

CLASSROOM AND «PLAYGROUND»: A COMBINATION ESSENTIAL TO DON BOSCO'S SCHEME OF TOTAL EDUCATION

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The analysis of this topic can, I think, usefully begin with the consideration that the relationship mentioned in the title is not, in practice, an easy one: even though, in the light of changing conditions and results, it remains a matter of some importance.¹ It is, in fact, one of those very open and controversial questions that face us today.

As we set the question against the general background of Don Bosco's work and of the school conditions in which Salesian pedagogy had to operate, it is natural to ask whether we are dealing with a matter of some complexity which may well have implications for us in the present. How easy or difficult is it to combine the role of the school and the role of extracurricular activities in the pedagogy of Don Bosco and his Salesians?

Let us begin to unravel the question.

1. Beyond syntheses

I should like to say at once, in order to clarify my approach, that the problem that we are considering has absorbed a lot of attention both on the part of Salesian educators and on the part of those who attempt a critical interpretation and evaluation of the problem, since we seem to be dealing with a very delicate form of «via media» which does not appear to be just one more example of the remarkable capacity for synthesis and the reconciling of oppositions which many see as the most typical and wholly original characteristic of Don Bosco's personality.

Analyses of Don Bosco, especially in recent years, have without question resulted in a general agreement that the statements and the work of this

¹ For an overall view of this question cf. C. SCURATI (edit.), *L'educazione extrascolastica. Problemi e prospettive*, Brescia, La Scuola 1986.

«imaginative yet obstinate peasant from the Becchi»² are best understood when seen as part of a great process of synthesis that operates at various levels: first at the psychological level, then the cultural, social, historical and political, pastoral and educational. It is worth taking a glance, however brief, at this synthetic process.

One writer has said that in Don Bosco there coexisted «two markedly distinct personalities: on the one hand, the able, decisive organiser, the "entrepreneur" of the sacred, the man of long vision and steady purpose who realised projects of great breadth, rooted in palpably earthly realities; on the other hand, the spirit tormented by anguish and visions of hell, constantly grappling with powerful and obscure forces that for ever opposed him». And again: «On the one hand [...] there is the master of events; on the other the pupil of the dreams», so that «the secret of the powerful and unforgettable personality of this saint and of his amazingly adventurous life resides in the mysterious balance that he maintained between opposing and apparently irreconcileable elements».³ The most surprising characteristic of his life seems to be his «extraordinary ability to live with the supernatural in daily symbiosis with the ordinary, yet always aware of the dramatic burden that this imposed».⁴

Other people have seen evidence of «a complex personality that combined the man of action with the contemplative: an entrepreneur; a realist and a poet: energetic yet prudent; flexible yet tenacious». «The interior richness of that personality springs from the harmonising of apparent opposites: frankness and respect, precision and freedom of spirit, tradition and modernity, humility and magnanimity, joy and austerity, intuition in planning and prudence in execution, audacity bordering on temerity and calculating circumspection, shrewd diplomacy and the shunning of hypocrisy». He was able to combine «tenacity of will» with «flexibility in the face of changing circumstances», «defiant optimism» with «calculating realism», the «wisdom of the serpent» with «the simplicity of the dove». The image that he presented was of «a citizen of heaven with his feet firmly planted on the earth»,⁵ living in daily equilibrium between memory and prophecy, freedom and obedience, sensitivity and strength, familiarity and reserve, humility and great-heartedness, dynamism and self-composure, the idealistic and the pragmatic, faith and action».⁶ He was firmly established in his peculiarly characteristic form of «a sanctity that is enfolded in the everyday».⁷

If we move on to another plane, we find reference to «what is, rationally

² M.L. STRANIERO, *Don Bosco rivelato*, Milano, Camunia 1987, p. 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵ S. PALUMBIERI, *Don Bosco e l'uomo*, Torino, Gribaudo 1987, p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

speaking, an inextricable combination of traditionalism and innovation»,⁸ manifested in an unshakeable fidelity to tradition. This made a precious contribution to modern developments, because «his religious intent produced results that were of benefit to the state».⁹

