

VI. “SUMMARY” OF GOODNIGHTS TO THE BOYS AT VALDOCCO (1864-1877)

Amongst the more original practices put in place as part of the educational praxis at Valdocco, and maintained in the Salesian tradition that then followed from it, we would have to highlight the “Goodnights”: brief “talks” or “short speeches” after night prayers. Don Bosco addressed the pupils in the presence of their educators (superiors of the house, teachers assistants), in a familiar way using simple and attractive language.

Thus far we have not found handwritten originals of these kinds of interventions. But the Central Salesian Archives in Rome have a considerable number of relevant texts with either all or at least summaries of their contents. They are interesting testimonies handed down by careful listeners; in particular, members of a kind of “society” or “commission” of young collaborators who in 1860-1861 proposed “preventing anything belonging to Don Bosco being forgotten”, doing everything possible to “preserve their memory.” This was precisely the purpose of the diaries, brief chronicle notes compiled by some members of this commission. Amongst the better known ones are: Giulio (Jules) Barberis, Dominic Ruffino, Michael Rua, John B. Francisia⁴⁴.

The “summary” of seven “goodnights” given to the students at Valdocco in November and December 1864 offer practical guidelines, with a view to helping their listeners “benefit from their study”. Speaking on this topic, Don Bosco gave strong emphasis to the good religious and moral conduct of the student as an essential prior condition.

Included here are two “goodnights” from 1877—the most complete and probably closest to the original—which take up the topic of study and reading but also other topics characteristic of Don Bosco’s educational approach: holidays, fleeing idleness, recreations and play.

⁴⁴ Domenico Ruffino (1840-1865), Salesian priest, General Spiritual Director (1863); Director/Rector of the college at Lanzo (1864); compiler of some of the *Cronache dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*.

173. Ways of getting the best out of study

ASC A0090102 *Sunto di Buone notti di don Bosco*, ms allog., 1864/65 (cf. MB VII, 817- 829).

24 November

1st Way - to study well is the fear of God: *Initium sapientiae timor Domini*. Do you want to become learned and benefit from your classes? Fear the Lord. See that you don't commit sin because: *sapientia non habitabit in corpore subdito peccatis*; human wisdom comes from God's wisdom. So what pleasure can one gain from studies if one's heart is all disturbed by passions? How can you overcome the difficulties you meet without God's help? Truly learned people were never ones who offended God. Look at St Francis de Sales, St Thomas. Experience constantly teaches that those who benefit from studies are those who keep far away from sin. It is true that there are certain evildoers who currently stand out for intelligence and knowledge. But maybe at other times they deserved this great gift from the Lord, because of their good conduct and good works, but then abused it. Furthermore, most of them do not have true wisdom: their mind is filled with errors which they then teach to others. Because even if the Lord has allowed these bad people to benefit from their knowledge despite being his enemy, that will become a greater punishment and curse for having been abused⁴⁵.

25 November

2nd Way – Never waste a moment of time. Time, my dear friends, is precious. *Fili conserva tempus*. Give all the time you have to, to study. Never look for excuses to get out of class. It is sad to see boys looking for excuses not to do their duty. Not reading during study time or reading other books that have nothing to do with the subjects they are doing in school. Reign in your imagination. Can you see that young lad who is so intent on his books? Do you think he is studying? Tut tut! His mind is a thousand miles away. Look, he is smiling. He still seems to be in recreation playing tops and thinking how he beat his friend. And the other one is thinking about the chestnuts and

⁴⁵ The passage from: "Look at St Francis de Sales" to: "abused" is taken from MB VII, 817. The "summary" only says: "St Francis de Sales". St Thomas etc."

salami he has in his lunch box. And another one is thinking about an idea he has, a picnic, a joke he heard. I am not talking about boys who are thinking of offending God, because I hope there are none of those in the Oratory. So study and let's not waste time.

27 November

3rd Way – Eat at the right time. The throat kills more people than the sword. Do you want to learn something? Do not live to eat, eat to live. Eat lightly in the morning and at the afternoon snack and don't eat immoderately. If you have a tasty morsel stashed away in your trunk, don't be greedy and eat it all at once. Keep some of it for other days and it will not do you harm. Don't believe I am telling you this for my own interests: no really, because experience says that if you eat a bread roll less at breakfast you will eat three extra at lunchtime. Whoever has his stomach too full goes to school or study with a full head. Sometimes the stomach prevents us sleeping, and if we stay awake we end up doing nothing. Or if we want to work, and this is even worse, we have a headache and do nothing for a few days while at other times we have indigestion.

