vol. (S. Benigno Canavese-Torino, 1898-1937)
OE	Bosco Giovanni, <i>Opere edite</i> , a cura del CSDB. Prima serie: Libri e opuscoli, 37 voi. (Rome 1977-1978) RSS Ricerche storiche salesiane (Rome)

Though Don Bosco often composed his writings for particular occasions, they nonetheless reveal his deepest concerns and contain in outline a certain number of key ideas necessary for any exact interpretation of his educational practice.

In the opinion of some writers Don Bosco excelled among Christian educators because of the variety of his activities: director of oratories, prison chaplain, catechist, author, founder of congregations for education, apologist and creator of a network of educational institutes in Italy, Europe and overseas. His initiatives, different as they were, allow us to see some of the convictions he had made his own during his formative years and which shaped the ways in which he thought, acted and spoke. His ideas on the human person, particularly on the young person whom he educated and formed provide the focus for this paper. Don Bosco showed a constant concern for the human and Christian situation of abandoned youngsters in a society which was deeply involved in a process of economic, social and political change. He was especially sensitive to the erosion of the religious outlook which was taking place even among the ordinary people of his day and his way of reacting reveals the mentality or outlook of the age in which he was educated and formed namely the period of the (Past Revolutionary) Restoration. This mentality saw religion as the maintenance of human values and for education in general. The statement that "without religion no real progress is possible" was clearly fundamental for some writers in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, though in a society which they accused of marginalising religion and the Church, such an attitude appears somewhat reactionary.

The human sciences have demonstrated well enough that the human person speaks, thinks and acts on the basis of models and paradigms inherited from tradition.¹ Though they are indeed personal, human words and actions always emerge from the common convictions present in a culture. These convictions are often unsystematic and unquestioned.² Don Bosco's intense and often vehement apologetics for a Christian (and Catholic) education constitutes the point of departure for our reflections. He reiterated a conviction common to the tradition which had existed for centuries but which had come under severe criticism in the nineteenth century. The oft repeated sayings of Don Bosco that the work of education

¹ Cfr. BARBOUR I., *Myths and paradigms. A comparative study of science and religion* (New York 1974).

² WALGRAVE J., *Man's self-understanding in Christian theology*, in *Louvain Studies* 5 (1974) 48-58.

can only achieve its purpose with the support of religion suggest that he did not share the Enlightenment view of reality which was not restricted to the intellectuals but had also seeped down into the common people. They also suggest an outlook which is very different to the current conception of Christian education which accepts that the inner dynamic of education itself provides its own criterion of autonomous legitimacy.³ But even if Don Bosco's reactions can be explained as answers to the particular immediate needs, they nonetheless bear witness to his own specific view of the human person and how he comes "into being".

I. The proper religious meaning of human existence

Although rarely explicit in his writings Don Bosco had an implicit view of the human person both in his relationship with himself and with others, with the world and with God. What type of self-understanding do we find there? How did he see the true reality of human existence and the purpose of life for the young people he educated?

1. His predominant notion was of mankind and young people in particular as "Being-for-God". The primacy of this vertical dimension constitutes an essential characteristic of his anthropology. For Don Bosco, mankind is fundamentally directed towards God, towards the divine and towards heaven. He is directed in this way by his nature i.e. from his origin and by the force of all his being. He is essentially open to the Transcendent who is his Creator, his Redeemer and his unique Master. He attains the fullness of his being only in his definitive encounter with God in the eternal and heavenly life.

For Don Bosco ideal humanity cannot be found either in human existence itself or in its specific dimensions, nor even in the task of education or any other purely earthly concerns. Man cannot be fully understood on the basis of his engagement in this world. The one essential dimension is to live one's life in friendship and peace with God and to practice one's religion and the Commandments. To Don Bosco's way of thinking, a human being without God and without religion is a stunted or a crippled being — eternally unhappy. His social and educative enterprise seems to have been entirely aimed at this goal i.e. that people might learn to

³ VERGOTE A., *Un projet éducatif fondé sur Jésus-Christ*, in *Humanités chrétiennes* 18 (1974-1975)411-432.

serve God in a joyful manner, to avoid sin in thought, word and deed and that they should order, direct, measure and control their actions towards enhancing the most fundamental dimension of their existence.

2. This conviction, which underlies the whole work of education is actually present in a radical form. The value of human existence cannot be directly identified with attaining secular or merely horizontal goals in the field of education, neither the formation of personality, nor attaining self-fulfilment can be taken to define its meaning. Even if Don Bosco educated "good citizens" and foresaw multidimensional formation, yet he could never reduce human existence to a purely earthly task. He did not consider a youngster first of all as someone who builds up the world, develops his personality within a culture or society, or in history but he saw him primarily as someone who could know and understand his ultimate destiny and who could become sensitive to his own personal development in so far as it helped him to save his soul. It is written into human nature that in his earthly condition, the desire for God directs the human being towards achieving the salvation that only God can guarantee and offer. Don Bosco remained secure in this conviction despite the critique of Christianity developed since the Enlightenment and in spite of the powers of déchristianisation supposedly at work in his own environment. His radical thinking did not cause him any problem. The idea that humanism without any explicit reference to God might constitute an autonomous value seemed strange to him personally and he clearly dissociated himself from it when it appeared in his environment.

In the area of practical life Don Bosco acted out of this fundamental option, which remained unquestioned and unquestionable. His writings and his declarations permit us to see this without any great difficulty. Don Bosco expressed himself according to the way of thinking prevalent in the nineteenth century. Its main focus was the "eternal salvation of the soul", salvation offered by God, salvation that man can refuse according to his free choice at the risk of his definitive and total destruction. Don Bosco felt himself called and sent to announce this salvation to youngsters and to work with them to achieve it and to help them to live and to die in peace with God. In fact this is the only necessary and unique thing in the light of which every other reality must be considered.

3. This conviction is expressed in different ways. Already in his early writings we find it quite clearly. Inspired by St. Alphonsus de Liguori, Don Bosco inserted into his "*Giovane provveduto*", reflections for each day of the week. The first reflexion concerns the ultimate purpose of man and explains

the fundamental perspectives in which human life must be seen. He writes: "Consider, my son, that God has created you according to his image and has given you a body and a soul without any merit on your part. Through baptism he has made you his son. He has always loved you and still loves you like an affectionate father. The only end for which he has created you is to love Him and to serve Him in this world and to make you happy one day in paradise. You are not here on this earth only to amuse or to enrich yourself, to eat, to drink and to sleep like the animals but the aim of your life is to love your God and to save your soul. If you do this, what a consolation will it be to you at the hour of your death? On the other hand, if you do not think of serving God, what feelings of regret will you experience at the end of your days, when you see that riches and pleasures leave your heart full of sorrow [...] You must also consider that if you save your soul everything will go well and you will be happy for ever; but if you lose your soul, then you will lose not only your soul but your body, God and paradise, you will be damned for all eternity".⁴

This passage was taken up in the later editions of the same book and in the writings which were inspired by it or which show a great affinity with it.⁵ In a line from another text from St. Alphonsus, Don Bosco explained the same thought later in his meditations from his book "*Mese di Maggio*": "Dear Christian, you have an immortal soul, be aware of this: if you save your soul, everything is saved, but if you lose it, everything is lost. You have but one soul; just one sin is enough to destroy it".⁶

⁴ Bosco G., *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri, degli esercizi di cristiana pietà, per la recita dell'Uffizio della Beata Vergine e de' principali vespri dell'anno col'aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre* [= *Giovane provveduto*] (Torino, tipografia Paravia e comp., 1847) 32-33 = OE 212-213; except for the prayers and the hymns, the *Giovane provveduto* offers a method of christian life which contains elements of religious instruction and of asceticism for the young; this passage receives its inspiration from St. ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI, *Massime eterne ossia meditazioni per ciascun giorno della settimana*. Per la domenica: Del fine dell'uomo. Per lunedì: Dell'importanza del fine, in *Opere ascetiche*, voi. 2 (Torino 1846) 473-474.

