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of St John Bosco

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LET US EDUCATE WITH THE HEART OF DON BOSCO

«The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord» (Lk 4,18-19)

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Rome, 25 December 2007
Solemnity of the Birth of Our Lord

Dear Confreres,

At the end of 2007, in which we have been working on behalf of life, in imitation of our God, "the lover of life", and on the threshold of 2008, which opens before us as an "acceptable year of the Lord", I address you with the heart of Don Bosco.

Since my last letter in which I presented to you the Africa-Madagascar Region, I have had a very busy period with visits to the Provinces of the United States and to the Vice Province of Canada, in the month of September; to the Vice Province of West Africa on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the arrival of the Salesians in Nigeria, and to those of Zambia and Mozambique, in the month of October; and finally to the Province of the Middle East, which was followed by my journey to Argentina, in the month of November.

To this one must add several important and significant events such as the departure ceremony for the 138th missionary expedition, at the end of September, the beatification of the Salesian Spanish Martyrs on 28 October, and that of Zephyrinus Namuncurá, on 11 November.

These two beatifications serve to bring to a conclusion the whole of the six-year period, which began with the beatification of three saints of practical charity (Bro Artemides Zatti, Fr Louis Variara and Sr Maria Romero), and are a new appeal to give to our lives a high standard of ordinary Christian living to which John Paul II invited us at the beginning of this third millennium.

In addition, while the Martyrs send us back to the letter on the Eucharist, since the Eucharist does not exist without martyrdom and martyrdom does not exist without the Eucharist, Zephyrinus incarnates holiness as the fruit of the action of the Spirit and of Salesian pedagogy. There is no doubt that the missionaries sent by Don Bosco learned from and reproduced the spiritual and pedagogical experience of Valdocco to bring young saints to maturity. I don't think there could be a greater stimulus for the new Strenna that I now present to you.

As you will have seen from the title and from the contents that I already made known to you, I should like to focus not so much on those to whom our educational work is directed, as immediately on all the educators of the Salesian Family, who, like Jesus, feel consecrated and sent by the Spirit of the Lord to evangelise, free from slavery, restore sight and offer a year of grace to those to whom the work of education is directed (cf. *Lk* 4,18-19). The Strenna for 2008, therefore, is explicitly addressed to members of Educative Pastoral Communities, to the Communities of educators, to Pastoral Councils etc. in the vast world of the Salesian Family. It is intended to be an appeal to re-enforce our identity as educators, to throw light on the Salesian educative programme, to examine in some depth educational meth-

ods, to clarify the goal of our efforts, to become more aware of the social failings of education.

We have been called precisely to this mission. The text of the Gospel of Luke that I have chosen to introduce this Strenna, defines our vocation as educators in the style of Don Bosco. Not by chance, in the Constitutions of the Salesians these verses were chosen as the biblical quotation introducing “our pastoral education service”.

At the beginning of his public life, Jesus recognised in the text of the prophet Isaiah, read in the synagogue at Nazareth, his messianic mission and declares in front of his fellow citizens: «Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing» (*Lk 4,21*).

This “today” of Jesus continues in our educative mission. Through our Baptism, we have been consecrated with the anointing of the Spirit, and we have been sent to the young to proclaim the newness of life that Christ offers us, to foster it and to develop it through an education that liberates the young and the poor from every kind of oppression and marginalisation. These situations of marginalisation prevent them from seeking the truth, from being open to hope, from living with purpose and joy, from constructing their own freedom.

The Strenna for 2008 follows closely on the Strennas for the two last years. Life is the great gift of God, “the lover of life”, which he has entrusted to us as a seed so that we may collaborate with him in making it grow and produce abundant fruit. This seed needs “to fall into good soil”, in which it can germinate and bear fruit; this soil is the family, the cradle of life and love, the first place where one learns to be human. The family welcomes the gift of life with joy and gratitude, and provides the natural setting suitable for its growth and development. But as with the seed, good soil is not enough; there is also need for the patient and laborious efforts of the farmer, who waters it, cares for it and helps it to grow. This farmer who helps life to grow is the educator. This is what Don Bosco had to say about it: «Just

as there is no barren or sterile land which cannot be made fertile through patient effort, so it is with a man's heart. No matter how barren or restive at first, it will sooner or later bring forth good fruit. It will begin by loving what is naturally good and ultimately advance to what is supernaturally good, provided that a spiritual director (an educator) will cooperate with God's grace by prayer and effort in making it fruitful and beautiful» (*BM V*, 236-7).

I think it appropriate here to repeat what I have already said elsewhere. This year's Strenna is not meant to propose a new topic as though those of previous years were definitely over and done with. I am convinced that pastoral educational work cannot be understood and carried out spasmodically, with stops and starts; it is just like farming which requires a long-term approach, planning, care and attention, and above all, great dedication and love. In this case we are dealing with the best form of agriculture: culture that is the cultivation of men and women. In this way the topic chosen this year is certainly a continuation of those of the family and of life.

Here then the Strenna for 2008:

**Let us educate with the heart of Don Bosco
to develop to their full potential the lives of young people,
especially the poorest and most disadvantaged,
promoting their rights.**

At the beginning of this commentary on this annual spiritual and pastoral programme, that the Strenna is meant to be, I recall a significant appeal made by P. Duvallet, for twenty years the collaborator of Abbé Pierre in the apostolate of the re-education of the young, that he addressed to us Salesians: «You have works, colleges, oratories for the young, but you have only one treasure: the pedagogy of Don Bosco. In a world in which youngsters are betrayed, squeezed dry, crushed, exploited, the Lord has entrusted to you a pedagogy in which respect for the young

person, for his greatness and his frailty, for his dignity as a son of God prevail.

Preserve it, renew it, rejuvenate it, enrich it with all the latest discoveries, adapt it to these twentieth century creatures and their tragedies that Don Bosco could not know about. But for heaven's sake, preserve it! Change everything, if necessary lose all your houses but preserve this treasure, forming in thousands of hearts the way to love and to save the young, which is Don Bosco's heritage».¹

It would be difficult to find a more pressing appeal than this. Aware of the greatness of our vocation as educators and the gift we have received in Don Bosco's pedagogy, truly a "pedagogy of the heart", we want to commit ourselves to seeing the prophetic words of this eloquent testimony become a reality today.

In practical terms the Strenna is intended to focus on:

- the subject of Salesian pedagogy and the Preventive System, as a response to the need we educators have for further reflection and formation on it so as not to lose its richness;
- the valid contribution that we can make, through education, in responding to the huge challenges of life and of the family;
- the promotion of human rights, in particular the rights of juveniles, as a way of seeing that our commitment to education makes a positive contribution to all cultures.

1. Educating with Don Bosco's heart

Educating with the heart of Don Bosco means for the educator cultivating in one's own heart and then allowing them to overflow "reason, religion, loving kindness", making loving

¹ AA.VV. *"Il Sistema educativo di Don Bosco tra pedagogia antica e nuova"*, Atti del Convegno Europeo Salesiano sul sistema educativo di Don Bosco, LDC Torino 1974, p. 314.

kindness the key factor, the practical application of what religion and reason propose. It is a matter of living the Preventive System, which is a love that knows how to make itself loved (cf. C. 20), with a *renewed presence among the young*, consisting in affective and effective closeness, in participation, in accompaniment, in animation, in giving witness, in vocational promotion, in the Salesian style of assistance. Above all what is needed is a renewed option especially for the young who are poor and at risk, seeking out situations of evident or hidden deprivation, having confidence in the positive resources of every young person, even the most damaged by life, committing our whole lives to their education.

