

I. GUIDELINES FOR RUNNING SALESIAN HOUSES (1863-1887)

The origin of this authoritative document, the Confidential Reminders¹⁸, is a letter written to Fr Michael Rua whom Don Bosco called on to take up the running of the first Salesian house outside Turin in autumn 1863: the college or junior seminary of St Charles in Mirabello Monferrato¹⁹. In a letter sent to the young Rector/Director, Don Bosco wanted to pass on pedagogical and spiritual guidelines which had already been in practice at Valdocco. These were to also characterise the apostolic and educational work in the new foundation.

It is a document “dictated by immediate needs but under the cover of practical advice, concrete examples, brief notes and insights. It had all the signs of Don Bosco’s deep certainties and keen concerns. He was convinced of that, so much so that what was a simple private letter to Fr Rua in 1863 then became—from 1871, with some retouching and additions dictated by later experiences and reflections, the “Confidential Reminders for Rectors of Individual Houses of the Salesian Society.”²⁰

The last printed version of the Confidential Reminders—the one in this volume—is dated December 8, 1886, about a year before Don Bosco’s death. The twenty six points or the original letter to Fr Rua were enriched by new content and doubled in number coming to forty seven. These are developed in eight brief paragraphs which cover the life, main tasks and ways of behaving for a Rector-Director-Educator of a Salesian house.

The item was given careful study and reflection in the Seventh Salesian General Chapter in 1895 and in the first American Chapter of the Pious Salesian Society (Buenos Aires 1901). Later, at meetings of European Salesian Provincials held in 1907, this guideline emerged: “Rectors/Directors would do very well if, on the

¹⁸ Francesco MOTTO, I “Ricordi confidenziali ai direttori” di don Bosco, in RSS 3 (1984) 25-166.

¹⁹ Mirabello Monferrato: a district belonging to the Province of Alessandria (Piedmont).

²⁰ DBE, Scritti, pp. 173-174.

day of the exercise for a happy death, they were to carefully read the Confidential Reminders of Don Bosco which contain so much pedagogical wisdom.”²¹

150. Confidential reminders for the director at the house of

Critical ed. in *DBE, Scritti*, pp. 173-186.

For yourself

1. Let nothing disturb you²².
2. Avoid austerity in food. Let your mortifications be diligence in your duties and putting up with the annoyances of others. Get seven hours of rest each night. That can vary more or less for you and others when there is some reasonable motive. This is useful for your health and that of your dependants.
3. Celebrate Holy Mass and recite the breviary *pie, attente ac devote (piously, attentively and devoutly)*. This is for you and for your dependants.
4. Every morning never omit meditation and during the day a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. For other things, do as indicated in the Rules of the Society.
5. Learn how to make yourself loved rather than feared. Let charity and patience constantly accompany you in commanding and correcting and act in such a way that everyone knows by your words and deeds that it is the good of souls you are seeking. Put up with anything when it is a matter of preventing sin. Let your concerns be directed to the good of the youngsters whom Divine Providence has entrusted to you.
6. In matters of greater importance always lift your heart briefly to God before making a decision. When some report is made to you, listen to everything but try to discern the facts well and listen to both parties before

²¹ *Atti del Primo Capitolo Americano della Pia Società Salesiana*. Buenos Aires (Almagro), Collegio Pio IX di Arti e Mestieri 1902, p. IV; ASC E171 *Convegni Ispettori 1907-1915*; José Manuel PRELLEZO, *Linee pedagogiche della Società salesiana nel periodo 1880-1922. Approccio ai documenti*, in RSS 23 (2004) 107.

²² The opening words of a well-known prayer by Teresa d'Avila (1515-1582).

making a judgement. Often on first hearing of them, things seem like wooden beams that are merely splinters.

With the teachers

1. See that teachers are lacking nothing they need regarding food and clothing. Note their efforts and if they are ill or simply unwell, quickly send someone to substitute them in class.

2. Speak with them often, individually or together; see that they do not have too much to do, or if they lack clothing or books, or have some physical or moral concern or if they have pupils in class who need to be corrected or have particular disciplinary needs regarding the level and way of teaching them. As soon as you know of some need do whatever you can to accommodate it.