⁵ The manual has had a large circulation and also various reprints; cfr. the complete bibliography of the printed works of Don Bosco in STELLA, *Gli scritti a stampa di san Giovanni Bosco* = Pubblicazioni del CSDB. Studi storici 2 (Roma 1977); the *Giovane provveduto* has a similar structure and contents to other writings of Don Bosco, for example: *La chiave del paradiso in mano al cattolico che pratica i doveri di buon cristiano* [= *Chiave*] (Torino, tip. Paravia e comp., 1856); *La figlia cristiana provveduta per la pratica de' suoi doveri negli esercizi di cristiana pietà, per la recita dell'ufficio della B.V., de' Vespri di tutto l'anno e dell'ufficio dei morti, col'aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre*, pel sacerdote Giovanni Bosco (Torino, tipografia e libreria salesiana, 1878); the works had been reprinted several times.

⁶ *Il mese di maggio consacrato a Maria SS. Immacolata ad uso del popolo*, per cura del sacerdote Bosco Giovanni [= *Maggio*] (Torino, tip. G.B. Paravia e compagnia, 1858) 25-26 = OE X 319-320; cf ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI, *Apparecchio alla morte cioè considerazioni sulle*

These quotations make clear the motive behind the type of education given by Don Bosco and his collaborators in his houses, where the whole life was directed to the salvation of soul. Even the biblical quotations printed in big letters on the walls were there to remind the youngsters of the urgent necessity of saving their souls. At least this is how Fr. G.B. Lemoyne interpreted them when he copied them.⁷

Don Bosco realized that he was entirely devoted to the great work of the salvation of poor and abandoned youngsters. For him this work was utterly critical since the crucial hour of death must always remain uncertain and because of his conviction that a priest never goes to heaven or hell alone.⁸ In his educational activity he was guided above all by the idea of redemption and salvation. His intense activity and great availability stemmed from his conviction of the urgency of his mission that had been entrusted to him.

When he arrived at the Oratory of Turin, Dominic Savio went up to the room of Don Bosco who was to become the author of the boy's edifying biography "to put himself entirely in the hands of his superiors".⁹ On a poster he read the motto of his teacher: "*Da mihi animas, coetera toile!*". This motto has been attributed by the director of the Oratory to St. Francis of Sales but in fact it is taken from Genesis: "Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself. Thus Don Bosco adapted the words of the king of Salem to Abram after the victory over four great kings (Gen 14:21). Don Bosco gave this saying the sense of a petition and the value of a prayer. It constitutes the matrix for all his educative and social work for mankind who live between time and eternity, between salvation and eternal damnation, between grace and sin, between God and Satan.¹⁰ It continued

massime eterne utili a tutti per meditare ed ai sacerdoti per predicare. Cons. 12: Importanza della salute; Cons. 13: Vanità del mondo, in *Opere ascetiche*, voi. II (Torino 1846) 54-63 (passim).

⁷ At the moment of copying them, G.B. Lemoyne observed that don Bosco "wished that even the walls of his house, would speak of the necessity of the salvation of the soul" (MB V 542); see also: DESRAMAUT Francis, *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle* = Bibliothèque de Spiritualité 6 (Paris 1967) 61-62.

⁸ This is an idea strongly underlined by the spiritual literature for priests; cfr. STELLA P., *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica. IL Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità* = Pubblicazioni del CSDB. Studi storici 4 (Roma 1981) 55. 235.

⁹ *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico, allievo dell'Oratorio di san Francesco di Sales*, per cura del sacerdote Bosco Giovanni [= Savio], (Torino, tip. G.B. Paravia e comp., 1859) 38 = OE XI 188; born at Riva di Chieri on 2 April 1842, Dominic Savio was a student at Valdocco from 1854 to 1857. He died at Mondonio 9. March 1857 and was canonized in 1954.

¹⁰ For an exegesis of the expression in the meaning of Don Bosco, cfr. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 13-14.

to be his main concern when in 1863 the Salesian work moved for the first time outward the city of Turin. His confidential notes addressed first to Fr. Michel Rua and then to the young directors of all new houses, in the 1886 edition read: "Conduct of the Director towards the pupils: You ask what should we tell them. The same words that were once said to you. For example: how are you? Fine. — And your soul? — and so on. — You should help me in something really important. Do you want to help me? — Yes, Father, but what is it you want to be helped with? — In making you wise and in saving your soul and to make you the best of our children".¹¹

The salvation of souls, the redemption, the life of grace and man in his orientation towards God are themes which were dear not only to Don Bosco, they can easily be found in many other spiritual writers of that age. Spiritual writers such as St. Alphonsus, Rosignoli, Pinamonti, Nepveu and others all deal with identical themes. The salvation of souls is at their central preoccupation. The same is true of founders of nineteenth century religious congregations and others interested in the destiny of the young. The spirituality of the time strongly emphasized the link between the salvation of the soul and personal conversion. Here on this earth God calls man to eternal life and fidelity towards Him so that he may enjoy perfect happiness in heaven, and in direct contrast eternal loss is highlighted. The spiritual writers focussed on salvation by looking at the four last Things, the theme of death seen as the gateway to heaven for the just i.e. the faithful who live in peace with God, but which also means final damnation for those who deviate from the path which leads to God.

According to these authors life here must be interpreted in the light of God and communion with Him in paradise. As for Don Bosco, life lived in the grace of God, strengthened by prayer and nourished by the sacraments seems to be a foretaste of eternal life, although imperfect and threatened. Christian life, particularly for the young, has right from the beginning

¹¹ In 1863 don Bosco founded at Mirabello Monferrato the little seminary of St. Charles (S. Carlo); at that occasion he wrote for M. Rua, the rector of the newly founded house, the "Ricordi", which will later become "*Ricordi confidenziali ai Direttori delle case particolari della Società Salesiana*"; we read there the following text: "This is a copy of my last will which I sent to the directors of certain houses. If they will carry out these suggestions, I shall die peacefully, because I will be sure that our Society, blessed by God, will continue to flourish and will achieve its goal, which has always been the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls" (ed. 1886); for the history of the *Ricordi*, as well as for the critical edition of the text, cfr.: MOTTO Francesco, *I "Ricordi confidenziali ai direttori" di don Bosco*, in RSS 3 (1984) 125-166; see also: Piccola Biblioteca dell'ISS 1 (Roma 1984) and BORREGO J.-BRAIDO P.-FERREIRA DA SILVA A.-MOTTO F.-PRELLEZZO J.M. [a cura], *Giovanni Bosco. Scritti pedagogici e spirituali* = ISS. Fonti, serie prima, 3 (Roma 1987) 71-86.

eternal possibilities which have to be fulfilled. It is a pilgrimage to heaven. Even if this earthly life is important, it is something that passes and even if there are different ways to heaven only one way is certain for salvation.