“Don Bosco’s love for these youngsters was a matter of practical and timely gestures. He was concerned about their whole lives, responding to their more obvious needs and sensing those hidden. To say that his heart was given entirely to the young means that everything that was his, intelligence, heart and will, physical strength, his whole being was directed towards what was best for them, fostering the development of their full potential, wanting their eternal salvation. For Don Bosco, therefore, being a man of the heart meant being totally consecrated to the well-being of his boys and devoting to them all his energies, until the last breath!”²

To understand the well-known expression of Don Bosco “education is a matter of the heart of which God alone is the master” (*BM XVI*, 376)³ and therefore to understand the Preventive System, to me it seems important to listen to one of the best known experts on the holy educator: “Don Bosco’s pedagogy is identified with everything he did; and everything he did with his personality; and the whole of Don Bosco is totally

² P. RUFFINATO, *Educhiamo con il cuore di don Bosco*, in “Note di Pastorale Giovane”, n. 6/2007, p. 9.

³ Cf. G. BOSCO, *Dei castighi da infliggersi nelle case salesiane*, in P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco educatore. Scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Roma 1992, p. 340.

summed up in his heart".⁴ This then is his greatness and the secret of his success as an educator: Don Bosco knows how to balance authority and kindness, love of God and love for the young.

1.1 Vocation and the way to holiness

There is no doubt that the explanation for the capacity of Salesian education to bridge the years, to become inculturated in the most varied contexts and to respond to the needs and the expectations of young people that are always new is the unique holiness of Don Bosco.

A happy combination of personal gifts and circumstances led Don Bosco to become the "Father, Teacher and Friend of Youth", as John Paul II proclaimed him in 1988. His innate talent for getting close to young people and gaining their trust, his priestly ministry which gave him a profound knowledge of the human heart, and his experience of the effectiveness of grace in a boy's development, with a practical talent for putting his ideas into practice in a simple manner, the long time spent among the young, all of these enabled him to bring his initial inspirations to their full development.

At the root of all of this is a **vocation**. For Don Bosco, service to the young was a generous response to a call from the Lord. It is the combination of holiness and education, in all that regards his commitments, a spiritual life of sacrifice, an expression of love, that constitute his singular personality. He is a saintly educator and an educator saint.

From this combination he forged the origin of a "system", that is a set of ideas and practical applications that can be presented in a book, narrated in a film, described in a poem or

⁴ Cf. P. BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di Don Bosco*, LAS, Roma 1999, p. 181.

represented in a musical. It is something that has attracted collaborators full of enthusiasm and made young people dream.

Taken up by his disciples for whom education is also a vocation, this system was carried to a great variety of cultures and translated into different educational projects, according to the circumstances of the young people to whom it was directed.

When once again we examine the life of Don Bosco or the history of one of his works, some questions arise spontaneously: And nowadays? To what extent do his ideas still apply? Which of the practical solutions he actually made use of can solve the problems that we are facing, seemingly insurmountable: dialogue between the generations, the possibility of communicating values, the transmission of a view of reality, etc.?

I won't delay in listing all the differences between Don Bosco's time and ours. They are certainly not slight, and they are to be found in all areas: in the condition of youth, in the family, in behaviour, in the way education is considered, in social life, in religious practice. If, in an attempt to make a faithful historical reconstruction, it is difficult to understand a past experience, it is even harder to relive it and translate it into practice in a context that is radically different.

And yet we are convinced that what happened in Don Bosco's case was a moment of grace full of potential; one that can contain inspirations for parents and educators to translate into present day terms; that there are ideas ripe for expansion, almost like seeds waiting to burst into life.⁵

1.2 Preventive love

One of the lessons to learn is certainly that about **prevention**, the need for it, its advantages, its impact and therefore the

⁵ Cf. P. BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di don Bosco*, LAS, Roma 1999, p. 391.

responsibilities involved. Nowadays, faced with clear and alarming statistics, this need is becoming quite obvious, but to accept it in principle and put it into practice effectively is no easy matter in the present state of society. Unfortunately this is not the prevailing culture. Far from it!

And yet prevention costs less and is more productive than mere containment of delinquency and any later rehabilitation. In fact, it allows the majority of young people to be freed from the burden of negative experiences, which put at risk their physical health, their psychological development, the fulfilment of their potential, their eternal happiness. It also allows them to give full rein to their talents, to profit to the utmost from all the educational opportunities afforded them, to recover in the early stages from any possible failings. This was the conclusion Don Bosco came to after his experience with the youngsters in jail, and contact with the young manual labourers of Turin.

Prevention, from being almost a form of policing aimed at maintaining order in society, became for him the essential and fundamental characteristic of education. It was preventive because of its timeliness but also because of the form it took and the way he made use of it. He had to anticipate negative situations, whether physical or spiritual, and behaviour arising; and at the same time he had to provide more ways of harnessing the good qualities of individuals and guiding them into attractive and useful projects. He was convinced of the goodness in the hearts of young people, of each young person, that even in the most wretched youngsters there are seeds of goodness and that the task of the wise educator is to discover them and nurture them. It was necessary to create a generally positive climate through a family atmosphere, friends, things to do, things to learn, that would encourage their self-awareness, broaden their knowledge of the real world, give them a feeling for life and a taste for goodness.

Just think of the story of Michael Magone, the "little general" at the Carmagnola station, to whom Don Bosco offered first

of all his friendship, then a education at the Valdocco Oratory, then his skilful guidance ("Dear Magone, I'd like you to do me a favour, ... just let me look into your heart for a moment"), finally helping him to find in God the meaning of his life and the source of real happiness ("Oh how happy I am!") and making him into a model for young people of yesterday and of today.

One of the problems in our society today is the inadequacy of the educational service provided. It doesn't reach everyone, loses many by the wayside and doesn't provide what, given their particular situation, many require. It cannot cope with those who start with a handicap or cannot keep up the pace. What is needed in order to deal with this situation through various preventative measures and provide an appropriate education, is the combined efforts of families, politicians, social services, educational agencies, church communities and individuals. Education, especially for disadvantaged youngsters, rather than being a question of employment or of a professional qualification, is mainly one of a vocation. Don Bosco was a charismatic figure and a pioneer. He went beyond legislation and custom. Urged on by a strong social conscience, but with a very personal approach which was the fruit of a vocation, he created everything that is associated with his name. And perhaps what is required nowadays is no different: putting to work all the forces available, encouraging vocations to education and supporting projects of service.

The preventive effectiveness of education lies in its quality. Society's complexity, the multiplicity of views and messages on offer, the separation of the various areas of life into different compartments, have brought dangers also for education. One of these is the fragmentation of what is offered and the different ways in which it is received. We are living on a diet of pills including those for the mind. The *slogan* is the model of the messages.

Another danger is the selection of what is provided according to one's own individual preferences: this is subjectivism. The

optional has passed from the market place to life. Everyone is aware of the difficult alternatives to be reconciled: personal profit and solidarity, love and sexuality, a material view and a sense of God, a superabundance of information and the difficulty in assessing its value, rights and duties, freedom and conscience.

Don Bosco's way was to encourage in the young person anything that was positive or showed ambition, putting him in contact with a cultural heritage consisting of ideas, customs and beliefs, and offering him the opportunity of a deep faith-experience, helping him take his place in a society of which he could feel a part through his work, through co-responsibility for the common good and a commitment to creating harmony in society. He expressed this in simple formulae that the young could understand and follow: "good Christians and honest citizens", "health, wisdom, holiness", "reason and faith".

The personal benefits gained from education were to be directed towards making a contribution to society in a spirit of solidarity; living honestly with material success in this world had a spiritual, transcendent, Christian dimension; education and training for a profession were linked to a Christian view of the world, to the formation of conscience and to the building of human relationships.

So as not to fall into an exaggerated idealism, Don Bosco began from where it was possible, adapted to the condition of the young person and the situation of the educator. In his oratory it was possible to play, they were made welcome, relationships were forged, religious instruction was given, they could learn to read and write, how to work, norms for proper civilised behaviour were given, thought was also given to the law which regulated labourers' work and attempts were made to improve it.