Arriving at the question that mostly concerns us, we may refer to the evidence of combined «inspiration from above» and «complete docility to reality, verified through experience».¹⁰ With this goes his ability to «take traditional teachings and practices and renew them by infusing into them a new style and a new life distinguished by a deep sense of humanity, by affection for the young and dedication to their total education».¹¹

It is not out of place to mention also that «living synthesis [...] of religious vocation, of deep feeling and genuine benevolence, of charity and grace combined with intelligence and exceptional organizational ability»,¹² which best sums up Don Bosco's educational method. That method appears as a great synergic organisation that combines into one formative process the material (lodging, food, clothing, assistance) and the spiritual (prayer, catechism, sacraments), the social (the community, the group, employment), the individual (hospitality, inter-personal dialogue, confession, spiritual direction), the recreative (theatre, music, walks, games, environment, feasts) and the organizational (regulations, discipline, homework, study).

It is also certain that Don Bosco saw this living, organic synthesis, which governed everything that happened, as the essence of his «preventive system». He was, we may say, a man and saint, who achieved impossible syntheses, and in achieving them he showed himself, as in everything else, an exceptional educator.

I do not intend, nor would it, indeed, be feasible, to contradict this fundamental image. However, one can accept it with total conviction without being debarred from undertaking further analysis, especially of the theme which is proposed in the title of this paper.

2. The crux of the matter

The question we are considering is not a mere pretext for airing one's views. Critical studies of Don Bosco reveal very divergent assessments of the

⁸ F. TRANIETTO, *Don Bosco e il problema della modernità*, in: *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità*, Quaderni del Centro Studi C. Trabucco, n° 11, Torino 1988, p. 43.

⁹ P. SCOPPOLA, *Don Bosco nella storia civile*, *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁰ C. COLLI, *Pedagogia spirituale di Don Bosco e spirito salesiano*, LAS 1982, p. 18.

¹¹ E. ALBERICH - U. GIANETTO, *Don Bosco maestro di educazione religiosa*, in: «Orientamenti Pedagogici» 35 (1988) 188.

¹² P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco per la gioventù povera e abbandonata in due inediti del 1854 e del 1862*, in: P. BRAIDO (edit.), *Don Bosco per i giovani*, Roma, LAS 1988, p. 27.

balance he achieved between the «scholastic» and the «extrascholastic» in his thought and practice. I therefore think that the development of my theme requires an adequate treatment of this matter, which will clearly reveal at least two distinct approaches to two central points of interest, namely Don Bosco's original inspiration and the special nature of the initiatives that characterise the precious patrimony he left behind.

The first point, at whose central aspects we shall look in some detail, tends to show that his greatest original contribution was in the sphere of education, since this formed the main object of his preoccupations and proved the validity of his aims.

M. Casotti, after having praised Salesian pedagogy for «responding fully to the most vital needs of both modern and Christian education»,¹³ notes that «Don Bosco, at least initially, was more concerned with the Oratory than with the school»,¹⁴ since «his main pedagogical problem was [...] discipline, in its widest sense, rather than schooling properly so-called».¹⁵ He then picks out as Don Bosco's most distinctive characteristic his ability to «combine study and recreation, so that the former acquired some of the joyful spontaneity of the latter, while the latter acquired, to a certain extent, the composure and seriousness of the former».¹⁶ (One might also point out that in this respect Don Bosco anticipated the «activism» of modern educationalists).

Two points, therefore, stand out:

- Don Bosco's point of departure was not the school but recreation;
- the harmonious combination of study and recreation was his point of arrival.