28 November

4th Way – Keeping company with studious types is the best way to benefit from study. When you are at recreation join the cleverer school mates and clerics. Ask them something about geography, Latin, history. Speak about these things amongst yourselves and how much benefit you will have! When on walks, talk about these kinds of things and leave the company of certain loafers and tale-tellers. You lose rather than gain knowledge with them. Useless chatter helps nobody and only dissipates the mind or cools the heart. If you want to be wise, practice wisdom.

1 December

5th Way – Get fully involved in recreation, because by doing this you will get new strength to study better when time for class comes. Don't turn recreation time into study time, because when you then have to study your mind is tired and you will get little benefit from it. But be careful about immoderate and

excessive recreation. At recreation time there are some who run here and there with such a fury that they are not recreating at all, but killing themselves. They shout and throw their friends to the ground, break noses, smash limbs, and when everything is finished they are all sweaty and out of breath and head off to study, but their head is still in revolt and they need a rest.

I'm not speaking of those who scream so much they've got a headache for the rest of the day; or of those who spend their recreation in dirty conversations; or of others who get into a fight to amuse themselves: I am only saying that it is unthinkable that there could be any benefit when the fear of God is lacking. So be orderly in any of your recreation; and I'm not telling you not to play tops, *bara rotta* etc. So jump around and have fun but avoid excess. When I don't have to see people who come looking for me, I too go to recreation, I welcome taking a break with you, playing around. I laugh but I never break my neck just to have recreation.

So the fifth way of benefiting from study, is having orderly recreation as is required for orderly students. I also note that there are boys who speak of outings or afternoon snacks with so much enthusiasm that they have nothing else they can think about in class. as you can see, you could expect little benefit for them.

4 December

6th Way – To study with benefit and overcome difficulties you find in studying some writers: when you encounter difficulties, don't get discouraged. What did you come to do here at the Oratory? Study: so it is natural that you need to learn what you do not know. So courage, do not leave things half done. People don't do well if they encounter a problem then skip it, saying: I don't understand this, then they go on to something else. No, you don't need to go on to something else until the problem is beaten and overcome. To obtain this you first need to appeal to Jesus and Mary with some little brief prayer and you will see that the problems just disappear. Never forget this way of overcoming problems, my dear boys, because God alone is the Father of knowledge and he gives it to who he wants and how he wants; and every day in the Litanies you say about Mary that she is *Sedes sapientiae*, the seat of

wisdom. As well as this turn to your teachers, the assistants: they will be keen to help you; they not only make efforts to overcome the problems but they rejoice when they come across them because these are the things that make our intelligence grow. What kind of a boast is it if you learn something easy to understand?

5 December

7th Way – Get down to things to do with your study. We need to keep this in our mind, that any kind of study that has nothing to do with our classes needs to be put aside. There are boys who read a lot, but they read so many things that without realising it all they are doing is cheating their minds. There are many who read poets, stories, good things, but they leave aside their duty. When you have done your duty, will there be some time left over? Well then, go back over the explanations given, return to some grammar rules you have forgotten and don't waste time reading the life of *Gianduja* or *Bertoldo and Cacasenno*.

174. Holidays, amusements, fleeing idleness

ASC A0000303, *Conferenze*, 1877-1878, Quad. III, ms allog., pp. 17- 21
(cf. MB XIII, 431-433).

Friday 31 August 1877

I have some good news to give you. Holidays begin Monday. Do you like this news? I see some do. And I am happy for you to go on holidays. But I can tell you that many have asked if they could have them here. I am also happy about this but I want them to do it willingly. They too will have time for recreation, lots of outings, but our holidays will be a bit more withdrawn and exposed to less harm. The one thing I recommend to either group is to flee from idleness. I know that for some it doesn't sound very nice going on holidays and working. The term *vacanze* (holidays) does not mean resting up as some think, but applying oneself, attending to things. So *vacare studio*, attending to study, *vacare agriculturae*, applying oneself to agriculture.

