

II. DON BOSCO'S EDUCATIONAL METHOD IN CONFIDENTIAL DISCUSSIONS WITH A POLITICIAN (1854) AND AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER (1864)

*“Even though these were written down later (1881-1882), two presentations which Don Bosco made regarding his educational system are trustworthy. They were conversations that took place in 1854 and 1864. The first was with a Minister of the Kingdom of Sardinia, Urban Rattazzi; the other with an elementary teacher, Francis Bodrato.”*¹³

The two documents which follow one another present something special in this context of essays and testimonies presenting Don Bosco's pedagogical thinking, especially if we consider how the material is organised. The first document furnishes us with an account of a conversation in 1854 with Urban Rattazzi¹⁴. In the second, the other member of the conversation is Francis Bodrato¹⁵, an elementary school teacher at Mornese (Alessandria). This discussion of Bodrato's with Don Bosco took place ten years later in 1864 but the heart of the contents and how they are arranged is similar.

There is a similar departure point in both accounts: Rattazzi and Bodrato, when they meet the founder of Valdocco, and although on different dates and in different places, are struck by the exemplary behaviour of the many boys whom the Piedmontese priest is surrounded by. So they request a private talk with Don Bosco, so they can get to understand his educational approach and how he applies this in practice.

¹³ P. BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere...*, p. 136.

¹⁴ Urbano Rattazzi (1808-1873), lawyer and politician. The text of the conversation with Rattazzi “is part of Chapters 7 and 8 of the second part of the *History of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, published by Fr John Bonetti, main editor for the SB. We can suppose, then, that he was also the author of this text.” (*DBE, Scritti*, p. 76).

¹⁵ Francis Bodrato (1823-1880), after his wife's death, became a Salesian priest and missionary in Latin America. The discussion with Bosco comes from the *Biographical sketch of Father Francis Bodrato*, of which an original text by Carlo Cays (1813-1882) exists and a “proof copy” in ASC B220 Bodrato Francesco; cf. *DBE, Scritti*, pp. 77 and 191.

The version closest to the facts bears the date 1881 (Don Bosco is still alive). The account of the conversation with Rattazzi was published in the BS (Salesian Bulletin, 1882), probably by John Bonetti, the chief editor. The conversation with the teacher from Mornese is reproduced in the Cenni biografici del sacerdote don Bodrato Francesco (Historical sketch of Father Francis Bodrato).

It seems very likely that references to the “two systems of education” which emerged in the conversation with Rattazzi were suggested by the brief description: The Preventive System in the Education of the Young in 1877¹⁶. A similar consideration could be given to the version of the conversation with Bodrato. At any rate the two documents are of special interest for understanding Don Bosco’s pedagogical thinking and educational praxis as well as their development.

148. Conversation with the Politician Urban Rattazzi

Critical ed. in *DBE, Scritti*, pp. 78-87.

Leaving his political views to one side, truth demands that we acknowledge that the lawyer Rattazzi both as a member of Parliament and as a Minister has always looked upon our Oratory and hospice with a kindly eye. He used to say that the Government was obliged to protect an Institute such as ours, because it operated very efficiently to lessen the prison population and to produce intelligent citizens at the same time as it was making good Christians of them. In fact, he himself set a good example in this regard.

Therefore he encouraged Don Bosco in his work, made grants, recommended the admission of young people, and even entrusted a young cousin to him, Cesare Rattazzi by name, so that he could bring him to a positive point of view, and be guided by sound principles. Then, each time he was appointed to the Ministry, he would be so kind as to inform Don Bosco that he would have nothing to fear. He showed these kindly dispositions from the time of his first meeting with Don Bosco, coming to our Oratory *incognito*. The event is worth noting.

¹⁶ Cf. Pietro BRAIDO, *Breve storia del “Sistema Preventivo”*. Roma, LAS 1993, p. 98.

It was a Sunday morning in the month of April of the year 1854, about ten-thirty. The young people at the Boarding school along with many who attended during the day, were in church for the second time. They had sung Matins and Lauds of the Office of the Blessed Virgin, had heard Mass, and Don Bosco had gone up into the pulpit and was recounting an episode from *Church history*, a topic he had taken up some time ago. In the meantime, a gentleman comes in through the main door of our Church, one whom no one recognised, not even Don Bosco. Hearing the sermon in progress, he sat himself down on one of the benches provided at the back for the faithful, and stayed there listening till the end.

Don Bosco had begun on the previous Sunday to tell the life of Pope St Clement and that morning was explaining how the saintly pontiff, because of hatred for the Christian faith, had been sent into exile by Emperor Trajan to the Chersonese, today known as the Crimea, where this year the war mentioned above broke out.