P. Braido takes a view which is substantially the same. He thinks Don Bosco saw schools and teaching as tactical instruments, an inescapable stage in the process of «morally improving and sanctifying the young [...] and preparing them for life».¹⁷ His teaching methods and style of organization show, therefore, «little originality as far as traditional schooling in the humanities is

¹³ M. CASOTTI, *La pedagogia di S. Giovanni Bosco*, in: *Il metodo preventivo*, Brescia, La Scuola 1958, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁷ P. BRAIDO, *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco*, Torino, PAS 1955, pp. 387 et ss. The same approach is adopted by G. CHIOSSO (*L'oratorio di Don Bosco e il rinnovamento educativo nel Piemonte carloalbertino*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 83-116), who repeats that Don Bosco's «interest in schooling went no further than [...] what was suggested by practical common sense, namely, that a little education would serve to relieve deprivation» (p. 111). Very different is the view taken by G. COSTA, for whom «Don Bosco saw the need to free schooling from its rigidity and to place more emphasis on formative and educative awareness. This opened the way to new technical and didactic methods, which were interesting and more effective, and were based on a more intuitive and inductive approach, closer to the scientific method of discovery and research. Various teaching aids were used to make the teaching less abstract» (*Don Bosco e la letteratura giovanile dell'Ottocento*, *ibid.*, 349).

concerned».¹⁸ He himself had had just such a traditional schooling. One must, however, concede that he had a «clear desire not to fossilize teaching by using ponderous, antiquated procedures»;¹⁹ he was aware of the «relative nature of every technique when compared with the extremely urgent educational and human problems that called for solution». Those techniques, however, could be «good and acceptable, as long as they served as effective tools of an education that was alive and relevant».²⁰

These judgements can be complemented by other brief comments: B. Bellerate underlines the «priority given to doing rather than teaching»;²¹ according to L. Cian «it cannot be said that the problem of schooling, in all its various aspects, was the thing that most concerned Don Bosco»;²² G. Dacquino believes that «Don Bosco's didactic method was not predominantly cerebral in approach, something that could be completed sitting at a desk; it was an educational method based essentially on an effective relationship that spanned the entire day».²³

This last observation leads us straight to one of the most crucial contributions that we need to consider, the recent essay written from a psychoanalytical angle by X. Thévenot,²⁴ in which the author assigns unequivocal primacy of importance to the extrascholastic over the scholastic, and traces this back to the very source of Don Bosco's vocation as a priest and educator, namely his dream at the age of nine.²⁵ It was in that dream, says Thévenot, that Don Bosco identified «the axis round which all his Salesian work of education would revolve: the love of God». He recognised that «gentleness and charity» were «the central virtues of the educator» and discovered – and this is what concerns us here – «the distinguishing criterion by which any educational activity is to be judged», namely, «not the quality of the teaching imparted to boys in schools but the values implicit in the relationship that develops between educator and pupils when they are relaxing together during recreation».²⁶

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 396.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 403.

²¹ B. BELLERATE, *Il significato storico del sistema educativo di Don Bosco nel sec. XIX e in prospettiva futura*, in: *Il sistema educativo di Don Bosco tra pedagogia antica e nuova*, Torino-Leumann, LDC 1974, p. 35.

²² L. CIAN, *Cosa dice Don Bosco alla scuola d'oggi*, in «Il Maestro» (May, 1988) 9. For other significant contributions see his *Il «sistema preventivo» di Don Bosco e i lineamenti caratteristici del suo stile*, Leumann (Torino), LDC 1985; *Educhiamo i giovani d'oggi come Don Bosco*, Leumann (Torino), LDC 1988.

²³ G. DACQUINO, *Psicologia di Don Bosco*, Torino, SEI 1988, p. 135. The central idea is that «Don Bosco's educational method tended, by appealing to the heart and by persuasion, to sublimate and incorporate the power of instinct» (*ibid.*, 142).

²⁴ X. THEVENOT, *Don Bosco educatore e il «sistema preventivo». Un esame condotto a partire dall'antropologia psicoanalitica*, in «Orientamenti Pedagogici» 35 (1988) 701-730.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 708-712.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 710.