Today there can be instruction that doesn't take life's problems into consideration. It is a recurring complaint of the young. There can be professional preparation that does not have a

moral or cultural dimension. There can be an education that is limited to the present moment and does not deal with life's questions.

If life and society have become complicated, someone without map or compass is bound to get lost or become dependent on others. Formation of the mind, of the conscience and of the heart is more necessary than ever.

A "problem area" of education today is communication: between the generations because of the rapidity of change, between individuals because of a loosening in relationships, between institutions and their clients because of different perceptions regarding their purpose. Communication, it is said, is confused, disturbed, open to ambiguity because of excessive noise, the sheer volume of messages, and because transmitter and receiver are not on the same wavelength. As a result there are misunderstandings, silences, limited and selective hearing as though through "zapping", non-aggression pacts for more peace and quiet. In this way it is difficult to offer advice about attitudes, recommend ways of behaving, transmit values.

1.3 Language of the heart

The language of the heart too has changed not a little since Don Bosco's day. Yet he does offer suggestions that in their simplicity are winners, if one can find the way to put them into practice. One such suggestion is: "*love the boys*". "We obtain more with a friendly glance", - we read in the so-called "Letter on punishments" - "with a word of encouragement, than with a flood of reprimands" (*BM XVI*, 373).⁶

Loving them means accepting them as they are, spending time with them, showing that you want to share their tastes and

⁶ Cf. G. BOSCO, *Dei castighi da infliggersi nelle case salesiane*, in P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco educatore. Scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Roma 1992, p. 335.

interests and enjoy doing so, demonstrating trust in what they can do, and also tolerating what is short-lived or casual, silently forgiving their involuntary mistakes due to their impetuosity or immaturity. This is what Don Bosco thought: "All youngsters have their crises, as you too have had your own. Heaven help us if we do not make an effort to aid them over these moments swiftly and blamelessly " (*BM XVI*, 373).⁷

There's an expression not much used nowadays that Salesians are proud to preserve because it sums up what Don Bosco learned about the educational relationship and gave as his advice: **loving kindness**. Its source is charity as the Gospel presents it, by which the educator perceives God's plan in the life of each young person and helps him to become aware of it and to put it into practice with the same liberating and magnanimous love with which God thought of it in the first place. Loving kindness is love recognised and expressed.

Loving kindness generates an affection that is demonstrated in the way a youngster reacts, especially the poor; it is an approach that shows trust, takes the first step, says the first word, shows respect in ways that can be understood, that encourages confidence, fosters a sense of self-confidence, it suggests and then gives support to the desire to become involved and the strength to overcome difficulties.

In this way, but not without difficulty, a relationship develops to which it is necessary to pay attention as one tries to translate Don Bosco's intuitions into our own context. It is a relationship marked by a friendship that develops into one of fatherliness.

Friendship grows with expressions of familiarity and is nourished by them. So in its turn comes trust. And trust is everything in education, since it is only when the young person opens the doors of his heart to us and entrusts his secrets to us that it

⁷ Cf. G. BOSCO, *Dei castighi da infliggersi nelle case salesiane*, in P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco educatore. Scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Roma 1992, p. 336.

is possible to interact. For us friendship has a very practical expression: **assistance**.

It is not possible to understand the significance of Salesian assistance from the meaning given to the word by the dictionary or from its current use. It is a term coined within a particular experience and it has a significance and application that are quite unique. It implies a desire to be with the young people: "I like being here with you". It is being physically present where the youngsters gather together, exchange ideas or make their plans; and at the same time it has a moral dimension with the ability to understand, and encourage, and to offer guidance and advice according to individual need.

Assistance eventually becomes an educative fatherliness, that is more than friendship. It is an affectionate and authoritative expression of responsibility that offers important guidance and teaching and makes demands about discipline and commitment. This fatherliness is love and authority.

It can be seen best of all in "*knowing how to speak to the heart*" in a personal way, since that is the way it deals with what is on the youngsters' minds, it explains what is happening in their lives, it helps them understand the value of the way they behave and feel, touching the depths of their consciences.

Not saying too much, but to the point; not harshly but clearly. In Don Bosco's pedagogy there are two examples of this way of speaking: "the good night", the few words addressed to everyone at the end of the day commenting on what has happened, and "the little word in the ear", that personal word that was spoken at informal moments in recreation. They are both very sensitive moments when real and immediate events are spoken about and wise everyday advice is given on how to deal with them; in fact they are an aid to living and teach the art of living.

Friendship, assistance and fatherliness create the **family atmosphere**, where values become intelligible and the demands

acceptable. In this way the right balance is struck between an authoritarian attitude which runs the risk of not really exerting an influence even though it may apparently get results, and one that lacks a clear purpose; between intrusiveness that leaves °no room for free expression and an educational abdication of responsibility with no effort to transmit values; between an overly friendly approach and responsible adult behaviour.

The *fatherliness* of Don Bosco was expressed in a context in which the style of the patriarchal family was the norm. Its characteristics served as models for all kinds of authority: in civil society, the world of business, education. Everything then had its "family style": education, business, the economy. It was taken for granted that the educator ought to assume a "paternal role".

For us too fatherliness is still irreplaceable: it is a love that gives life and takes responsibility for its development, it loves from the heart as it should, it assists the maturing process, accepts independence, joyfully welcomes the one who returns.

Prevention, proposals, relationships all come together wherever young people are to be found. Youngsters need to be able to express their liveliness, what they are feeling inside, thinking about and planning. Youngsters need to have the opportunity to experience exercising responsibility, putting into practice the values they have learned, practising solidarity, managing their own lives.

For a Salesian educator the "best educational key" for getting to know the young person is not the psychological test but the **playground**, where he behaves spontaneously. Educational contact is not mainly that in formal circumstances but the spontaneous. The process of a young person's growth certainly needs to include respect for the rules and docility towards the educator, but it is reflected much more in the capacity to take part joyfully in the various activities and in the life that is created in the group, in the club, in the youth community, where the edu-

cators have the not easy task of motivating, moving, encouraging, widening horizons, encouraging creativity.

The works that still today draw their inspiration from Don Bosco preserve the characteristics that he gave to his foundations. They try to respond to the needs of the young with a practical and ideally all-inclusive programme: teaching, accommodation, preparation for work, and recreation. They also bring adults together, especially those belonging to the working class, or are interested in helping the young people. They are "open" and not exclusive. They network, collaborating with institutions, the local area, the people and the authorities.

Today the need is felt to have "spaces" for the young: small, medium sized and large. Discotheques and various groups would be examples. There is the problem of the harm done by solitude, which is at the origin of much deviant behaviour. Educational analysis has hit the mark when, without being too categorical, it makes a distinction between official places organised for specific purposes and "vital places" open to spontaneity, to a search for meaning, to projects, to creativity: obligatory places and freely chosen places; imposed places and vital places. The space Don Bosco created is a combination of both kinds: so that in daily life the distinctions education analysis talks about are overcome.

2. Fostering the development of the young to their full potential

Faced with the situation of the young, Don Bosco made his choice of education. It is the kind of education that forestalls evil by trusting in the good that exists in the heart of every young person, that with patience and perseverance develops his full potential, that builds up the individuality of each one. It produces sound individuals, active and responsible citizens, people open to the values of life and of faith, men and women capable of

giving meaning to their lives, with joy, a sense of responsibility and competence. It is an education that becomes a real spiritual experience, that touches the "love of a God who provides in advance for all his creatures, is ever present at their side, and freely gives his life to save them". (*SDB C. 20*). Reproducing this choice of Don Bosco nowadays requires deciding on some fundamental options.