But I want us to understand the terms we use. Fleeing idleness means not hanging around doing nothing, it does not mean constantly doing manual work, although there is nothing wrong with that, and in fact I recommend it. I remember that when I used to go on holidays, I would take some leather, make some shoes then give them away as gifts. I used to take cloth, canvas, cut out a pair of pants or underwear, sew them together and did what I wanted. Or I got some wood and made chairs, benches. There are still some tables at home that I made. Sometimes I went out to cut hay, or turn over the hay with Virgil or some other book in hand.

I am not giving these as examples for you to do, but just to let you see how you can occupy holiday time somehow.

So I recommend that when you go home, if you have vineyards eat the ripest grapes; if you find fish, figs, pears or apples, eat the best ones.

I recommend that you enjoy yourself: play bocce, soccer ... Everyone will have special amusements at home: playing cards, draughts, chess, etc. Take some good walks; I recommend that a lot. Each of you will have time to read, study a passage that you haven't understood properly.

So, always work and play? No, at lunch eat, also at breakfast, and supper too. Serve at table, clean up afterwards, serve bread too, just don't be idle. Rest in the evening, sleep a little in the morning, but watch out for the kind of rest we call the *demonium meridianum*. This means the nap we take after lunch: this is the devil's time. If you let him get you the devil can sing a song of victory. He'll walk around and whistle in your ear. Oh, what terrible conversations come to mind! Then he'll squint at you. Oh, what a terrible picture comes to mind! These temptations remain there, can't be got rid of and you end up in the devil's hands. So, no going to bed after lunch. If you really need to, sit on a chair and snooze a bit.

Oh what a thing to talk about! Let's put it in just a few words: have great holidays, but never remain unoccupied; if you are not working the devil will be working. Work by day; sleep by night.

There are other things I would like to say to you, but I hope to speak to you on Sunday before you leave. Tomorrow and the day after, the last days you are here with us I want you all to come and see me and I will have something to tell each of you.

Would like you also to note that Don Bosco suggests you spend your holidays happily. It is so you can spend your holidays happily that I give you these warnings and if you heed them you will have happy holidays. Good night.

175. Invitation to reading

ASC A0000303 *Conferenze*, 1877-78, Quad. III, pp. 22-24 (cf. MB XIII, 437-438).

7 October 1877

Heartfelt greetings to everyone, since this is the first time I have seen you since the holidays. It is true that not everyone has arrived as yet, but I see there is already a good number of us and if the table is prepared we will do justice to it just as we are.

Most of you are here to get ready to enter secondary school or move on to a higher grade or correct something that didn't go too well in the final exam, and this means you all need to study. There are others who at the beginning of the year have to repeat the exam for some subjects studied last year, and these also have to study to complete and repeat these exams. The clerics are mixed up in these various groups too.

And does that mean that others without a specific task can continue their holidays? If there were no more books to read, none in the bookshop or library, or if you had already read them all, then I would say: take a rest. But while there are still books to read, I say: Read. Amongst you there are some going on to study philosophy and I would advise these to read the treatise they have to study this year; then they can read or study a book by Virgil, Horace, Ovid or one of Dante's poems or repeat what they studied in language and literature. One book I would advise everyone to read is the *History of Italy*, and even if you have read it five times, I would say read it again. Because these days

all our history books distort things: the Church's enemies use history books to discredit and besmirch it, speaking about exaggerated or even completely fictitious things. Instead, in this history book, the facts are presented as a whole, briefly yes but it gives you the key to studying the *History of Italy* in detail and the *Church History* which is so closely bound up with it.

I am not trying to boast by saying nice things about my own history book, but it is only because I see that it can be of great use.

I have just heard of the death of Fr Cerruti. Tomorrow we will pray for his soul. This is not the only death notice I have received in these days. I came to know of a famous actor who did not recover and died suddenly on stage, and another who was acting with him, seeing him collapse, also collapsed and died. The audience who had come to watch a comedy went away having seen a cruel tragedy. This is not the only such case. I have heard of others. It is about being ready, so that when death comes, we can respond like Abram did when the Lord called him: *Abraham, Abraham! Ecce, Domine, adsum.*

Meanwhile, good night.