

1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

1.1 THE LETTER «JUVENUM PATRIS» OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Introduction: the centenary celebrations. - The gift of the Pope's Letter. - Don Bosco presented as a Master in education. - the preventive system, an ecclesial heritage. - The significance of its present-day relevance. - Today's educational requirements. - The action of the Holy Spirit and Mary's protection. - The importance of the Letter for ourselves.

Rome, 24 February 1988

My dear confreres,

We have begun the centenary celebrations of the «dies natalis» of our Father and Founder St John Bosco, and in this connection I have received very positive news from a large number of provinces.

At Turin and the Becchi the commemorative functions were of high quality and very impressive, and were given unexpectedly extensive coverage by the Italian mass media. The presence of our Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops gave added emphasis to the tone of universality and the ecclesial dimension.

Don Bosco's original type of holiness, the relevance of his mission at the present day, his historical, civil and social stature, together radiated a message and a stimulus which encourage us to a bolder creative fidelity.

It made us eager to prepare with the sincere attitude of sons the eloquent personal and communal

gesture we shall make on 14 May next, when all our confreres, with eyes fixed lovingly on Don Bosco our Model and Guide, will renew their salesian profession as the fundamental option they have made in life.

I think that the danger of triumphalism has been overcome or rather eclipsed by the serious historical tone, the spiritual depth and the artistic dignity of the commemorative functions. The emphasis was on Don Bosco's theological wisdom, his ecclesial authenticity, his social dimension, and on his success as the Founder of a spiritual and apostolic Family.

The gift of the Pope's Letter

The finest present we received on January 31 was the Letter «*Juvenum patris*» of our Holy Father John Paul II. It was indeed an extraordinary gift by which Peter's Successor wished to highlight the figure of Don Bosco as a Master in education.

The Letter is addressed not only to us and to the Salesian Family, but also to the young, to parents and to christian educators.

In the conclusion the Pope emphasizes in a special way its application (among educators) to priests: «the education of youth is a challenge directed primarily to them; ... let priests direct their first concern to young people!». ¹

And to us and to our Family he then imparts his Apostolic Blessing «the pledge and promise of heavenly gifts and testimony of my affection; may it strengthen you in the faith, and may it console and protect all the members of the great Salesian Fa-

¹ «*Juvenum patris*» 20

mily»; as though to say to us that in fidelity to Don Bosco we have also the responsibility and special task of being able to make known to all educators the values of the spiritual and pedagogical experience that the Holy Spirit inspired in our Founder.

Don Bosco presented as a Master in education

The Pope, while recognizing the different aspects of the figure of Don Bosco, has concentrated his reflections on his «educational commitment», as the trait which discloses and characterizes his significance for the Church and society.

He emphasizes two distinguishing elements in his contribution to pedagogy: the particular and intense interior attitude centred on «pastoral charity» (as a fundamental quality in the personality of every christian educator); and the early experience of the Oratory, considered as the permanent pedagogical and pastoral criterion, which would give shape to the growth of the subsequent indispensable structures and to the organization needed to keep abreast of the times and cope with the increased number of possible institutions.

The preventive system, an ecclesial heritage

Don Bosco's contribution to pedagogy has already become part of the educational tradition of the Church which, because she is an expert in humanity, «has also every right to call herself an 'expert in education'.² The experience of our Father appears as a charisma of the Holy Spirit,

² *ibid.* 7

bestowed for the enrichment of the Church's evangelizing commitment at the dawn of a social transformation in which «the primary and essential task of culture is education».³

³ *ibid.* 1

The Holy Father recalls the famous statement of Paul VI, speaking of Religious, that their apostolate «is often outstanding in its admirable resourcefulness and initiative»; and he adds, referring to Don Bosco: «one may say that the peculiar trait of his brilliance is linked with the educational method which he himself called the 'preventive system'».⁴

⁴ *ibid.* 8

The Letter dwells more deeply on this contribution which, says the Pope, «represents in a certain sense the quintessence of (Don Bosco's) pedagogical wisdom and constitutes the prophetic message which he has left to his followers and to the Church».⁵ And after a brief consideration of the positive significance of «prevention», he comments on the now well known threefold formula «reason, religion, loving kindness» as a legacy which will remain a challenge for future ages.

⁵ *ibid.* 8

The significance of its present-day relevance

The condition of youth in the world of today is certainly very much changed and presents many aspects which were unheard of in the circumstances at Turin in the last century. But today too «there remain those same fundamental questions» which occupied the mind of Don Bosco.⁶ The message of this great educator cannot be considered a thing of the past; «it needs to be studied at still greater depth, to be adapted and renewed with intelligence and courage, precisely because of changed social, cultural, ecclesial and pastoral contexts...