2.1 Shared trust in education

Our age appears to have confidence in education; for this reason there is an attempt to extend it to everyone. Efforts are constantly being made to adapt it to the challenges that emerge from the work place, from developments in knowledge and the way society is organised. It is being entrusted more and more to specialist institutions. It focuses on the communication of culture, on scientific information and professional preparation. Responsibility for it is being extended more and more to families, social institutions and the state.

In this way education has become a social phenomenon, a recognised right and the aspiration of everyone. Questions connected with it have become everyone's concern. Management and business people are interested in it as is the ordinary citizen and public opinion too. Basically it is a question of recognising the unique value of the individual and his central place in the evolution of culture, of social life and even of production processes.

The Church has been no less concerned, and there has been no shortage of guidelines in this area too. Its involvement in education has been decisive in many places as regards both its expansion and its quality. The intrinsic connection that exists between evangelisation and education has led the Church to see education not as an optional commitment but as being at the heart of its mission; it sees itself and wants to be the educator of man.

The most obvious signs of this commitment are the holy educators, who have made the task of education the expression of their preferential option for God, the daily exercise of their love for mankind and the path of their own sanctification. And following behind them have been the institutes and the movements of the Church for whom education has become a mission and a style of life.

Don Bosco and the Salesian Family are to be found among these church movements inspired by a saintly educator. They want to respond to the deepest aspirations of people, especially the poorest of them, taking their place at the present time and taking up the invitation for a new evangelisation.

2.2 Starting with those at the bottom

In spite of this generalised confidence in education, nonetheless we still have the impression that, in its regard, there is a gap between aspirations and possibilities, between declarations and their implementation, between intentions and fulfilment, between rights recognised and rights guaranteed. This is best seen in certain contexts.

Therefore the first appeal to respond to is that concerning the lack of the minimum services and the essential conditions for education. At the beginning of the third millennium the educational desert, like the geographical one, is not getting any smaller but is expanding.

In vast areas of the world the chances of an education are being dramatically reduced both in absolute terms and in relation to the increase in the population. Internal conflicts, a breakdown in services, administrations that are bankrupt and greedy, social and political decay are leading to an increase in under-development, in which the first victims are the young.

There is also a reduction in the chances of an education in advanced societies. The deficiencies are seen in wasted scholastic opportunities, in the lack of family support, in the many forms of delinquency, in youth unemployment and in unskilled child labour often linked to criminal activities.

From these situations a strong appeal is raised. There is a need for the sharing of the basic benefits of education, for a redistribution of attention, time and resources so that they are devoted to those who are without them in particular places and in the world at large.

A family like ours that has accepted the poor as its inheritance and has made huge efforts for a poor continent like Africa, cannot ignore this phenomenon, without at least making some prophetic gestures.

2.3 A new education

The modern enthusiasm for education, while representing worldwide something positive, is not without its ambiguities as regards the way it is generally organised and the practical direction it takes.

It has been said that to educate is to help each one to develop to the full his potential as a person by forming his conscience, developing his intelligence, helping him understand his own destiny. Around this central core problems arise and different concepts come into conflict with regard to education.

Nowadays one can see a kind of imbalance between freedom and a moral sense, between power and conscience, between technological progress and social progress. This imbalance often takes other forms: the emphasis on having with little attention given to being, the desire to possess and the inability to share, consumption without managing to appreciate.

It is a matter of contrasting alternatives which, if a person is able to harmonise them, can become a great source of strength. But they are destructive if they succeed in changing one's values, and especially if the fundamental ones are denied or diminished. Structural factors, cultural currents, forms of social life can have a powerful influence in one direction. Education will always require a positive attitude of discernment, to proposals and prophecy. I shall now consider some of these contrasts to which we need to pay attention in order to renew what we offer through education.

2.3.1 Complexity and freedom

Many have the impression that we are living in a world that is extremely confused when it comes to what is good and what is evil. Sociologists talk about complexity, a social and cultural situation in which there are many messages, and many languages with which the messages are communicated, many basic conceptions of life, with different, autonomous agencies promoting them, innumerable and incompatible interests behind them. And there is no authoritative body capable of proposing with authority a common view of the world and of human life, a system of moral norms, a view about existence, a "list" of common values and having them accepted.

In this situation the process of education becomes difficult. Adults don't feel that they have a firm grasp on a secure cultural heritage. In addition, there is little time to pass it on and there are so many distractions. Therefore what they do succeed in communicating seems to be subjected to rapid wear and tear. The educational package on offer is not always seen as attractive nor understood as a whole. It struggles to gain acceptance.

The most obvious consequence for everyone but especially for the younger generations is the strain of finding one's way among the masses of stimuli, problems, points of view, special

offers. Life's various features appear confused and it is not easy to evaluate them.

The problem experienced in trying to communicate cultural values by families, schools, society and religious institutions makes it difficult to plan an ordered life. This is seen in the way people give up in the face of conflicts and frustrations, in the effort it takes to make and maintain long-term commitments, in the putting off of life choices, in the inability to recognise oneself in the role models society offers.

The educational problem of one's identity is not a new one. In all ages young people have had to deal with it in order to come to terms with their own identity and find and take their proper place in society.

What is new are the circumstances in which nowadays this is taking place. In fact there is a combination of factors that are at one and the same time advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand there are far more things on offer and greater freedom. It is as though youngsters were being told: "choose and help yourself". There is the promise of autonomy and an offer of self-fulfilment, but in isolation. What is missing nowadays is not freedom but knowledge and responsibility, support and guidance.

Soon therefore the individual comes up against his own limitations and against the obstacles presented by a post-industrial society: competition and selection in every field, the job market, the lengthening of the period of dependence, the narrow opportunities for becoming involved in public life, the lack of available alternatives.

This gives rise to feelings of insecurity that make the young in our society vulnerable to exploitation in a variety of ways. Persuasive arguments aimed at their acquiring products determine not a few of their choices, not only of products but also of models: the type of man or woman, the ideal of beauty, of happi-

ness, the scale of values, ways of behaving and of taking one's place in society.

2.3.2 Subjectivism and truth

The emergence of subjectivism is one of the keys to the interpretation of current culture. It is linked to the recognition of the individuality of each person and of the value of his experience and inner life. It is seized upon by those groups who for a long time have felt "victimised" by the laws, by impositions on their identity or by society's conventions that prevent them expressing themselves. However, left to its own devices, without any reference to truth, to society or to history subjectivism cannot find fulfilment.

This privatisation or subjective approach can best be seen in matters of morality and the formation of conscience. The most obvious example, although not the only one, is that of sexuality. In this area restraint imposed by society has collapsed and at times also that by the family. There is public tolerance for the right to make different choices. Indeed, the press, books, the theatre often play up transgressions and present what is deviant behaviour as the consequence of various conditions. Any kind of moral dimension even in purely human terms is given little consideration when it is not completely ignored, even in official programmes widely publicised. The only concern seems to be to have a satisfying sex life without any risks to physical or mental health. It is thus detached from those elements that give it meaning and dignity.

The lack of any reference to the truth is also seen in the rules regarding economic and social activity. Often they are based on personally chosen criteria and on agreements between the most powerful parties involved. They do not always correspond to the common good nor to the benefit of the economy or of society.

The quality of education will depend on bridging the gap between freedom of choice and the formation of conscience,

between objective truth and the individual. Guidance needs to be given in helping to understand the practical consequences of the choices made and keeping in check unbridled subjectivism, and in recognising the objective reality of situations and values.

2.3.3 Individual profit and solidarity

Complexity and subjectivism have an influence on achieving the right balance between seeking one's own advantage and being ready to be open to other peoples' needs.