3. In appropriate Conferences recommend that their questions in class cover all the pupils without distinction. They should read each one's work in turn. Let them avoid particular friendships or favouritism and they should never allow pupils or others into their rooms.

4. If they need to give tasks or advice to pupils, they should use a room or hall made available for this purpose.

5. When there are Solemnities, Novenas or Feast Days in honour of Our Lady or the Patron Saint of some town, the school, or one or other Mystery of our Religion, they should say a few words about it beforehand and should never omit to do this.

6. Keep an eye out to see that teachers never send pupils away from the school or, should that be absolutely necessary, see that they are accompanied by the Superior. They should never hit delinquent or negligent boys. If something serious happens they should immediately advise the Director of Studies or the Superior of the House.

7. Outside of school, teachers cannot exercise any authority over their pupils and should limit themselves to advice, warnings or at most corrections that suggest that they mean to do so charitably.

With the assistants and those in charge of dormitories

1. Most of what has been said concerning teachers can be applied to those in charge of the dormitories.
2. Try to share out tasks so that both for teachers and for these they can have the time and ease for attending to their studies.
3. Deal willingly with them to listen to their opinion about the behaviour of the boys entrusted to them. The most important aspect of their duties is to arrive punctually where the boys come together to rest, or for school, work, recreation or the like.
4. If you see that one of them has engaged in a particular friendship with a pupil, or that his role or his morals may be at risk of being compromised, change his duties with all prudence; if the risk continues you should immediately let your Superior know.
5. Bring the teachers, assistants and those in charge of dormitories together every now and then and tell them to make efforts to prevent bad conversations, keep out every book, writing, image or picture (*hic scientia est*) or anything that endangers purity, the Queen of virtues. Let them offer good advice and be charitable to everyone.
6. Let them make it their common concern to discover the more risky pupils; Once they have been found, encourage them to let you know who these are.

With the coadjutors and service personnel

1. See that every morning they can hear Mass and approach the Sacraments according to the rules of the Society. Service personnel should be encouraged to go to Confession every fortnight or at least once a month.
2. Employ great charity in giving commands, letting people know by your words and actions that you want the good of their souls. Keep a special eye out to see that they do not engage in familiarity with the boys or people from outside.

3. Never allow women into the dormitories or the kitchen or allow them to deal with people in the house unless it is for charitable matters of something absolutely necessary. This article is of the greatest importance.

4. If arguments or disputes should break out amongst service personnel, assistants, the boys or others, hear each one out charitably, but ordinarily I would say offer your view separately so that one does not hear what is being said about the other.

5. A coadjutor of known probity should be appointed head of the service personnel to watch over their work and their moral conduct, so that there is no theft or bad conversation. And take special care to prevent anyone taking on jobs or engaging in business affairs with relatives or other people outside, whoever they may be.

With the young pupils

1. Never accept pupils who have been expelled from other [boarding] Colleges or whom you judge to be of bad conduct. If, despite due caution, you happen to accept one of this kind, appoint a companion you are certain of who will stay with him and never let him out of his sight. When he gets involved in some misdemeanour advise him at least once and if he fails again he should immediately be sent home.

2. Let the pupils get to know you, and you should get to know them by spending all the time possible with them, offering whatever word of affection in their ear you know best as you see the need, bit by bit. This is the great secret that will make you master of their hearts.

3. You might ask: what are these words? They are the same ones that were said to you once upon a time. For example, "How are you?" "Good." "And your soul?" "Just so-so." "Would you like to help me in a great task, will you help?" "Yes, but what is it?" "Make yourself good" or "Saving your soul" or "Make yourself the best of all the boys." And with the wilder ones: "When do you want to start?" "Start what?" "To be my consolation, behaving like St Aloysius." And for the ones who are a bit resistant to approaching the

sacraments: “When would you like to break the devil’s horns?” “How?” “With a good confession.” “When would you suggest?” “As soon as possible.” On other occasions:” When should we have a good clean-up?” or “Do you feel like helping me to break the devil’s horns?” “Do you want us two to be soul friends?” *Haec aut similia.*

4. In our Houses the Rector/Director is the ordinary Confessor, therefore see that you willingly hear each one’s confession but give them full freedom to go to confession to someone else if they wish. Make it well known that you take no part in the marks given for good conduct and try to eliminate any hint of suspicion that you make use of or even recall what was told you in Confession. Let there not be even the least hint of favouritism shown to someone who goes to confession to one rather than the other.