Finishing the story, it was his custom to question some of the boys, see if they had questions to ask, or what moral could be got from this fact of history. He made sure in this way that every one paid attention, and at the same time it added great interest to the telling. So doing this morning, he questioned one of the young day boys. Contrary to what might have been expected he came out with a question which while appropriate, was inopportune considering the place, and for the times, very dangerous.

He said, "If Emperor Trajan committed an injustice by driving Pope St Clement out of Rome and into exile, has not perhaps our government done wrong to exile our Archbishop Frasoni?" To this unexpected question Don Bosco replied without at all losing his composure, "This is not the place to say whether our government has done good or evil, in sending our most revered Archbishop into exile. This is something that can be discussed at the right time. But it is true that through the centuries and right from the beginning of the Church the enemies of the Catholic Faith have always had its leaders in their sights—popes, bishops, priests—because they believe that if you pull down the columns the building will fall down, and that, having struck down

the shepherd, the flock will be scattered and become easy prey to ravening wolves.

Meantime, whenever we hear or read that this or that bishop, this or that priest has been condemned and sentenced, for example to exile, or even to death, we should not straight away believe they are guilty, as these people say they are. It could be that on this occasion he has been a victim of his duty, that he is a confessor of the faith, that he is a hero of the Church, as were the Apostles, as were the martyrs, as were so many popes, bishops, priests and simple faithful. And then let us always remember that the world, the Hebrew people, Pilate, condemned to death on a cross as an impious blasphemer and subverter of the people, the Divine Saviour himself, while in fact he was truly Son of God, and had urged obedience and submission to the constituted authority; while he had ordered to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

After adding a few other words on the duty of keeping oneself strong in the faith and spiritual life, and respect for the ministers of the Church, Don Bosco came down from the pulpit, and having said the usual *Our Father and Hail Mary* in honour of St Aloysius, and having sung the *Praised be forever the names of Jesus and Mary*, we left the chapel by the side door. The unknown gentleman came out behind us, and coming into the playground, asked to speak to Don Bosco. The latter had this moment gone up to his room, and a young man accompanied him up.

After the first greetings, a brief dialogue occurred between Don Bosco and Rattazzi, heard by the same young man, who as was the custom in those unhappy times, remained there until told by Don Bosco to leave, in case anything happened. This is the dialogue.

Don Bosco: "May I know with whom I have the honour of speaking?"

Rattazzi: "With Rattazzi."

Don Bosco: "With Rattazzi! With the great Rattazzi (*coul gran Ratass*), Member of Parliament, Former Speaker of the House, and now Minister of the Crown?"

Rattazzi: “Precisely.”

Don Bosco (Smiling) “Then I had better hold out my wrists for the handcuffs, and prepare myself for prisons dark.”

Rattazzi: “For Heaven’s sake why?”

Don Bosco: “Because of what Your Excellency heard a few moments ago in the Church concerning the Archbishop.”

Rattazzi: “Not at all. Leaving aside the matter of whether the question asked by the boy was opportune or no, you replied, and you got out of it admirably, and no Minister in the world could proffer the slightest rebuke. In any case, although I am of the view that it is not a good idea to discuss politics in Church, much less with young people, who are not yet capable of justly weighing things up, nevertheless, one should not have to deny one’s personal convictions on anyone’s account. I might add that in a Constitutional Government Ministers are responsible for their actions which can be verified by any citizen, and therefore also by Don Bosco. As for myself, although not all the ideas and actions of Archbishop Frasoni meet with my approval, I am happy that the severe measures taken against him did not occur during my term of ministry.”

Don Bosco: “If that’s the case,” Don Bosco concluded merrily “I can rest assured that this time Your Excellency will not throw me in the cooler, and will let me breathe the free air of Valdocco. So let us pass on to other things.”

After this pleasant beginning, there followed a serious conversation lasting nearly an hour. Rattazzi, plying Don Bosco with questions, had him describe in detail how the Institution of the Oratory, and the Boarding School attached to it began, what were its aims, how had it progressed, what results it achieved. Being as he was a good-hearted man, he gained such a good impression of it all, that from that day forward, as we have mentioned above, he became our advocate and defender.

This was a real stroke of good luck for us, insofar as the times becoming harder year by year, and with Rattazzi frequently having the reins of government in his hands, and continuing to be a man of influence, our Oratory had such

support from him, without which it would have taken some very hard knocks, and even suffered very heavy losses. Instead it was just the opposite. It seemed as if the Lord wanted to use him for our good, and for not allowing us to come to harm, as for the same end under King Nebuchadnezzar, a powerful minister was used to favour young Daniel and his companions. God never changes. He is always like a father who provides. Happy he who loves him and trusts in him.