4. The Roman Catholic Church also played an indispensable part in the anthropology which underlies the educational thought of Don Bosco. Founded by Christ, it possesses the means of salvation and sanctification.¹² The increasing emphasis on its Catholic character was doubtless determined by the existing socio-political situation, namely the unification of Italy and the consequent conflict between Church and State. But besides the efforts he made to defend the Pope and "legitimate" pastors, Don Bosco also saw a deeper meaning in the institution of the Church. During his controversies with the Waldensians and unbelievers he saw the Church as the Society of faithful Christians who profess the religion established by Christ. The Church transcends the meaning of an earthly community, she is the spiritual kingdom on earth, the ark of salvation, of sanctity and of virtues.¹³ Even outside the context of direct controversy, Don Bosco underlined the inevitable choice, which the Christian has to face of either living in the Church as a good Christian or being damned for all eternity.¹⁴ His thought is transparent: the Church is the only guarantor of the salvation of souls, of what is central in life and of any real education. She plays a decisive role in the earthly and eternal happiness of mankind. The fact that certain circumstances led Don Bosco to stress more and more the Roman Catholic character of the Church does not change his conviction that the Church itself is necessary and that she guarantees the meaning of life, of education and of full human development. All these values appear to be without meaning as long as they are not rooted in a firm basis i.e. in their relation to God; this relation can only be attained through the Church.

¹² For the ecclesiological perspective characteristic to don Bosco, cfr. BRAIDO P., *Pedagogia ecclesiale in don Bosco*, in CINI Ch.-MARTINELLI A. [a cura], *Con i giovani raccogliamo la profezia del Concilio* = Atti della XIII Settimana di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana (Roma 1987) 23-63; STELLA P., *Don Bosco* II 119-145.

¹³ "Il nostro Divin Salvatore disceso dal cielo per salvarci volle stabilire un mezzo onde fosse assicurato il deposito della fede fondando un regno spirituale sopra la terra. Questo regno è la Chiesa ovvero la congregazione dei fedeli cristiani di tutto il mondo, che professano la dottrina di Gesù Cristo sotto la condotta de' legittimi pastori, e specialmente del Romano Pontefice che ne è il capo da Dio stabilito.." (*Maggio* [1858] 33 = OE X 327).

¹⁴ "Considera, o cristiano, e trema riflettendo al gran numero di quelli che non sono in grembo della Chiesa cattolica e perciò tutti fuori della strada che conduce al cielo" (*Maggio* [1858] 35 = OEX 329).

II. Earthly realities

1. The identification of man with his ultimate religious purpose and his eternal destiny did not deter Don Bosco from being deeply involved in educating the young for their involvement in society and the world. The "good Christian" he was so concerned to form was always closely related to becoming a "good citizen". The primacy of the vertical dimension and religious education did not force Don Bosco to diminish the meaning of the horizontal realities such as the intellectual or social formation of the young in their material, physical and moral situation. Uppermost in his mind where the importance of education for work, for professional status, the importance of duty, of moral values, of the affective dimension and of the family atmosphere. Suffice is to say that Don Bosco undertook many different initiatives in order to make of his youngsters honest citizens. His anthropology, however vertical it seems to be, did not deflect his attention from this earthly life, from the world of the young and from the work he had undertaken for them. It will be sufficient to refer to the statements he made in the last decade of his life (1876-1886) in which he reflected upon his various activities,¹⁵ or to the testimony of some of his contemporaries.¹⁶ His convictions about the importance of both religious and human values are obvious from, for example, the letters and circulars he sent to his benefactors, the catalogues of his lotteries¹⁷ or the introductions to the history of the work at Valdocco and of the Salesian Congregation.¹⁸ He

¹⁵P. Braido elaborated the texts of the last decade of don Bosco's life; cfr. BRAIDO Pietro, *Esperienze di pedagogia cristiana nella storia. II. Sec. XVII-XIX* = Enciclopedia delle scienze dell'educazione 26 (Roma 1981).

¹⁶ As an example we shall quote a passage from a liberal journal of Milan, which praised the activities of don Bosco: "È questi tra i più attivi propagatori delle dottrine clericali e fra i più intelligenti, perché non si limita a predicare, ma opera senza posa, creando istituti d'ogni sorta, opifici, missioni, raccogliendo i poveri, facendo tutto quello che dovrebbero fare i liberali. Noi lo consideriamo come un esempio per tutti i partiti, perché il tempo nostro non vuole chiacchiere ma fatti, e don Bosco dà i fatti" (*Il secolo di Milano* 13-14 September 1886; cfr. also MB XVIII 202-203).

¹⁷ Cfr., as an example, the introduction to the *Catalogo degli oggetti offerti per la lotteria a beneficio dell'Oratorio maschile di S. Francesco di Sales in Valdocco* [1852] p. V-VIII = OE IV 149-152.

¹⁸ We can read in the OE: *Notitia brevis Societatis sancii Francisci Salesii et nonnulla decreta ad eamdem spectantia* (Torino 1868) = OE XVIII 571-586; *Societas S. Francisci Salesii* (Torino 1873) = OE XXV 102-121; *Cenno storico sulla congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales e relativi schiarimenti* (Roma 1874) = OE XXV 231-250; *Esposizione alla S. Sede dello stato morale e materiale della Pia Società di S. Francesco di Sales nel marzo 1879* (S. Pier d'Arena 1879) = OE XXXI 237-254; also BRAIDO P., *Don Bosco per la gioventù povera e abbandonata in due inediti del 1854 e del 1862 — Don Bosco nella Chiesa a servizio dell'umanità. Studi e testimonianze* = ISS. Studi 5 (Roma 1987) 13-81.

abstained from using religious language when talking about his educative system to people he thought to be indifferent or even hostile to religion.¹⁹ Nevertheless, in the mentality of Don Bosco, human values are secondary, even education itself. They are to be considered as dependent on the primary vertical dimension, religion, grace and the relationship with God. In his way of thinking, the historical fulfillment of man does not have meaning in itself. The social advancement of the young seems to obtain its true meaning only when it contributes to help the young to find their fundamental destiny. Everything which is not related to God and to eternal salvation seems only to be provisional and fragile realities. The moral life, education and happiness are valuable because they are already integrated in that they point to God. This constitutes their distinctive motivation. Don Bosco never separated human values from their connection with God.

2. The preceding affirmations should not lead us to think that Don Bosco had no appreciation of human values, but for him, man's earthly development could neither be an isolated goal nor have a relatively autonomous value: it must be related to the ultimate destiny which turns man towards God. The way of becoming a true human being and the process of divinisation necessarily go hand in hand.

Don Bosco did not push his views so far as to affirm explicitly that the value of pagan's virtues are only vices embellished with beauty. The Age of the Enlightenment had made such affirmations difficult to sustain. For him there is a natural goodness but his way of presenting it shows an extreme prudence.²⁰ However he is not afraid of maintaining the thesis that everything good undertaken by atheists, unbelievers and heretics, who fight against the Church and religion, or by those who put themselves explicitly

¹⁹ Cfr. the text of the Preventive System and the letter Don Bosco sent to the minister Francesco Crispi (E 1719); cfr. BRAIDO P. [a cura], *Il sistema preventivo applicato tra i giovani pericolanti* (1878), in *Giovanni Bosco. Scritti pedagogici e spirituali*, 219-230.