The question of schooling is, accordingly, wholly adventitious and secondary, something that can be justified only in relation to considerations that are largely extraneous, such as the social needs of a particular age, practical requirements: it is not an essential constituent of that special spirit which constitutes the Salesian vocation.

Although one could discuss this point at greater length, it is time to pass on to the second point which we mentioned earlier; although of lesser importance, it often tends to influence the elements we have already recalled.

V. Cimatti,²⁷ in his anxiety to present Don Bosco as an educator whose work was suited to every educational situation, affirmed that schools, together with the family and the Church, were the most important element in the preventive system. Unfortunately this thesis obscured the traditional importance of recreation and the playground, wholly subordinating them to scholastic matters. J. Aubry restored the balance, formulating the matter in more appropriate terms: «The playground was a strategic point, as important as the chapel or the classroom».²⁸ For Don Bosco this essential triad (playground - school - chapel) constituted an integrated, formative environment, in which all three components played an equally essential part.

But the most decisive contribution, which provides a kind of counterpoint to the essay of Thévenot, has come from M. Pellerey, who claims, rightly in my opinion, that the appeal to reason²⁹ is the element that we need to rediscover and reevaluate if we are to appreciate Don Bosco's educational method.

According to Pellerey, reason was explicitly recommended as a means of education, as well as being an essential quality of Don Bosco's own way of acting. It is, therefore, a substantial element in his pedagogical system, in which the cultural nature of the human person has to be fully accepted and developed,³⁰ otherwise one runs the risk of altering or watering down a basic

²⁷ Cf. V. CIMATTI, *Don Bosco educatore*, Torino, SEI 1925.

²⁸ J. AUBRY, *Il santo educatore di un adolescente santo: Don Bosco e Domenico Savio*, in: R. GIANNATELLI (edit.), *Don Bosco. Attualità di un magistero pedagogico*, Roma, LAS 1988, p. 160. Cf. also Id., *Lo spirito salesiano. Lineamenti*, Roma, Ed. Coop. Salesiani 1972.

²⁹ Cf. M. PELLEREY, *La via della ragione. Rileggendo le parole e le azioni di Don Bosco*, in «Orientamenti Pedagogici» 35 (1988) 383-396.

³⁰ Concerning Don Bosco's approach at the anthropological level cf. S. PALUMBIERI, *Don Bosco e l'uomo* 61 et ss. In contrast to a vision which concentrates upon a «disembodied spirituality», Don Bosco proclaims «the central importance of basing everything on divine and personal values, if one is to achieve the complete reformation of an individual or of society through what we would now call a "cultural revolution". Only thus can one bring about a civilization that is new, creative and life-friendly, liberal and creative of solidarity, in which man himself, a complex of body-soul-heart with an entire web of relationships, structures and aims, can become the object of initiatives that foster true humanity» (pp. 68-69). In such a view «the primacy of the soul» does not exclude «a positive vision of bodily realities»; the «heart» becomes the «central factor» and the «focus for a rich synthesis within the human personality» (p. 64), without ever excluding the part played by «reason», which has here the

element in Don Bosco's vision of man. From that vision there follows a conviction of the importance of schooling as a practical way of expressing one's «desire to assist in the moral and material improvement of the mass of the people by making education available to each one of them»,³¹ as part of one's pastoral goal and social mission.³²

This leads me to my first point. It now becomes possible to resolve the problem whose fundamental elements I have tried to outline and to provide a satisfactory answer to the question with which I began. That is precisely what I shall now attempt to do.

3. A solution

I suggest that our task will be easier if we return to Valdocco, that is, take a trip backward in time to the place where Don Bosco worked, to see if we can find in early manifestations of the preventive system certain features that may help us to resolve our present problem. This journey clearly has a precise objective, namely to establish our hypothesis whose main constituents we may set out thus:

- a) schooling is as fundamental a category in Don Bosco's educational approach as is recreation (in other words it was a feature of the Oratory from its very start);
- b) the growth of the scholastic side of the work into a college institution introduced an imbalance and created difficulties within the overall educational scheme that the saint had planned and lived; and the saint himself finally became fully aware of these difficulties.