Among the various questions asked of Don Bosco by Mr Rattazzi in the above-mentioned conversation, one concerned the means he used to keep order among the many young people who flocked to the Oratory.

“Does not Your Reverence have at his orders,” the Minister asked “at least two or three constables in uniform, or in civilian dress?”

“I have absolutely no need of them, Your Excellency.”

“Is that possible? But these youngsters of yours are simply no different from young people everywhere. They also will, to say the least, be unruly, troublesome, quarrelsome. What censures, what punishments to use then, to restrain them, to prevent disorders?”

“Most of these young people are as smart as they come, as the saying is. Notwithstanding this, here we do not use violence, or punishment of any kind.”

“This seems to me to be a mystery. Explain the secret!”

“Your Excellency would know that there are two systems of education; one is called the repressive system, the other is called the preventive system. The former sets itself to educate people by force, by repression, by punishment, when they break the law, when they commit a crime. The latter seeks to educate them with kindness, and gently helps them to observe the law, and it provides them with the most suitable and efficacious means for the purpose. This is precisely the system we use.

Above all here we try to inculcate in the hearts of the young the holy fear of God. One motivates them with love for virtue and horror of vice, by

teaching them their Religion, and with appropriate moral instruction. One directs them on the path of good and sustains them with opportune and kindly counsel, and especially with the life of prayer and religion.

Over and above this we surround them, as far as is possible, with loving assistance in recreation, in the classroom, at the work place. We encourage them with kindly words, and at the first sign they are neglecting their duties, we remind them in a kind way, and recall them to a good way of behaving. In a word, we do all the things Christian charity suggests so that they might do good and avoid evil ruled by a good conscience and supported by Religion.”

“Certainly this is the best method of educating rational beings, but does it serve for every one?”

“For ninety out of a hundred this system offers consoling results. On the other ten nevertheless, it has such a good influence as to make them less stubborn and less dangerous, because of which only occasionally do I have to send a young person away as untameable and incorrigible. So much so that young people arrive or are brought along to this Oratory, and to Porta Nuova and Vanchiglia too, who before many weeks are out, are no longer the same. They may have a bad attitude, or refuse to be guided, or they may be the despair of their parents and their employers through sheer malice, but from wolves, so to speak, they change into lambs.”

“It is a pity that the Government is not able to adapt this system for use in their penal establishments in which hundreds of guards are needed to prevent disorders. And the prisoners get worse every day.

And what prevents the Government from following this system in its penal establishments? Bring Religion into it; set down appropriate times for Religious Instruction and prayers. Let the one in charge give these things the importance they deserve. Let God’s Minister come in frequently and let him mix freely with these poor souls; let them hear a word of love and peace and then the preventive system will be well and truly in use. After a while the guards will have little or nothing to do, but the Government will be able to boast that it has given back so many morally upright and useful people to their

families and to society. Otherwise it spends good money in order to correct and punish for a more or less prolonged period difficult and blameworthy people, and when they will have been set free, it will have to follow them and keep them under surveillance in order to protect itself from them, because they are ready to do worse.”

Don Bosco continued in this vein for a good while, and given that he had known the situation of the juvenile and adult offenders since 1840, because following the example of Fr Cafasso and Fr Borel he was accustomed to visit these wretches frequently, he was in a position to emphasise to the Minister the good effects of Religion on their moral rehabilitation. “When he sees the priest,” he added “when he hears the words of comfort, the prisoner remembers the happy years when he took part in the catechism classes. He remembers the good advice given him by his Parish Priest and his teacher. He realises that if he has landed up in this place of punishment it is either because he stopped going to church, or because he did not put into practice the teaching he had received. So, calling to mind these happy memories, more than once he feels his heart moved, a tear springs from his eye, he repents, suffers with resignation, determines to improve his conduct. And when he has finished his sentence he goes back into society determined to make up for the scandal he has given.

On the other hand if the kind face of Religion and its gentle precepts and practices are removed, depriving him of the conversations and good advice of his soul’s friend, then what will become of the wretch in that hideous enclosure? He will never be invited by a loving voice to lift his soul above the earth, never urged to reflect that in sinning he has not only broken the laws of the land but offended God, the Supreme Law-giver. He will never be urged to beg God’s pardon, nor encouraged to suffer temporal punishment in place of the eternal one God wants him to avoid. In his miserable condition he will never see anything but the evil act of fortune going against him. So instead of bathing his chains with tears of repentance he will gnaw at them with ill-concealed rage. Instead of resolving to change his life, he will stubbornly cling to his evil ways. From his companions in crime he will learn fresh malice, and plot with them one day to commit crime more secretly so as not to fall

into the arms of Justice again, but he will not consider bettering himself or becoming a good citizen.”