²⁰ The nuances are very clear in the following passages: "IX. Quattro imperatori buoni (dal 96 al 161 dopo Cristo): Quando vi dico essere stati degli imperatori buoni, uopo è che intendiate soltanto quella bontà che può avere un uomo pagano. Imperciocché quasi tutti gli uomini virtuosi del paganesimo andarono soggetti ai vizi della crapula, della lussuria e dell'ambizione. La sola cattolica religione, perché divina, è capace di sollevare l'uomo a portare vittoria sopra questi vizi e a praticare la temperanza, l'onestà e la modestia" (*La storia d'Italia raccontata alla gioventù da' suoi primi abitatori sino ai nostri giorni, corredata di una carta d'Italia*, dal sacerdote Bosco Giovanni [Torino, tipografia Paravia e compagnia, 1855] 122 = OE VII 122; "Antonino, figliuolo adottivo di Adriano, fu il migliore di questi quattro imperatori. Egli è soprannominato il pio per la sua bontà, e fu il primo imperatore che conoscendo la ragionevolezza della cattolica religione, lasciasse libero ai cristiani di professarla, perciò il primo che non abbia perseguitato i Cristiani..." (*Ibidem* 124 = OE VII 124).

outside the Church is only superficial. Even if he does not deny certain forms of humanism and virtue in non-Christians,²¹ he was convinced that human life must be lived in the sphere of the uniquely necessary, of the eternal, of the salvation of the soul and of the city of God, implanted by Christ and through the Church in human history. Though his educative and social activities were very concrete, they were never disengaged from their orientation towards God which is the basis of religious existence and also of all temporal values.

In this sense the religious element really constitutes the core of Don Bosco's pedagogy. All virtues are only meaningful in the true and lasting sense when they are maintained by that which constitutes their essence. The divine life represents the reality in which all human values must be integrated and by which they must be transformed. The human values which are developed according to the actual theology by man's own forces had not yet obtained in Don Bosco's thought the autonomy which is their due as created realities.

3. This truth is obvious from reading the writings of Don Bosco. The passages where he speaks of happiness, true and lasting joy, morality and education are to be seen in the light of their unbreakable link with the divine reality expressed in the various themes such as faith, grace, the sacraments, confession and the eucharist. The preceding considerations allow us to grasp the radical character of certain of his expressions, which remain unchanged throughout his life. In 1849, he already laid down the main idea that has to form the basis of all his activities: "Only religion is able to begin and to bring to a happy ending the great enterprise that is education".²² The same themes reappear in the biographies of his pupils. We read: "Experience teaches that the most solid supports of the young are the two sacraments, confession and communion. Give me a youngster who frequents those sacraments, you will see him grow, become a man and, please God, grow old and remain an example for every one. I want the youngsters to understand and to put into practice this principle, and I also

²¹ "La parola incredulo significa precisamente colui che nulla crede. Ma siccome gli uomini comunque irreligiosi e di guasti costumi non giungono mai ad essere intimamente persuasi che nulla debba crederci in fatto di religione, così diciamo, che gli uomini fanno piuttosto gl'increduli, di quello che realmente siano. Gli increduli intesi in questo senso sono di due sorte: quelli che parlano e vivono come se non ci fosse religione; gli altri non parlano della religione ma vivono come se non ci fosse" (reproduced from STELLA, *Don Bosco* II, 46, n. 16).

²² Cfr. *Esercizi spirituali alla gioventù. Avviso sacro* (Torino, tip. Paravia, 1849); a sample in ACS 131.04, published in MB III 605.

want all those who are engaged in the education of the young to understand this and to impress it upon them".²³ A similar expression can be found in the life of Francis Besucco, another pupil of the Oratory, published in 1864: "People may say what they wish concerning different methods of education but, according to me, the only solid basis is frequent confession and communion, and I think I am not exaggerating when I say that, if both these elements are left out, morality becomes impossible. Besucco — as I have said — was educated and led from his early years to the frequent practice of the two sacraments".²⁴ The sacraments which figure in these two texts concretize and are almost synonymous with the life of grace and of religion.

The necessarily religious character of all education has been the object of the pedagogical "novels" composed by Don Bosco. The book entitled "*La forza della buona educazione*", which is explicitly oriented towards the theme of Christian education, marks a new stage in the publications of Don Bosco.²⁵ It contains a pedagogical thesis based on the hypothetical life of a boy called Peter. The contents of the book refer to the climate of the second half of the nineteenth century, when religious exercises and the Christian basis of education were questioned.²⁶ The story, which for the first time deals with the pedagogical principles of Don Bosco, narrates the life of Peter, son of a drunkard — who is presented as a product of the climate of religious indifference — and of a mother who is very concerned about the Christian education of her child. Against the will of his wife the father sends his son, at the age of eight, to a factory to earn his living. The boy nevertheless behaves well because of the solid basis of his Christian education, practiced since his early boyhood and particularly since his first communion; because of this education he perseveres and progresses in the life of faith and christian virtues. Adopting for the first part of his work

²³ *Savio* [1859] 67-68 = OE XI 217-218.

²⁴ *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero vita del giovane Besucco Francesco d'Argenterà*, pel sacerdote Bosco Giovanni [= *Besucco*] (Torino, tip. dell'Orai, di S. Frane, di Sales, 1864) 100 = OE XV 342); born at Argentera in 1850, Fr. Besucco was a student at Valdocco from 1863 to 1864; he died on 9. January 1864.

²⁵ *La forza della buona educazione. Curioso episodio contemporaneo*, per cura del sac. Bosco Giovanni (Torino, tipografia Paravia e comp., 1855) = OE VI 275-386; a later edition, with a partly different title: *Pietro ossia la forza della buona educazione. Curioso episodio contemporaneo*, pel sac. Giovanni Bosco (Torino, tipografia e libreria salesiana, 1881, 1885).

²⁶ One thinks, for example, of the laws of Bon-Compagni (4 Oct. 1848) and Casati (12 Nov. 1859); cfr. TALAMANCA A., *La scuola tra Stato e Chiesa nel ventennio dopo l'Unità*, in *Chiesa e religiosità in Italia dopo l'Unità (1861-1871)*. Atti del quarto Convegno di storia della Chiesa. Comunicazioni 1 (Milano 1973) 358-385.

the text of a French book,²⁷ Don Bosco²⁸ expressed the convictions which he maintained throughout his life: without Christian faith any sort of education, happiness or morality are doomed to fail. In the eyes of Don Bosco the ideas of Peter's father who personifies the "new principles", must be completely rejected, whereas the mother, who is concerned about her son's Christian formation, should be praised because she forms the child in a definite way. Don Bosco constructed his work of education in the spirit of the mother. He distanced himself from a climate of secularisation that, according to him, constituted the cause of human and moral deformation. The story of Peter must be a clear example that the real success of life depends on self-denial from childhood and adolescence onwards.

The story of Valentine presents clearer evidence of the same thesis: without religion there is neither morality nor application to study and there is no education. The story of Peter and that of Valentine are novels with a thesis.²⁹ Though a gentleman of means, Osnero, the father of Valentine, had to discover that a worthy and honest life and a successful education are only possible on the basis of faith in God. A widower, Osnero was obliged to send Valentine to a college where education was thought possible without belief in God. At the end of the school year, the gentleman had to admit the failure of his enterprise, for Valentine left school without results either in the scholastic or the moral fields. Osnero then chose another school, where education was based on religion. There his son developed on all levels, intellectually as well as morally. At the age of fifteen he was even convinced that he was called to the ecclesiastical state. But his father was dismayed when Valentine expressed this wish because he dreamt of a brilliant career for his son in public life. He, therefore, entrusted him to a certain Mari, a sturdy mariner, who introduced him to the pleasures of life. This satanic guide deprived the boy of his vocation and drew him into an immoral way of life. Having been given over to libertinism, unbelief and all sorts of perversions, Valentine's personality was totally ruined.

The stories of Valentine and Peter must be seen as expressions of Don Bosco's rejection of the "anti-clerical" climate that had penetrated the

²⁷ The literary source of the book has as its title: *Un mari comme il y en a beaucoup, une femme comme il y en a peu* (Caen 1853; 1869; cfr. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 104, n. 7).

²⁸ The Oratory or his director are mentioned, at p. 15.18.23.63.66 = OE VI 289.292.297.337.340.