There was a time when it was thought possible to organise a free and just society, which through laws and structures could provide the right conditions for the well being of all. Many young people passionately took up the cause of the transformation of society and the liberation of the peoples. Preparation for a political role was part of human formation and of the practice of the faith; it was a sign of a mature sense of responsibility and of generous idealism.

Then came the winter of utopias, the collapse of ideologies and with them of collective projects, the moral problem, the setting of institutions one against the other. Political differences led to squabbling. Politics became a spectacle, and not always a very edifying one. This was followed by its loss of respect and people becoming disaffected as was evident in their lack of participation. An appreciation of the concept of the common good suffered and nothing equivalent took its place; on the contrary, only the "crumbs" of a reciprocal social good-will are offered.

Nowadays we are living in the era of the "market", as a mentality and as an organised view of society. At present an individualistic concept of social action is gaining ground. Society is coming to be considered as the sum of individuals, each of whom is intent on seeking his own personal interests, the satisfaction of his needs, potentially without limit. It is the primacy of individual desires and rights.

In this never-ending tendency towards the satisfaction of artificial needs one becomes deaf to fundamental and genuine needs. The ideals of social justice and of solidarity finish by becoming empty formulae, considered impracticable.

Not without foundation therefore is the conclusion of many people who see in the market the principal moral, cultural and legal obstacle to the growth among adults and young people alike at national and international level of a mentality of mutual cooperation.

2.4 The maturing of the faith of the young in this context

Complexity, subjectivism and the individualistic idea of the person have an influence in young people on the process of the maturing of their faith, which is basically openness to, communion with and acceptance of life and history in all its reality.

One is struck nowadays by two phenomena. There is a widespread religious sense that takes the most varied forms. It responds to the search for meaning in a society that does not provide it, to a vague perception of another dimension to life that remains unexpressed. However, together with this one notices the lack of an objective foundation and motivation, and therefore a gap between religious experience, the understanding of life and moral choices. Religious truths too are reduced to opinions. The nature of the Church's contribution becomes problematic, and even more so that of its individual ministers or representatives; it is made use of selectively.

There is a minority who study, enjoy, and develop a mature Christian life and express it in faith, in a sense of Church, and in social commitment. However, there is also a large number of young people who, after having heard the proclamation, drift away from the faith without any regrets. The period of religious formation has become longer and one cannot always count on there being suitable material that covers it completely.

All this gives the faith a very subjective flavour. Disconnect-ed from the solid foundation of the historical events of salvation, it becomes extremely fragile, a kind of commodity for consumption that each one makes use of as he pleases. In this way it becomes just one of the various aspects of life and thought that have their own separate existence. The danger of the gap between life and faith, between this and culture is the situation in which we all find ourselves, in which young people today are growing up. And this too at a time when the Church is showing marked signs of a strong sense of community, of social commitment and missionary endeavour.

2.5 Response of the Salesian Family

What responses to these appeals can young people expect from the Salesian Family? What forces can we deploy?

Nowadays there are more and more educators, especially professional ones. There are also informal educators, who don't have a specific role and aren't professionals. Just as there are published agenda and hidden ones. More and more at the centre of the educational process and passing judgement on it is the individual who chooses and processes the things presented to him or that he discovers for himself. Less than ever nowadays can education be delegated to someone with the hope that he will be able to control the way it goes. Young people quietly appoint their own educators when they open their minds and hearts to us, when they want to hear a word from us or see us do something that they consider makes sense for their own lives. This responsibility can come to someone at any moment.

The influence of educators delegated for the task of education and of those chosen by the individual depends on three factors: the credibility of what is taught in relation to the situation in which the young person is living, the authority of the witnessing teacher, the capacity for communication.

This therefore is the challenge for the adult: offering guidance and suggestions without hiding from the complexity and the demands of subjectivism and without allowing oneself to offer vague generalisations. This means being open to the positive, firmly grounded in what gives human life its real significance, having a capacity for discernment. Here are three things to which the Salesian Family needs to pay special attention.

2.5.1 Returning among the young with greater effectiveness

It was while he was among the boys that Don Bosco fashioned his way of life, his pastoral and pedagogical heritage, his system, his spirituality. For Don Bosco, his exclusive commitment to the mission for youth was always and everywhere a reality, even when for some particular reason he was not physically in contact with the boys, and when the work he was engaged in was not directly at the service of the young, and when he tenaciously defended his charism as founder for all the young people of the world in the face of pressure from ecclesiastics not always well informed. The Salesian mission is consecration, it is a "special love" for the young; and this special love, in its original form, is a gift from God which our intelligence and our heart need to develop and bring to perfection.

The true Salesian does not desert the field of youth. A Salesian is someone who knows young people from personal experience: his heart beats in time with theirs. The Salesian lives for them, devotes himself to their problems; they give meaning to his life: work, school, affective life, free time/recreation. A Salesian is also someone who has both a theoretical knowledge of young people and a lived experience which enables him to discover their real needs and to create a youth ministry adapted to the needs of the times.

Fidelity to our mission, for it to be really effective, needs to be in touch with the "key issues" of today's culture, with the patterns of current thinking and attitudes. We are being faced

with colossal challenges that require serious analysis, a competence in making critical observations, an in-depth examination of the culture and an ability to appreciate the situation psychologically. In a context like this, educative communication gives preference to certain channels.

The first is that of pooling interests and research instead of presenting prefabricated solutions; of dialogue at all levels instead of providing limited information; of transparency and real explanations instead of half-truths.

In their efforts to arrive at/form their own vision of the world, young people listen, react, reflect and experiment. They feel as though they were in a market where they can see the price and the quality of what is on offer and can take those that they like. Personal witness and the word which are capable of providing light and hope will find an audience.

The educator of the future will be the one who knows how to navigate between the multiplicity of messages and views, towards a choice of values and criteria able to sustain a continuous growth. And it will be precisely in the education to values that he will need to focus on the active involvement of the subject, rather than on his simply docile acceptance.

The demands need to be presented with courage. Being satisfied with responses to immediate demands, which deprive the young person of distant horizons and leave him permanently in a narcissistic position is to be avoided.

On the other hand having responsibility contributes greatly to a person's development. Through experience and reflection he has to make his own what education offers and from this draw his own conclusions. Only when a young person becomes an active agent and not merely a recipient of what education has to offer does he become fully aware of what he is being taught and it becomes something to treasure for the whole of his life.

Then there is another key element in the models of communication: the circumstances. Nowadays attention is being given to the so-called “vital spaces”, along side the traditional educational institutions. These latter exert their influence through structures, programmes, roles, rules and regulations; but they appear to be incapable of satisfying the demands for meaning and for relationships that young people express. Vital spaces on the other hand allow room for spontaneity, concentrate on the positive, on freely sharing, on friendship, on mutual acceptance, on ideals, on symbolic language, on projects. It is to be hoped that families, Christian communities, committed groups, places where young people gather, and schools will become like this.

Addressing members of the Salesian Family it is not out of place for me to recall that Don Bosco, by intuition rather than by any theoretical knowledge, created a whole communication system: the oratory, a place full of spontaneity and free expression, in which there were clear roles and informal relationships, and programmes provided for everyone on a regular basis alternated with opportunities for personal and group creativity.

In the first oratory in the Pinardi house, as Don Bosco envisaged it, some important basic ideas can be found that afterwards will be taken up with their more profound human and Christian significance:

- a flexible structure, bringing together the Church, urban society and groups of the sons of the people, a sort of “bridge”;
- respect for and appreciation of the working class;
- religion as the foundation of education according to the teaching of Catholic pedagogy as handed on to him from the atmosphere at the Convitto;
- the vital inter-connection between religious formation and human development, between the catechism and education, but also the combination of education and education to the faith and the integration of faith and life;

- the conviction that teaching is an essential instrument to enlighten the mind;
- an education, just like catechesis, that is developed in every way possible given the limited time and resources available: teaching to read and write those who had never had the opportunity of going to school, finding work for some of them, keeping an eye on them during the week, developing activities for groups and mutual assistance, ...
- the full use and appreciation of free time;
- loving kindness as a style of education and more in general, as a style of Christian living.