⁶ *ibid.* 6

The substance of his teaching remains intact, the unique nature of his spirit, his intuitions, his style, his charisma are unchanged, because they draw their inspiration from the transcendent pedagogy of God». ⁷

⁷ *ibid.* 13

I consider these statement of the Pope particularly invigorating, my dear confreres, because through them he is exhorting us to communicate in a faithful but renewed and creative form the basic elements and criteria which Don Bosco's message suggests at the present day for a «new education», of which both Church and society have so great a need.

Recalling our traditional hymn «Don Bosco ritorna» the Pope exhorts us also to «return to Don Bosco», and expresses the fervent hope that we may know how «to find in his legacy the starting point for a present-day response to the difficulties and expectations (of the young)». ⁸

⁸ *ibid.* 13

This is precisely the line the Congregation has followed in the years that have followed Vatican II, through the work of three General Chapters of great importance. It would be sad indeed if any of us, through ignorance of the path the Congregation has followed, were unmindful or incapable of harmonizing the progress of the educational sciences with the renewal of Don Bosco's charism.

Today's educational requirements

Both Church and society feel themselves strongly challenged by today's educational requirements. Starting from the living testimony Don Bosco has left us, the Pope's Letter emphasizes some urgent needs which we do well to highlight.

He mentions simply:

- the love of predilection for youth: «Let us go to the young»;⁹ ⁹ *ibid.* 14
- the ability to «establish a synthesis between evangelizing activity and educational work»; so that concern for evangelization is inserted within the overall scheme for human advancement;¹⁰ ¹⁰ *ibid.* 15
- and hence «a special sensitivity for cultural values and institutions, by acquiring a deep knowledge of the human sciences», vitally linked with the concern «to direct the whole educational process to the religious objective of salvation»;¹¹ or in other words, to evangelize by educating and educate by evangelizing; ¹¹ *ibid.* 15
- the obligation to get back to a «realistic pedagogy of holiness», which is «intrinsic to the educational art of Don Bosco, who can rightly be called the 'Master of youth spirituality'»;¹² ¹² *ibid.* 16
- the vital and social imperative of «making of education our 'raison d'être', to which we dedicate ourselves as a primary objective» with its interaction between evangelization and human advancement to which we have already referred;¹³ ¹³ *ibid.* 17
- the extraordinary educational significance of the «family», the «school», starting «work», and «group activity»;¹⁴ ¹⁴ *ibid.* 18
- the indispensable need for typical «educative moments» of personal conversation and encounter which can take many forms and which become «occasions of true spiritual guidance»; this is an important pedagogical means offered to the young for the planning of their lives and the due discernment of their vocation.¹⁵ ¹⁵ *ibid.* 18

The action of the Holy Spirit and Mary's protection

The conclusion of the Letter reminds us of «the powerful though hidden efficacy of the Holy Spirit», who is «the animator of the birth of the new man and of the new world». If education, as Don Bosco used to say, is «a matter of the heart», it is indeed exhilarating to recall that «the way of the Church passes through the heart of man», and even that the Church, animated by the Spirit, «is the heart of humanity; and so she embraces all christian educators in her delicate ecclesial motherhood.

It is therefore fitting that parents and educators should believe and trust in the operative presence of the Holy Spirit and in his silent work of the transformation of hearts through their far from easy efforts.

In this sense it will be helpful to entrust ourselves to Mary, «the most lofty collaborator of the Holy Spirit», and earnestly ask her for true educational efficacy and for more numerous and authentic vocations for the service of the young.

The Importance of the Letter for ourselves

The Letter «Juvenum patris» which the Holy Father has kindly sent us for the Centenary of Don Bosco is certainly very important for us, dear confreres. For this reason we include the text (which you know already) in the Acts of the General Council; in this way it will be available to every confrere as part of our heritage of salesian reflection and as a pressing invitation to the making of appropriate

resolutions for a more intense spiritual, apostolic and pedagogical renewal. While it also throws light on the demanding Strenna of the present year, it will prompt us to rediscover the relevance of our charism and relaunch its social and ecclesial message.

We are deeply grateful to the Holy Father for this gift. Interpreting your own feelings, I have sent him a letter expressing our gratitude and whole-hearted adherence, and including an offering which will be a concrete indication to him of our hundred years of effort to be faithful to Don Bosco's commitment in the education of youth.

May Mary Help of Christians, Mother of the Church, enlighten us and be our guide in treasuring the Holy Father's reflections and guidelines.

In our Constitutions we read that «*through the motherly intervention of Mary, the Holy Spirit raised up St John Bosco to contribute to the salvation of youth*»;¹⁶ and again, that «*the Virgin Mary showed Don Bosco his field of labour among the young and was the constant guide and support of his work*»;¹⁷ and finally that «*under the guidance of Mary his teacher, Don Bosco lived with the boys of the first Oratory a spiritual and educational experience which he called the 'Preventive System'*».¹⁸

16 C 1

17 C 8

18 C 20

Let us then renew our entrustment to Mary, in the certainty that she will help us to develop and bear witness in the world to the sacred legacy of Don Bosco.

With cordial brotherly greetings in the Lord,

Don F. Viganò