²⁹ *Valentino o la vocazione impedita. Episodio contemporaneo*, esposto dal sacerdote Bosco Giovanni [= *Valentino*] (Torino, tip. dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1866); critical edition: PULINGATHIL Mathew [a cura], *Giovanni Bosco. Valentino o la vocazione impedita*. Introduzione e testo critico = Piccola Biblioteca dell'ISS 6 (Roma 1987).

world of education. As the story of Peter is an earlier work than the biographies of Savio, Magone and Besucco, it reinforces the thesis that all human progress has religion at its basis,³⁰ an idea that was taken up again by Don Bosco in 1877 in his text on the Preventive System.³¹

Happiness, true joy and inner peace rooted in faith and God are the explicit themes of the story of Peter. The author drew the contrast between Peter's father who had given himself over to the pleasures of the world but who had not found true peace of soul and Peter's mother who lacked even the basic necessities of life but found true inner joy and happiness.³² In its turn the biography Magone supports the thesis that joy which is not the result of the practice of religion becomes a passing and ephemeral reality.³³ In the tradition of Philip Neri, Don Bosco was firmly opposed to the idea that the practice of religion is a dull and wretched business.³⁴ For him there

³⁰ "Ma gli studi come andarono? Se non c'è moralità gli studi vanno male. Di mano in mano che Valentino prendeva gusto alla vita spregiudicata, come avevagli detto il padre, provava ripugnanza allo studio; sicché gli ultimi cinque mesi di quell'anno furono affatto perduti. Nell'esame semestrale aveva ancora ottenuti buoni voti, e il padre dimostrò la sua soddisfazione regandogli un bell'orologio. Ma nell'esame finale si ebbe un risultato sfavorevole e non fu promosso a classe superiore. A quella notizia Osnero provò grave dispiacere e pel denaro consumato inutilmente e per l'anno di studio perduto. Ciò tanto più gli doleva, perché il suo Valentino sempre erasi fatto onore nelle classi percorse, e sapeva che una mediocre diligenza gli avrebbe bastato perché venisse onoratamente promosso" (*Valentino* [1866] 12-13 = OE XVII 190-191); "Bisogna pur confessarlo, senza religione è impossibile educare la gioventù (*ibidem* 17 = OE XVII 195).

³¹ "Frequent confession and communion and daily Mass are the pillars which must support the edifice of education, from which we propose to banish the use of threats and the cane" (*Sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù* [= *Sistema preventivo*] eh. 2, 4; published in: *Inaugurazione del patronato in Nizza a Mare. Scopo del medesimo* esposto dal sacerdote Giovanni Bosco con appendice sul sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù [San Pier d'Arena-Torino-Nizza Marittima, tipografia e libreria salesiana, 1877]); in the same year there were also a French and a bilingual editions (French-Italian) published in OE XXVIII 380-446; for the critical edition and for an introduction, cfr. BRAIDO P. [a cura], *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*. Introduzione e testi critici, in RSS 4 [1985] 171-321; cfr. also: Piccola Biblioteca dell'ISS 5 (Roma 1985); *Giovanni Bosco. Scritti pedagogici e spirituali*, 125-200.

³² "Bisogna confessarlo, ella è la religione che rende la moglie di Giovanni così virtuosa, suo figlio così rispettoso ed obbediente; è la religione che porta fortuna in famiglia" (*Pietro* [1855] 41 = OE VI 317); "Così una famiglia da parecchi anni immersa nella desolazione per causa di un padre di famiglia sbadato, che incautamente aveva dimenticato i doveri di marito e di cristiano e che aveva dimenticata la religione; dopo dodici anni di tribolazione, tornò a vedere giorni di pace e di tranquillità, perché solo la religione o la grazia di Dio può render l'uomo contento e felice" (*ibidem* 48 = OE VI 322).

³³ Cfr. *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele, allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, per cura del sacerdote Bosco Giovanni [= *Magone*] (Torino, G.B. Paravia e comp., 1861) 16-29 = OE XIII 170-183; Michel Magone (1845-1859) was a student at the Oratory from 1857 to 1859.

³⁴ The "Ricordi generali di S. Filippo Neri alla gioventù" were often published in literature for the young (cfr. Isnardi, Burzio...).

was no conflict between Christian life and true joy. Preoccupied by the creation of a positive climate for youngsters he formulated this truth on many occasions: "Let the boys have full liberty to run, jump and play about as much as they please. Gymnastics, music, reciting, acting and walking are most efficacious means of promoting discipline and improving morality and health. Care, however, must be taken that the games, the persons who take part in them and the conversations held are blameless. 'Do anything you like', the great saint of youth St. Philip Neri used to say, 'as long as you do not sin'".³⁵

The idea of basing human values on religion arose from the type of thinking that Don Bosco shared with other Catholic authors of his day as can be seen from an examination of the popular spiritual literature of his day. This outlook is not unconnected to the climate of the (Past Revolutionary) Restoration which rejected the autonomy claimed during the eighteenth century and founded human order on religion. Don Bosco responded in much the same way but his response always remained flexible and adaptable to concrete situations.

III. The capacities of man

Don Bosco's educative practice was not only shaped by his view of the divine destiny of man and the place of earthly realities but also by the view he took of human nature in general and of young people in particular. The study of this dimension allows us to make clear his way of observing their capacities and their limitations and the practical consequences he derived from this observation in the field of education. Certain features of this experience indeed urged him to look to the Christian faith as the basis of education.

1. John Bosco sometimes grouped boys in categories. These categories, had to serve as indicators for his educative practice.³⁶ Beside this division into groups, don Bosco also expressed ideas which more directly concern the nature of the young people themselves. His texts are certainly not

³⁵ *Sistema preventivo* [1877] II, 3 = OE XXVIII 432.

³⁶ Cfr. *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comodo, morto nel seminario di Chieri, ammirato da tutti per le sue singolari virtù*, scritti da un suo collega [= Comodo] (Torino, dalla tipogran Speirani e Ferrero, 1844) 63 = OE I 63; *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 21-22 = OE II 201-202; *Savio* [1859] 26 = OE XI 176; *Regolamento per le case della Società di S. Francesco di Sales* [= *Regolamento Case*] 15-16 = OE XXIX 11-112.

always of the same tenor. It is not difficult to indicate passages which express his positive experience and his personal reflections more directly than the paradigms chosen when writing his books or pamphlets. Don Bosco, for instance, characterized the young in the beginning of his work as the "most delicate and most precious portion of society".³⁷ But here we are interested more in making clear the structures of his thinking. Beside the categories due to his experience, we have also to consider the view of human nature he expressed in his writings and which are in line with certain theological points of view.

Don Bosco believed in original sin and its consequences. Of course, he does not go so far as to affirm that human nature is completely wicked. Like the Council of Trent Don Bosco had reacted against the Reformers who emphasized the consequences of original sin so strongly that for them human nature appeared to have been completely perverted. Without faith man had neither the active faculty of knowing the ultimate purpose of life nor the strength to reach it by doing his duty. The Council distanced itself from the idea that as a consequence of original sin human nature was entirely dominated by concupiscence and by the inclination to evil in such a way that man is no longer able to do any good. In Catholic thought however, free will is not completely destroyed by the Fall. In man there remained an active possibility to avoid evil and to do good. Trent limited itself to underlining that original sin has weakened liberty in its exercise.