Understood in this way, the oratory for us continues to be the “formula” that we try to apply in every kind of situation or educational structure.

2.5.2 *Relaunch of the “honest citizen”*

The reconsideration of the *social quality of education*, already present in Don Bosco, even though imperfectly implemented, ought to give us the incentive to create explicit experiences of social commitment in the broadest sense. This presupposes a deep reflection both at a theoretical level, given the breadth of the subject of human, juvenile, popular promotion and the variety of the anthropological, theological, scientific, historical, methodological considerations involved, and on the level of the experience and practical reflection of individuals and of the communities. In the Salesian context the 23rd General Chapter had already spoken about “the social dimension of charity” and about “education of the young to commitment and participation in public life”, “a sector we have somewhat overlooked or disowned”.⁸

An educational presence in the life of society includes the following: an awareness of education, educational policies, the educational quality of life in society, culture.

⁸ Cf. GC23 203-210; 212-214.

Whoever is really concerned about the educational dimension tries to exert influence through political means, so that it will be taken into consideration in all areas: from urbanisation and from tourism to sport and the radio-television system, something in which market criteria often predominate.

Then there is the specific aspect of educational and youth policies. There is a need to reawaken interest and fight so that the solutions to some urgent problems are not put in the last place. These include, for example, the whole area of prevention, the quality of an integrated educational system, the appropriate diversification of the educational possibilities corresponding to the needs of individuals, economic parity, the rehabilitation of those who have fallen by the wayside in the educational process.

In addition, the style of social life and of political practices constitutes in itself a striking daily lesson from which adults and young people silently draw practical conclusions. One could say that it is useless for educational establishments to teach their students to be law-abiding if in public life other criteria are being applied with an easy conscience, since it is by these that our convictions and behaviour are being shaped. It is difficult to inculcate a sense of justice if public affairs are dominated by corruption and compromise. It is very hard to teach respect for the individual if in political debate mutual distrust, deceit and quarrelling prevail. Education, social life and political practice form a whole, so that whoever wants to improve the quality in one, of necessity must make the effort to change the others.

Finally, at the basis of education, of living together in society, and of politics there is culture. This provides motivations and communicates the significance of things that silently penetrate the mind and give rise to certain patterns of behaviour. To establish something as of value, initiatives are not sufficient even a multitude of them, nor generous and well inspired people. It is necessary for a common way of thinking to take hold and mature. Culture in fact concerns not only personal intentions and

proposals but the systematic and rational harnessing of the energies that the community has at its disposal. Sometimes there is a marked contrast between the actions of individuals and the collective mentality, between personal initiatives and society's approach, between practice and its foundations, so that the aspirations of the individual are one thing and the daily experience to which he is forced to submit is another.

2.5.3 Relaunch of the "good Christian"

The same thing one would have to say about the relaunching of the "good Christian". Don Bosco, "burning" with zeal for souls, understood the ambiguity and the dangers of the social and moral situation of his time, he challenged its presuppositions, he found new ways of opposing evil with the limited cultural and economic resources at his disposal.

How does one produce Don Bosco's "good Christian"? How does one safeguard nowadays all the human and Christian elements of a project with initiatives that are formally or prevalently religious and pastoral from the dangers of old and new forms of fundamentalism? How does one transform traditional-style religious education into an education for living one's own identity in a multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic world? Faced with the passing of the traditional pedagogy of obedience, related to a certain kind of ecclesiology, how does one use a pedagogy of personal freedom and responsibility, aimed at producing strong characters capable of making free and mature decisions, open to dialogue, actively taking their place in society not with a conformist attitude but one that is constructively critical?

It is a question of discovering man's vocation and helping him to live his true self in a conscious manner. It is precisely in this area that believers can make their most valuable contribution.

In fact, they know that man and his personal relationships are defined by his nature as a created being which does not indicate inferiority or dependence, but gratuitous and creative

love on God's part. Man owes his existence to a gift. He is in a relationship with God to which he must respond. Outside this relationship his life has no meaning. The 'other' he is aware of and unknowingly/vaguely desires is the Absolute, not an absolute that is alien to him or an abstraction, but the source of his life who calls him to Himself.

In Christ the truth about a person, that reason can begin to grasp, finds its full enlightenment. Through His words, but above all because of His human-divine life in which He shows His awareness of being the Son of God, He opens a person to a full understanding of himself and of his destiny.

In Him we are made sons and called to live as such in our place in history. It is a reality and a gift, the meaning of which a man needs to gradually come to understand. The vocation to be a child of God is not an added luxury, something extrinsic tacked on for man's fulfilment. It is instead his pure and simple indispensable condition for authenticity and fullness, the satisfying of the most radical needs, those that constitute his nature as a creature.

The one who educates – parent, friend, youth leader – is very aware that he is a witness to and companion in this revealing of life's possibilities, which links this awareness with its source and its end, which enables life to grow, but above all provides someone to talk to and a sign of God's presence.

There is a mysterious dialogue between each young person and whatever or whoever comes to him from outside, that which arises within and what he discovers as an imperative, as a grace or as an explanation. Little by little he acquires a fuller knowledge of himself, he creates an image of life in which he has to invest all his energies and fully play his part.

Educators, whether professionals or not, are called to offer what they consider appropriate, living with hope for the future with all its unknown factors. They take a serious interest in the

person growing up with uncertainties. In fact God wants to be recognised in him, and in the process of growth He will manifest Himself with ever greater clarity. If things go well they will have contributed to playing their part in the history of those “descended from God”, those who feel themselves to be in a filial relationship with Him, and will have created living signs of his presence.

3. Promoting human rights, in particular those of juveniles

We are the heirs to and the bearers of an educational charism that is aimed at the promotion of a **culture of life** and the **changing of structures**. For this reason we have the duty to promote human rights. The history of the Salesian Family and its extremely rapid expansion, even in cultural and religious contexts far removed from those in which it was born, witness to the fact that Don Bosco’s preventive system can be guaranteed to contribute to the education of youth in every kind of setting and be a platform for dialogue for a new culture of rights and of solidarity. By considering the dignity of each individual and the equality of his rights, one can better understand the raft of reasons that support the Church’s preferential option for the poor.

It is in this context that Don Bosco’s advice to the first missionaries should be read and implemented today: “Take special care of the sick, of the young, of the old and of the poor, and you will win the blessing of God and the goodwill of men”.⁹ For us Salesians, education to human rights, in particular those of juveniles, is the best way to put into practice in different settings our commitment to prevention, to all-round human development, to the building of a world that is more equitable, more just, more healthy. The language of human rights also enables

⁹ G. BOSCO, *Ricordi ai missionari*, in P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco educatore. Scritti e testimonianze*, LAS, Roma 1992, p. 206.

us to discuss our pedagogy and introduce it into the different cultures of the world.

3.1 Human rights and personal dignity

Human rights are rights that apply to every person as a human being; they don't depend on race, on religion, on language, on geographical origin, on age or sex. They are rights that are fundamental, universal, inviolable and indispensable. They are not carved in stone but are in continuous evolution. The civil and political rights that go back to the time of the French Revolution (1789), arise from the demand for a series of fundamental liberties from which large sections of the population had been excluded: the right to life, to physical respect, to freedom of thought, of expression, of association, of political participation. Economic, social and cultural rights were sanctioned by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948: the right to instruction, to work, to a home, to health, etc. Then there are the rights of people to self-determination, to peace, to development, to ecological stability, to control of national resources, to protection of the environment. Finally there are the rights linked to respect for man, in relation to the fields of genetic manipulation, of bioethics and the new communication technologies.