5. The Altar Boys, the St Aloysius, Blessed Sacrament, Immaculate Conception Sodalities should be encouraged and promoted. Show good will and satisfaction towards those who are enrolled, but you should only be a promoter and not their director. Consider such things as being for the boys. They are entrusted to the Catechist to run.

6. When you succeed in discovering some serious misdemeanour, have the guilty one or the suspect called to your room and in the most charitable way try to get him to admit his fault and the wrong he has committed. Then correct him and invite him to fix up his conscience. This way and by continuing to give kindly assistance to the pupil, wonderful results are obtained and improvements that one would never have thought possible.

With people outside

1. We willingly lend our efforts for religious services, preaching, celebrating Masses for the public and hearing confessions any time that charity and our duties of state allow us to, especially for parishes our houses are in. But never take on tasks or other things that mean you have to be away from the house or that can affect the roles that each one has.

2. Out of courtesy priests from outside are sometimes invited to preach or are invited to a Solemnity, musical entertainments and the like. Similar invitations can be made to authorities or any well-deserving or charitable people who have given us favours or who would be able to.

3. Charity and courtesy are the characteristic features of a Rector/Director towards people both inside and outside.

4. In case of questions regarding material matters be as agreeable as you can, even if there is some disadvantage, so long as anything that is matter for dispute or any other thing that could cause a loss of charity are kept far away.

5: If it is a case of spiritual matters, questions are always to be resolved with whatever gives greater glory to God. Your tasks, or stubbornness, spirit of vengeance, self-love, arguments, pretensions and also honour - everything is to be sacrificed to avoid sin.

6. In matters of grave importance it is good to ask time to pray and take advice from some pious and prudent individual.

With members of the Society

1. The exact observance of the rules and especially obedience is the basis of everything. But if you want others to obey you, you must also obey your superiors. Nobody who is not able to obey is suitable for being in command.

2. Try to share things out in such a way that nobody is overburdened but see that each one does faithfully what is entrusted to him.

3. Let nobody in the Congregation draw up contracts, receive monies, offer loans or lend things to relatives, friends or others. Nor let anyone keep money or administer temporal matters without being directly authorised by the Superior. Observance of this article will keep some of the problems that have been fatal for other Congregations far away from us.

4. Abhor any modification of the Rules like poison. Their exact observance is better than any variation. The best is the enemy of the good.

5. Study, time, experience have allowed me to have first-hand knowledge that greed, interest and vainglory were the ruin of flourishing congregations and respectable religious orders. Time will also allow you to see the truths that perhaps you only think are unbelievable right now.

6. Take the greatest care to foster common life through word and deed.

Giving commands

1. Never command things that you judge to be beyond the strength of your subjects or that you see they will not obey. Try to avoid repugnant commands. Indeed, take the greatest care to support the inclinations each one has by preferably giving them roles that you know they will enjoy fulfilling.

2. Never command things that are injurious to health or that hinder them taking the rest they need, or which clash with other tasks or orders from another superior.

3. When commanding, always use charitable and mild words and manner. Threats, anger, and even more so violence should always be far from your words and actions.

4. Where you have to command a subject to do difficult or repugnant things say, for example: “Could you do this or that other thing?” or “I have something important that I would prefer not to ask you to do because it is difficult, but there is nobody other than yourself who is up to it. You have the time and the health; it will not keep you away from other tasks” etc. Experience tells us over time that approaches of the kind have been very effective.

5. Be economical in everything, but ensure absolutely that those who are ill lack nothing. Amongst other things this lets people know that we have made a vow of poverty, therefore we ought not seek comfort nor even desire it in anything. We must love poverty and what comes with poverty, so avoid any unnecessary expense in clothing, books, furniture, trips etc.

This is like a Testament that I address to the Directors/Rectors of individual Houses. If this advice is put into practice, I will die happy because I will be certain that our Society will flourish even more before men and be blessed by

the Lord, and it will achieve its end, which is the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.

Yours affectionately in Jesus Christ,

Fr John Bosco

Turin, 1886, Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary Most Holy,
45th anniversary of the founding of the Oratory.