Jansenism had qualified the capacity of man to do good as only passive. Man succeeds in doing good insofar as he is capable of receiving from God the grace which overcomes contrary tendencies. If love given by God cannot overcome selflove which is derived from concupiscence, then man has only very weak motivation for doing good.³⁸ Jansenism had also

³⁷ We limit ourselves to transcribing only one important passage which attenuates the other texts of rather severe nature: "Ut filios Dei, qui erant dispersi, congregaret in unum. Joan. C. II. V. 52. le parole del santo Vangelo che ci fanno conoscere essere il divin Salvatore venuto dal cielo in terra per radunare insieme tutti i figliuoli di Dio, dispersi nelle varie parti della terra, parmi che si possono letteralmente applicare alla gioventù de' nostri giorni. Questa porzione la più delicata e la più preziosa dall'umana Società, su cui si fondano le speranze di un felice avvenire, non è per se stessa di indole perversa. Tolta la trascuratezza dei genitori, l'ozio, lo scontro de' tristi compagni, cui vanno specialmente soggetti ne' giorni festivi, riesce facilissima cosa l'insinuare ne' teneri loro cuori i principii di ordine, di buon costume, di rispetto, di religione; perché se accade talvolta che già siano guasti in quella età, il sono piuttosto per inconsideratezza, che non per malizia consumata" (for the text, cfr. BRAIDO P. [a cura], *Don Bosco per i giovani: "l'Oratorio". Una "Congregazione degli Oratori"* = Piccola Biblioteca dell'ISS 9 [Roma 1988] 30-31).

³⁸ Cfr. FLICK M.-ALSZEGHY Z., *Fondamenti di una antropologia teologica* = Nuova collana di teologia cattolica 10 (Firenze 1969) 342-352.

underlined the consequences of sin on the pedagogical level. There is the image of the young as fragile or sick plants which need the indispensable help of the educator. Abandoned or left to chance or to themselves, young people will end by giving in to evil. The themes of original sin and of redemptive salvation characterise the models of education emanating from the "Petites-Ecoles".³⁹ But the reduction of this vision of education only to the jansenist thinking, would lead to a deformation of perspective. The idea that the young are psychologically and morally weak and fragile beings as a result of original sin, was accepted by the great majority of Christian educators of the modern age. The sense of sin and its effects model the theories and the educative practice of many catholics, according to the doctrine of original sin, of liberty and grace developed since the Reformation under the influence of the antipelagian writings of St. Augustine. These elements were neither exclusive to Port-Royal educators themselves nor to the educators such as J.B. de la Salle whose dependence on Port-Royal can be proved. They are also found in Jesuit authors such as J. Croiset or P. De Mattei.⁴⁰

2. Similar ideas are also to be found in Don Bosco's writings. Sometimes they were reinforced through the experience of apostasy or the alienation of the faithful from the Church which has been commonly described in the nineteenth century as the "process of déchristianisation". In his own way Don Bosco highlighted the fragile nature of the young. Obviously less pessimistic than some of his models e.g. Ch. Gobinet,⁴¹ Don Bosco nevertheless started from the same fundamental outlook. In all probability this can also be explained to a certain extent by the climate of the Restoration, in which he himself had been formed. According to some authors the impiety which had been a product of the Age of Enlightenment, had smashed the powers of reason, of heart and of will. These authors wanted to put forward man's incapacity as a starting point.

With Don Bosco the accentuation of human weakness cannot be dissociated from his experiences with the young. His educative method, which always extols patience, gentleness and tenderness, seems to have been

³⁹ For the pedagogical principles of Port-Royal, cfr. the study of DELFORGE Frédéric, *Les Petites-Ecoles de Port-Royal, 1637-1660* (Paris 1985) 269-285.

⁴⁰ For this affirmation we base ourselves, among others, on STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 54-55.

⁴¹ GOBINET Charles (1613-1690), *Instruction de la jeunesse en la piété chrétienne, tirée de l'écriture sainte et des Saints Pères*; this work, often republished, appeared for the first time in 1655; there were numerous Italian editions; it was a source for the *Giovane provveduto* and was recommended to the Salesians at the second general Chapter.

inspired by a very concrete awareness of the fickle and unstable character of the young. His anthropological approach remains marked by the consciousness of the weakness of the human creature and of the grip of Satan on man and the world. Don Bosco also saw the young as fragile and inconstant beings, marked by moral weakness. The images he used suggest that the young cannot achieve holiness, happiness or salvation by their own forces alone; they reach these ends when they rely on God's grace and on the help of Christian educators. Don Bosco did not describe the fallen nature of man in theological terms. As an educator, he used images which evoke inconstancy and lightheadedness. Dislike of, or repugnance for prayer, attachment to certain forms of entertainment and distraction are for him distinctive signs of the fragile nature of the young.

When publishing his work on the Preventive System in 1877, Don Bosco took up an idea which is present in all his writings: "A [second] essential reason for this system is seen in the thoughtlessness of youth, who in a single moment forget the rules of discipline and the punishments which they entail. Consequently, a child often becomes guilty and deserves a punishment of which he had no heed, and which he quite forgot when carelessly committing the fault he would certainly have avoided if a friendly voice had warned him".⁴² You find in Don Bosco a real consciousness of weakness but it is moderated and tempered by the confidence which the educator can inspire.

Don Bosco did not hesitate to claim that children are "naturally thoughtless". Dominic Savio distinguished himself from his companions by his obedience and by his kindness, "whereas children, by lack of reflection, are a constant trouble and a continuous vexation to their mothers; they like to see everything, to touch everything, and above all, to break everything".⁴³ Their capricious character also comes through on the level of religious behaviour: "It is a very difficult thing to give adolescents a taste for prayer. The inconstancy of their age makes everything that demands the serious attention of the spirit boring and terribly heavy".⁴⁴ The weakening of man in consequence of sin appears still more clearly in a work like "*Maniera facile per imparare la storia sacra*".⁴⁵ When Don Bosco points out the

⁴² Cfr. *Sistema preventivo*, I, 2 = OE XXVIII 427.

⁴³ Cfr. *Savio* [1859] 12-13 = OE XI 162-163.

⁴⁴ Cfr. *Besucco* [1864] 113-114 = OE XV 355-356.

⁴⁵ It an abridged version of the sacred History: *Maniera facile per imparare la storia sacra ad uso del popolo cristiano*, per cura del sac. Bosco Giovanni [= *Maniera*] (Torino, tip. Paravia e compagnia, 1855).

consequences of original sin, he adheres almost to the positions of Bigex and of Collot;⁴⁶ on the level of the soul: ignorance, concupiscence and exclusion from heaven; on the level of the body: poverty, sickness and death. Ignorance prevents man from knowing his ultimate goal or his duties without the help of revelation.⁴⁷ If this phrase expresses the thesis of moderate traditionalism, the other one defining concupiscence refers to certain trends of Augustinian theology: by concupiscence is meant the inclination to sin.⁴⁸ A similar idea emerges from the *Cattolico nel secolo*, where John Bosco makes a better distinction between the philosophical and the theological level concerning the knowledge of God.⁴⁹ In it however, he maintains the following idea: "The second thing [to observe] is that the intelligence of man, obscured by original sin, is not capable of knowing all the necessary truths for his moral direction with any certainty free from error. However, God in his immense kindness, had deigned to reveal to man the truths of the supernatural order and a great number of truths of the natural order. Therefore you will understand easily that revelation is the proclamation made by God to man of those truths which are necessary to him, truths which we must believe firmly because God has revealed them to us".⁵⁰

3. In spite of his weakness, man must not despair of his situation when he turns towards God, his only Redeemer. It is here that education plays an irreplaceable role. The young let themselves be led by their parents and their teachers. Educators must take their great responsibility to heart. They

⁴⁶ [BIGEX F.M. (1751-1827)], *Catechismo storico* (Torino 1821); COLLOT P. (1672-1741), *Explication des premières vérités de la religion pour faciliter l'intelligence aux jeunes*. Ouvrage très utile aux personnes qui sont chargées de leur instruction (Lyon 1827).