We have to realise that full respect for human rights is first of all our responsibility. Unfortunately violations of human rights are the order of the day and it is clear that the existing means for prevention are not sufficient to eliminate them. In this situation too we need to work for respect for human dignity.

The Church's teaching affirms that a correct interpretation and an effective safeguarding of rights depends on an anthropology that takes account of all the constitutive dimensions of the human person. In fact all human rights ought to correspond to the dignity of the individual person. They need to refer to the satisfaction of his basic needs, to the exercise of his freedom, to

his relationships with others and with God. They are universal, to be found in all human beings without any exception of time or place. Fundamental rights in fact, belong to the human being as a person, to each and every person, men and women, children or the elderly, the rich or the poor, healthy or sick.

3.2 Salesian mission and childrens' rights

In an address that I gave in the Campidoglio in Rome on 27 November 2002, on the subject: "Before it is too late let us save youngsters, the future of the world", I tried to present the Preventive System from the point of view of the promotion of each individual boy and girl, to be educated, to be totally redeemed in every sense of the word from a Christian perspective, but with a particular reference to the transformation of society, so that there will no longer be any on the margins. Above all I presented the Preventive System in terms of a conscious assuming of responsibility by the one being educated who changes from being someone needing protection because of his needs (the object) to being a responsible subject because he has rights and recognises the rights of others, preparing in the youngster of today the citizen of tomorrow: *the honest citizen and the good Christian*. I give you some sentences taken from my address.

«The situation in which many young people find themselves in many parts of the world is very serious: young people at risk and marginalised. There are so many of them, too many of them. Their cry goes unheard. They weigh on the conscience of a society that is seeking to globalise the economy, but not the commitment to the development of peoples and the promotion of the dignity of each human being.

Today's challenges. Here is a rapid overview of the marginalisation and the exploitation of the young around the world:

- Youngsters who are on the streets and in gangs.
- Youngsters who are soldiers.

- Youngsters who are abused.
- Youngsters who are slave labourers.
- Youngsters who are “nobodies”.
- Youngsters who are in prison.
- Youngsters who are forced to donate organs and are crippled.
- Youngsters who are poor and marginalised.
- Youngsters who are living in the sewers and the waifs and strays.
- Youngsters who are sick.
- Youngsters who are refugees and orphans.
- Youngsters who are...

Such misfortune weighs on everyone’s conscience. At the end of the 25th General Chapter the Salesians made an appeal addressed to all those with responsibilities regarding the young: “Before it is too late let us save the youngsters, the future of the world”. This is also my appeal as the successor of Don Bosco.

Faced with such a sad picture of the way young people are suffering, we Salesians “are on the side of the young, because, like Don Bosco we have confidence in them, in their willingness, to study, to escape from poverty, to take their future into their own hands ... We are on the side of the young because we believe in the worth of the individual, in the possibility of a different kind of world, and above all in the great value of working for education”.¹⁰ Let us invest in the young!

Let us put commitment to education on a global footing and in this way we shall prepare a positive future for the whole world. To this effort the Salesian Family will bring the riches of the method of education inherited from Don Bosco, the well-known Preventive System.

According to this System the first concern is that of preventing evil through education, but at the same time it is concerned

¹⁰ GC25, 140.

with helping young people to build up their own personalities, to give new life to values that previously they had not been able to acquire and develop precisely because they had been marginalised, and to discover motives for living a life that has meaning with joy, responsibility and competence.

In addition, this System firmly believes that a persons' religious dimension is his most precious and significant quality; therefore as the final aim of everything that it does it sets out to guide each youngster to realise his vocation as a child of God. I think that this is one of the most important contributions that Don Bosco's Preventive System can make in the field of the education of young people of all ages from children to young adults who are poor and in psycho-social danger.

It is a question of a clear and significant experience of solidarity aimed at forming – these are Don Bosco's words – “honest citizens and good Christians”, that is, builders of the city, active and responsible people, aware of their dignity with a plan of life, open to the transcendent, to others and to God».

3.3 Let us try to present the same ideas in the language of human rights

Referring to the list of the violations of human rights set out above, it becomes clear that nowadays an all-round Salesian education cannot prescind from a commitment to the fundamental rights and the dignity of human beings.

First of all one can note that the theme of education to fundamental rights and freedoms is intimately connected to the two previous Strennas, in which I underlined the important role of the family in educating and promoting human rights, and first of all the defence and promotion of life.

In this area, education sets itself the aim of contributing to the building of a **culture of human rights** capable of dis-

cussing, persuading and in the last analysis preventing violations of human rights, rather than punishing them or repressing them. It is the passage from the mere denunciation of violations already perpetrated to preventive education.

From this point of view education to human rights has to be necessarily multi-dimensional and characterised as an education to honest, active and responsible citizenship, capable of combining the descriptive and the prescriptive, knowing and being, and to integrate the handing on of knowledge and the formation of the personality.

Education to human rights is education to action, to doing something, to taking up a position, to accepting responsibility, to critical analysis, to being informed, to weighing up information from the media; it is an education that has to become permanent and daily.

On these foundations, the *methodology* to be used ought to include at least three dimensions:

- a cognitive dimension: knowing, thinking critically, conceptualising, judging; Don Bosco would say “*reason*”;
- an affective dimension: making an effort, having an experience, making friends, empathy; Don Bosco would say “*loving kindness*”;
- a dimension involving the will: which leads to behaviour that is morally motivated: making choices and acting, behaving in an orderly manner; Don Bosco would say “*religion*”.

3.4 Educating ourselves to educate for the transformation of every individual and of the whole of society: for human development

Therefore the Preventive System and the spirit of Don Bosco are today calling us to a great effort, individually and collective-

ly, aimed at changing the situations of poverty and under-development, to make ourselves promoters of human development and to educate to a culture of human rights, and the dignity of human life.

Human rights are a means for human development; education to human rights is instrumental in bringing about human development both personal and collective and therefore to achieving a world that is more equitable, more just and more healthy.

Each one of us, whoever we may be, precisely because we are educators and are following the Christian anthropological view of life that inspired Don Bosco, can become a defender, a promoter and activist in the cause of human rights.

For this reason we need to arrive at a Salesian understanding of the principles that are at the foundation of human rights, so as to be able to identify the challenges that human rights present to our Salesian Family.

Here are some elements for such an examination:

- *the wholeness of the person* and the application of the principle of the indivisibility and the interdependence of all a person's fundamental rights: civil, cultural, religious, economic, political and social;
- education to honest citizenship and the application of the principle of the common differentiated responsibility for the promotion and the protection of human rights;
- the *one to one* approach and the application of the principle of the superior interest of the juvenile;
- the *juvenile at the centre as the active and participating subject* and the application of the principle of the participation of the juvenile;
- the "*it is enough that you are young for me to love you a great deal*" and the application of the principle of non-discrimination;

- the “*I want you to be happy now and always*” that concerns the whole person and the application of the principle of total human development: spiritual, civil, cultural, economic, political and social of the juvenile.

3.5 A text to which Don Bosco would be ready to subscribe

The education of the child shall be directed to:

- *The development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;*
- *The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;*
- *The development of respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living; the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;*
- *The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;*
- *The development of respect for the natural environment.*

This in fact is art. 29 of the “*Convention of the UNO on the rights of the child and adolescents*”, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20 November 1989 and at present ratified by 192 States.

The practice of many educators needs to be corrected therefore when they reduce human rights to a list of ideas or see education to human rights in terms of norms as though explaining legal texts.

We are in favour of a much broader approach, an approach to *socio-civic learning*, one that encourages practical experience,

the acceptance of responsibility and active and responsible involvement.