Given the favourable occasion, Don Bosco pointed out to the Minister the usefulness of the Preventive System especially in Public Schools and houses of education where one is dealing with souls still innocent of sin, souls that willingly resound to the voice of persuasion and love. “I know well,” Don Bosco concluded, “that promoting this system is not a task assigned to Your Excellency’s Department, but a remark or word from you will always carry great weight in the deliberations of the Ministry for Public Education.”

Mr Rattazzi listened with keen interest to these and other remarks of Don Bosco. He was completely convinced of the goodness of the system in use in the Oratories, and promised that for his part he would cause it to be preferred to any other in Government institutions. If he did not always keep his word, then the reason is that Rattazzi at times also lacked the courage to display and defend his religious convictions.

149. The discussion between Don Bosco and teacher Francis Bodrato

Critical ed. in *DBE, Scritti*, pp. 187-198.

Not satisfied with only admiring, Bodrato wanted to know more, and to this end asked Don Bosco for a personal interview, which was granted him that same night. He asked [Don Bosco] what secret he possessed to be able to have the mastery he did over so many boys, so that they became so obedient, respectful and docile, such that more could not be asked of them.

Don Bosco made short work of the answer: “*Religion and Reason* are the mainsprings of my system of education.

The educator should be convinced that all, or nearly all, of these fine young people are intelligent by nature, and can recognise the good done to them personally, and at the same time they are gifted with a good heart which is readily open to gratitude.

When one succeeds with God's help in inculcating the principal mysteries of our religion into their souls, these mysteries are all about love and make us think of the immense love God has for mankind; when you succeed in touching the strings of gratitude in their hearts, how much we owe Him because of what He has so generously done for us; when they have become convinced by reason that real gratitude to the Lord should be expressed by doing His will, respecting his precepts, especially those that require the doing of our duty to one another, believe me the greater part of our work of education is already done.

Religion in this system is like the bit in the mouth of a fiery steed, which dominates and rules it. Reason is like the bridle then which pulls on the bit and gives you the results you are looking for. True religion, genuine religion can control the actions of the young person. Reason correctly applies these holy precepts as a guide for all his actions. There you are—the system I use and which you wish to know the secret of, summed up in a couple of words.”

When Don Bosco finished speaking, Bodrato took up in reply. “Your Reverence, when you used that image of the bit which controls the young colts, you spoke to me of the moderating force of religion, and the good use of reason in guiding all their actions. This is very good, but it seems to me that you have said nothing about a third way the horse-breaker always uses, I mean he is never without his whip, which is the third element of his success.”

To this remark of Bodrato Don Bosco replied: “My dear sir, allow me to say to you that in my system the whip, which you say can't be done without, that is, the salutary threat of future punishment, is not excluded absolutely. Just recall that many and terrible are the punishments religion threatens for those who pay no heed to the Lord's precepts and dare to despise his commands. These are severe and terrible threats. If they are frequently recalled they will not fail to produce their effect, all the more so when we don't limit ourselves to emphasising external actions but we strike at their most secret ones, their most hidden thoughts.

In order to make the conviction of this truth penetrate even more deeply, we also include the sincere practice of the faith, attendance at the Sacraments

and the persistence of the educator, and we are certain that with the help of the Lord we will have much more chance of making very many boys, even the most difficult ones, into good Christians.

In any case, when the young come to be convinced that those in charge of them truly want to do them good, more often than not it is punishment enough to be a little reserved and show the displeasure you experience at getting so little return for your fatherly care.

Believe me, dear Sir, that this system is perhaps easier and certainly more effective because with its background of religious practice it will also be blessed by God. For proof you can see for yourself. I am inclined to invite you to come for a few days to see its practical application in our houses. Come at any time to spend a few days with us, and I hope that at the end of the experiment you can assure me that what I have said to you is verifiably the most functional and surest system.” This invitation, made partly jokingly and partly seriously, made an impression on our Bodrato. He thanked Don Bosco, saying he would give a definite reply later, but bearing in his heart the thought that he would take it up later with good results¹⁷.

¹⁷ The text of the first part of the dialogue needs to be completed with the other part of the report also drawn up by Carlo Cays and included by the publisher in the critical apparatus dealing with variants; cf. *DBE, Scritti*, pp. 196-197.