⁴⁷ "D. Quali sono le conseguenze di questo peccato [= original sin]?"

R. Le conseguenze del peccato originale sono tutte le miserie dell'anima e del corpo. D. Quali sono le miserie dell'anima?

R. Le miserie dell'anima sono l'ignoranza, la concupiscenza e la esclusione dal cielo. D. In che cosa consiste l'ignoranza?

R. L'ignoranza consiste in ciò che l'uomo non può conoscere il suo fine, né i suoi doveri senza la rivelazione" (*Maniera facile* [1855] 12-13 = OE VI 60-61).

⁴⁸ "D. Che cosa s'intende per concupiscenza?"

R. Per concupiscenza s'intende l'inclinazione al peccato" (*ibidem* 12 = OE VI 61).

⁴⁹ *Il cattolico nel secolo. Trattenimenti di un padre coi suoi figliuoli intorno alla religione*, pel sacerdote Giovanni Bosco [= *Cattolico nel secolo*] (Torino, tipografia e libreria salesiana, 1882); the work reproduces, with some modifications: *Il cattolico istruito nella sua religione. Trattenimenti di un padre di famiglia co' suoi figliuoli secondo i bisogni del tempo*, epilogati dal sac. Bosco Giovanni [= *Cattolico istruito*] (Torino, tipografia dir. da P. De Agostini, 1853-1854).

⁵⁰ Cfr. *Cattolico nel secolo* [1883] 35 = OE XXXIV 35.

will have to render an account before God. Don Bosco wrote: "Just as a young tree, even when it is planted in the fertile ground of a garden, grows crooked if it is not cultivated and in a certain sense guided until it has reached a certain stage of development, so you, my very dear sons, will surely turn towards evil if you do not let yourselves be guided by those who are put in charge of your education".⁵¹ The same thesis is illustrated by the examples of Comollo, Louis de Gonzaga, Peter, Savio, Magone, Besucco, and in a negative sense, by Valentine.

John Bosco praised the pastor of Cinzano, the Reverend Giuseppe Comollo, the uncle of Louis, who sowed the seeds of rare and extraordinary virtues in the heart of his young nephew.⁵² Before he tells the story of the arrival of Dominic Savio in the Oratory, Don Bosco summarized his views on the role of education: "It is typical of youngsters to change their minds very often. It is not rare that they like one thing today and another tomorrow. Today they will practise a virtue in an eminent degree, and tomorrow they will do just the contrary. And if there is no one to care for them, then education sometimes ends in failure, whereas it could have been admirably successful".⁵³ A similar idea can be found in the biography of Besucco, in which Don Bosco suggested a solution to remedy the inconsistency of the spirit of the young: "It is a great fortune for a Christian to be initiated into prayer from his adolescence and to learn to have a taste for it. This source of divine blessings remains always open to him. Francis was one of these happy Christians. The help which his parents gave him from his tender childhood and the care his schoolteacher and especially his parish-priest took of him, brought to fruition this desirable end".⁵⁴

So education is necessary, above all because of the weakness and the fragility of the young. Without it they will neither reach the ultimate goal of their lives nor the fulfilment of their personalities in a virtuous life. The educator is an indispensable guide. One of his principal tasks consists in supporting the young, so that they become able as soon as possible to collaborate with the divine grace which is the only guarantee of their religious and human destiny. This is the only means of keeping "a young tree from growing crooked".⁵⁵ Vigilance or protective assistance should therefore characterize the attitude of parents and educators. Together with

⁵¹ Cfr. *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 13-14 = OE II 193-194.

⁵² *Comollo* [1844] 16 = OE I 16.

⁵³ *Savio* [1859] 37 = OE XI 137.

⁵⁴ *Besucco* [1864] 114 = OE XV 356.

⁵⁵ *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 13-14 = OE II 193-194.

their stimulating presence, this attitude ensures the possibilities of making progress in virtue and of escaping from the risk of giving way to evil inclinations and hence of spoiling eternal life. If assistance gets its particular form according to the educative environment (Oratory, school, boarding-school...), with Don Bosco this assistance is undoubtedly incarnated in the direct, friendly, brotherly or fatherly encounter between the educator and the young and in the creation of a climate of joy (games, theatre, music...). The pedagogy of Don Bosco does not have a dull and dead atmosphere. Don Bosco attributed to the young much more than a passive role. Their fragility and their eventual inclination towards evil, however real they may be, did not hinder him from exploiting in a spirit of Christian humanism their active and inventive collaboration. His manner of education reveals a dynamism, which is moved by an attitude of confidence and cordiality. The space he offered to their free initiative is real but at the same time tempered, sometimes because of his experience but at other times because of the image of the young he had. Experience had taught him that their evolution can sometimes be chaotic and irregular, even with those like Dominic Savio, who could cultivate the ideal of sanctity. For this reason he asked them to give him "the key of their hearts" to enable him to guide them with gentleness and kindness until the "tree of their life" was able to resist the storms of temptation. The extra accent on the obedience of the young as an important virtue and on the task of the educator to know how to win the heart of the young, must be understood in this context.⁵⁶

4. Another idea dear to Don Bosco, namely the necessity of giving oneself to God from an early age, must be explained in the same context. If, thanks to the solid support of his parents and his educators, priests and spiritual guides, a boy manages to give his life as a gift to God from his early childhood and if he succeeds in inserting himself in the plan of salvation as soon as possible, he will avoid the risk of eternal damnation. If he does not, he will expose himself to a great danger, because he is never sure that God will repeat his call before death. The youngsters Don Bosco presented as models had chosen the most secure way of living "from an early age" in accord with divine favours.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ The meaning of this expression has been clearly explained by DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco* and STELLA, *Don Bosco* II (passim; see also the index); in this context you can read: *La lettera di Don Bosco da Roma del 10 maggio 1884*, in RSS 3 (1984) 295-374; also: Piccola Biblioteca deirISS 3 (Roma 1984) and *Due lettere da Roma del 10 maggio 1884*, a cura di P. Braido, in *Giovanni Bosco. Scritti pedagogici e spirituali*, 265-303.

⁵⁷ Cfr. *Comollo* [1844] 16 = OE I 16.

The theme of the gift of one's life "from an early age" characterized all the writings of Don Bosco. The basic principles were already articulated in the *Giovane provveduto*. Taking his inspiration from *Guida angelica* or from Ch. Gobinet, Don Bosco puts forward his thesis straight away in the introduction of the book: "The other trap, is to nourish the illusion of a long life and to persuade yourself that you will have all the time to convert yourself at an advanced age or at the moment of death. My very dear sons, be careful, because a great number have fallen into this trap. Who assures you that you will have a long life? Have you signed a pact with death in order that it will wait till you get old? Life and death are in the hands of the Lord, who disposes as He wishes. Even if God gives you a long life, listen to the important advice he gives you: the way a man takes during his early years is the way he will continue to follow until his old age and until his death. *Adolescens juxta viam suam etiam cum senuerit non recedei ab ea*. That means: if we begin to live well in our youth, we will be virtuous in old age and we will die a holy death that leads us into eternal joy. If, on the contrary, we let vice get hold on us from our youth, it is very likely to rule over us all through our life until our death which will become a fatal prelude to an unhappy eternity".⁵⁸

In the third article, the same theme is analysed more directly: "The Lord tells you that, if you apply yourself from youth becoming virtuous, you will persevere in this way the rest of your life which will be crowned with eternal happiness. On the contrary, an irregular life, that started early, will remain unchanged until death and it will lead you inevitably into hell. Therefore, when you see a person of mature age given over to the vices of drunkenness, of gambling, of blaspheming, you may suppose in general that they had acquired these vices in their youth: *Adolescens juxta viam suam, etiam cum senuerit non recedei ab ea. Prov. 22* [...] Give yourself as soon as possible to virtue, and I assure you that you will always have a happy and joyful heart and you will find how sweet the service of the Lord is".⁵⁹

"God wants us to serve him from our youth" is also a theme of *Sei domeniche*. The presentation of the virtues of Louis Gonzaga is principally aimed at defending the same thesis which is found in the *Giovane provveduto*. If Louis had waited until his old age to give himself to God.