Education to human rights, or better to a “preventive culture of human rights”, one that is capable of preventing their violation, needs to emerge from the narrow field of lawyers and jurists, in order to belong to everyone, to anyone who feels ready to open and maintain an intercultural dialogue based on human rights.

Human rights, in fact, are not mainly a legal or philosophical subject; they are an interdisciplinary subject and can be explained and discussed with an intercultural approach in the context of a number of subjects: history, geography, foreign languages, literature, biology, physics, music, economics.

They are not a subject apart but a transversal theme. Human rights ought to be an integral part of the training and updating of educators, whether formal or informal, so that they themselves may be able to develop and re-present them as the *leit-motiv* and transversal dimension within the different subjects.

If by teaching we were to understand an activity in which only one person, the teacher, has something to say, and all the others have only to listen, then as far as human rights are concerned it would not be possible to proceed in this way. Human rights are not taught, just as they are not imposed, but people are educated to them through dialogue, discussion, and personal reflection.

As teaching methods one can use art, drama, music, dance, design, poetry; in this regard we can recall the initiatives “invented” by Don Bosco.

If the accent in the educative process is placed on the interior motivations needed by the educator, then the Preventive System becomes a “spirituality”. If the accent is placed on the three *columns* of reason, religion and loving kindness, then the Preventive System becomes the exercise of a form of asceticism, a framework of values and a plan of life. If the accent is on the

relationship between the educator and the one being educated, the Preventive System postulates a mystical dimension. If the accent is placed on a plan of life that the person being educated needs to nurture in his heart, then the Preventive System is complete evangelisation, since it aims to form the honest citizen and the good Christian, as "Christifideles Laici" puts it, capable of *living the gospel while being of service to man and society*.

In conclusion the Preventive System transforms both the educator and the one being educated into someone who is aware of the responsibility to defend and promote human rights for the human development of the person and of the whole world.

Paraphrasing a felicitous expression of Paul VI, in "Populorum Progressio", I would dare to say that *the new name of peace is education to the defence and the promotion of human rights*.

Certainly, educating with Don Bosco's heart, for the development to their full potential the lives of the young, especially the poorest and most disadvantaged, promoting their rights implies:

- *a renewed decision to become involved as communities in specific fields of action.*

The communitarian character of Salesian pedagogy demands that we create a spirit of communion with regard to the educational ideals of Don Bosco, knowing how to involve all those with responsibilities in the various educational institutions and programmes, forming in them a critical awareness of the causes of youth marginalisation and exploitation, a strong motivation that sustains their daily efforts and an active and alternative attitude. All of this involves a commitment to the formation of educators.

- *a renewed explicitly pastoral approach.*

Salesian activity, in whatever circumstances it is carried out, always includes a concern for the salvation of the individual: a knowledge of God and filial communion with him by accepting Christ through the sacramental life of the Church.

Having made an option for youth and poor young people, Salesians take as their starting points where the young people find themselves, and the possibilities they have of making a journey of faith. In every work of rehabilitation, of education and of personal development, there is the beginning and the implementation of that salvation that will become more explicit as those involved become more capable of it. All have a right to Christ. He needs to be proclaimed without forcing things too much, but also without letting things slip by too easily.

By way of conclusion

And this time, I conclude not with a fable but with a family story, rather with the “dream” that is at the origin of what we are and what we do.

A “dream” that is both memorial and prophecy, a recalling of the past and a plan for the future.

«I had reached my ninth year. My mother wanted to send me to school, but this was not easy. The distance to Castelnuovo from where we lived was more than three miles; my brother Anthony was opposed to my boarding there. A compromise was eventually agreed upon. During the winter season I would attend school at the nearby village of Capriglio. In this way I was able to learn the basic elements of reading and writing. My teacher was a devout priest called Joseph Delacqua. He was very attentive to my needs, seeing to my instruction and even more to my Christian education. During the summer months I went along with what my brother wanted by working in the fields.

A Dream

«It was at that age that I had a dream. All my life this remained deeply impressed on my mind. In this dream I seemed to

be near my home in a fairly large yard. A crowd of children were playing there. Some were laughing, some were playing games, and quite a few were swearing. When I heard these evil words, I jumped immediately amongst them and tried to stop them by using my words and my fists. At that moment a dignified man appeared, a nobly dressed adult. He wore a white cloak, and his face shone so that I could not look directly at him. He called me by name, told me to take charge of these children, and added these words: "You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love. Start right away to teach them the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue".

Confused and frightened, I replied that I was a poor, ignorant child. I was unable to talk to those youngsters about religion. At that moment the kids stopped their laughing, shouting, and swearing; they gathered round the man who was speaking.

Hardly knowing what I was saying, I asked, "Who are you, ordering me to do the impossible?"

"Precisely because it seems impossible to you, you must make it possible through obedience and the acquisition of knowledge".

"Where, by what means, can I acquire knowledge?"

"I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you can become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness".

"But who are you that speak so?"

"I am the son of the woman whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day".

"My mother tells me not to mix with people I don't know unless I have her permission. So tell me your name".

"Ask my mother what my name is".

At that moment, I saw a lady of stately appearance standing beside him. She was wearing a mantle that sparkled all over as though covered with bright stars. Seeing from my questions and answers that I was more confused than ever, she beckoned me to approach her. She took me kindly by the hand and said, "Look". Glancing round, I realised that the youngsters had all apparently run away. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears, and other animals had taken their place.

"This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong, and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children".

I looked round again, and where before I had seen wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs. They were all jumping and bleating as if to welcome that man and lady.

At that point, still dreaming, I began crying. I begged the lady to speak so that I could understand her, because I did not know what all this could mean. She then placed her hand on my head and said, "In good time you will understand everything".

With that, a noise woke me up and everything disappeared. I was totally bewildered. My hands seemed to be sore from the blows I had given, and my face hurt from those I had received. The memory of the man and the lady, and the things said and heard, so occupied my mind that I could not get any more sleep that night.

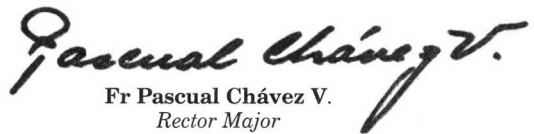
I wasted no time in telling all about my dream. I spoke first to my brothers, who laughed at the whole thing, and then to my mother and grandmother. Each one gave his own interpretation. My brother Joseph said, "You're going to become a keeper of goats, sheep and other animals". My mother commented, "Who knows, but you may become a priest". Anthony merely grunted, "Perhaps you'll become a robber chief". But my grandmother, though she could not read or write, knew enough theology and made the final judgement, saying, "Pay no attention to dreams".

I agreed with my grandmother. However, I was unable to cast that dream out of my mind. The things I shall have to say later will give some meaning to all this. I kept quiet about these things, and my relatives paid little attention to them. But when I went to Rome in 1858 to speak to the Pope about the Salesian Congregation, he asked me to tell him everything that had even the suggestion of the supernatural about it. It was only then, for the first time, that I said anything about this dream which I had when I was nine or ten years old. The Pope ordered me to write out the dream in all its details and to leave it as an en-

*couragement to the sons of that Congregation whose formation was the reason for that visit to Rome».*¹¹

My wish for all of you is that you make your own the dream of the beloved father and founder of our Salesian Family, Don Bosco. Let us work together to make it a reality for young people, especailly for the poor, the abandoned and those in danger and for their sake let us dream new dreams.

May the Mother of God in whose name we begin this year of grace 2008, be for you mother and teacher, as she was for Don Bosco, so that at her school we may learn to have the heart of educators.


Fr Pascual Chávez V.
Rector Major

¹¹ J. BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis of Sales from 1815 to 1855*, Translation by Daniel Lyons SDB, Don Bosco Publications, New Rochelle, 1989, pp. 9-10; 18-21.