⁵⁸ *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 6-7 = OE II 186-187; the text is close to the work: *Guida angelica, o siano pratiche istruzioni per la gioventù. Opera utilissima a ciascun giovanetto dato alla luce da un sacerdote secolare milanese* (Torino 1767).

⁵⁹ *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 12-13 = OE II 192-193; Cfr. GOBINET, *Instruction*, pt. 1, ch. 4.

he would not have reached the same degree of virtue and holiness, because he died very young, and perhaps would not have been redeemed.⁶⁰ Savio already recited his morning and evening prayers at the age of four all by himself.⁶¹ Thanks to the help of Don Bosco, the good cloth of his life was to become a beautiful garment to offer to God.⁶² Comollo, Louis Gonzaga, Savio, Besucco... form at this point a contrast with the young Valentine, put by his father in the impossibility of giving himself to God. Everything is destroyed if the young from their youth do not collaborate with grace and make the necessary choice to assure themselves true happiness and eternal salvation. This was Peter's good luck thanks to the constant care of his mother.⁶³

Conclusion

Don Bosco did not think of elaborating a systematic theory to support his educative action. Nevertheless we may not ignore the abundant literary evidence which, according to his own words, was to "serve the glory of God and the salvation of souls". In his eyes both were threatened in his lifetime.⁶⁴ His pages, whether they are the result of a personal reflection or rather drawn from other literary sources, can be considered as the conscious expression of a certain number of key-convictions of his own.⁶⁵

The main elements of his mindset which are the basis of his educative practice consist, in our opinion, in the relationship between what has been called "the natural and the supernatural", the order of nature and that of grace, human values and religion. According to Don Bosco there was no separation at all between these two levels. The thought of the educator of Turin attests to a deep coherence between nature and grace, creation and redemption, although without the subtle and necessary distinctions elaborated by contemporary theology.⁶⁶ Practically it means that Don Bosco obviously did not follow the schemes of scholastic theology, that

⁶⁰ "S. Luigi si diede per tempo a Dio" in *Giovane provveduto* [1847] 67-68 = OE II 247-248.

⁶¹ Cfr. *Savio* [1859] 12 = OE XI 162.

⁶² *Ibidem* 35-36 = OE XI 162.

⁶³ Cfr. *Pietro* [1855] 62-63 = OE VI 336-337.

⁶⁴ Cfr. the circular of 19 March 1885, in *Lettere circolari di D. Bosco e di D. Rua ed altri loro scritti ai salesiani* (Torino 1896) 26-27.

⁶⁵ Cfr. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 16.

⁶⁶ Cfr. CONC. VATICANUM II, *Gaudium et Spes* 36.

were taught in the seminaries. This theology made a clear distinction between nature and grace. For the post-tridentine theology, man is "nature" in its original sense: thanks to natural powers, he possesses from his birth (*natura / nasci*) the intelligence and the will to know and to reach his own connatural perfection. Grace and divine life are considered as the "supernatural" or "superadded" realities. Eternal life is presented as the desserts or the reward for him who has fulfilled his human duties. Paradise is promised to him who has lived according to the laws of nature, which he himself could know by reason and follow thanks to his natural capacities. In that way of thinking, divine grace risks being a mere external help, extraneous to the essence of man. His openness towards God risks becoming worthless in regard to human development and perfection.⁶⁷

Now the view of man put forward by Don Bosco, seems scarcely influenced by this type of thinking. It presents apparently more affinity with the anthropological presuppositions, which were handed on by an abundant spiritual literature, which did not consider human nature as closed on itself. Spiritual authors started rather from the conviction that man, in virtue of his natural desire, is entirely oriented towards God. His natural final end is God in Himself. Religion and faith are the essential categories which qualify the true value of human activities. Often these authors seem hardly able to understand how the grace of God can also operate in the life and virtues of those who live according to a noble ideal but do not (yet) know God.⁶⁸ Don Bosco's way of thinking seems to be in line with this conviction.

⁶⁷ Walgrave characterizes post-tridentine scholastic theology as follows: "Man no longer understands his nature as 'towards God', but as 'towards his own connatural perfection'. The Aristotelian principle according to which all substances are by their nature directed towards a connatural perfection, to be achieved by their natural powers, is now extended to man without special qualification. The natural final end of man is not God in Himself — this can only be given through a superadded grace — but the unfolding of the virtualities which are implicit in his active endowments [...]. This understanding of man soon prevailed in Catholic theology. It was as common in the eighteenth century as the opposite thesis was common in the thirteenth [...]. The tragic separation between the natural and the supernatural, between creation and Christian salvation, sets in. In virtue of creation man's nature is complete in itself without any positive intrinsic relation to that which is the object of God's saving initiative. Salvation in the Christian sense is added to creation as by a second arbitrary decree of God, added to the first decree of creation" (WALGRAVE, *Man's self-understanding* 56-57).

⁶⁸ We base our ideas on: RONDET H., *Le problème de la pure nature en la théologie au XVI^e siècle*, in *Recherches de science religieuse* 35 (1948) 481-522; ALFARO J., *Lo natural y lo sobrenatural. Estudio histórico desde Santo Tomás hasta Cayetano* (Madrid 1952); ID., *Transcendencia y Immanencia de lo sobrenatural*, in *Gregorianum* 38 (1957) 5-50; DE LUBAC H., *Augustinisme et théologie moderne = Théologie* [Lyon-Fourvière] 63 (Paris 1965); WALGRAVE J.H., *Geloof en théologie in de crisis* (Kasterlee 1966); PESCH H.O., *Frei sein aus Gnade. Theologische Anthropologie* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1983).

For him man's basic self-understanding is grounded in his "being turned toward God" and not in a kind of connatural perfection. In actualizing just their immanent active possibilities the young cannot be perfectly happy.

Don Bosco's well known sensitivity to concrete challenges often made him forget his theoretical convictions. For the rest he distinguished himself by the fact that he operated as an educator. He was aware of the fact that the young are involved in the process of becoming Christians. He did not disqualify those who devoted themselves to an ideal of Christian life, even if they did not immediately succeed in realizing it. John Bosco did not ignore the aspect of growth towards human and Christian perfection.

In this perspective we suggest another theme to study. While reacting against certain so-called "jansenist" severities, did Don Bosco not also share some aspects of their way of thinking on the doctrinal level? P. Stella was able to indicate some similarities between the educative method of Don Bosco and that of the Petites-Ecoles.⁶⁹ According to this author, we can find an analogous manner of thinking in the majority of the spiritual books for the use of priests, religious and laymen, circulating in Italy and in Piedmont, and even beyond the borders of the country. A certain number of these texts were read by Don Bosco or used by him as a source of his writings.⁷⁰

At any rate the preceding paragraphs illustrate how, according to the ideas of Don Bosco, man needs God. The implicit anthropology on which he bases his educative system refers necessarily to this religious foundation. God, divine life, grace... do not only guarantee the strictly religious dimension of human existence. These ultimate issues still constitute the unique foundation of man's self-realisation and of his terrestrial and historical development.

⁶⁹ STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 450-453.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem* 232-336.