Let us now concentrate on the first point of this hypothesis, trying to provide fundamental evidence of its validity.³³

specific function of ensuring that everything that is done is «reasonable». This ensures a balance which «shuns all rationalism, cerebralism, voluntarism or an obsession with the erudite» (p. 113).

³¹ M. PELLEREY, *La via della ragione* 386.

³² Don Bosco cannot be considered in isolation from the growing interest in mass education which was characteristic of Piedmont in this period. He shared the growing view that education was «not an evil to be exorcised but a resource that was to be used, in order to provide for the complete human and Christian formation of youth» (CHIOSSO, *L'Oratorio di Don Bosco* 109), becoming, indeed, one of the most famous exponents of this view. The question of schooling also surrounded the discussion of professional education, marking a transition from the workshop phase (based on a peasant-worker model) to the favouring of genuine professional schools (based on the industrial model). Cf. D. VENERUSO, *Il metodo educativo di San Giovanni Bosco alla prova. Dai laboratori agli istituti professionali*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 133-142. Also L. PAZZAGLIA, *Apprendistato e istruzione degli artigiani a Valdocco*, in: F. TRANIELLO (edit.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, Torino, SEI 1987, 13-80; P. BAIRATI, *Cultura salesiana e società industriale*, *ibid.*, 331-357.

³³ From this point on, unless otherwise indicated, references to texts of Don Bosco are drawn from G. BOSCO, *Scritti sul sistema preventivo*.

3.1. Always the teacher

If one reads attentively the *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, picking up little pieces of evidence, one can see that, right from the «mythical» and «story book» beginnings of his life (the shepherd boy at Becchi, the peasant lad working in the fields and nearby farms, the student and the seminarian at Chieri), Don Bosco thought about schooling and began to teach others. He saw his vocation, as a priest and as a teacher, as an indivisible unity. When questioned by Don Calosso he said that he wanted to study, «in order to become a priest» and thus be able to «talk to my companions and instruct them in their religion». Instruction became inseparable from recreation; he was always the teacher: he was acrobat *and* preacher, juggler *and* reader, organiser of games *and* instructor. His mission could be summed up as that of being simultaneously priest *and* educator.

3.2. School from the start

Almost from the very start, even during its early nomadic and precarious stage, time and space were found at the Oratory for schooling, which at times seemed almost the main preoccupation. During the early phase in the chapel attached to the Hostel of St. Philomena, there was «provision for a chapel, for a school and for the recreation of the boys»; referring to the period at St. Francis of Assisi, Don Bosco stated that he himself had been «conscious of the need for a school»; at the Refuge and in the Moretta house he began «regular Sunday classes», and laid the foundations for the «evening classes» that would be more fully developed after the transfer to Valdocco.

He began to give free lessons in Italian, Latin, French and arithmetic to the boys who were helping him to teach catechism, and the classes were soon so successful that he began to produce his own books, suited to the needs of the boys (the *Storia Sacra*, the *Sistema Metrico Decimale* and the *Giovane Provveduto*). Singing and music were soon added to the normal curriculum of scholastic subjects, as part of a process that culminated in the senior courses of the «ginnasio» and «liceo», as well as the workshops that eventually turned into a professional school.

Don Bosco summed things up by saying that at the Oratory there was «recreation, singing and class until dark».

3.3. Reading and writing

Don Bosco became intensively engaged in writing, editing and publishing and in tirelessly encouraging others to do the same. This work, to which an

increasing amount of critical attention is being paid,³⁴ only makes sense when it is considered as part of his radically positive attitude to teaching, which he obviously saw as having a moral and not only a utilitarian dimension.

It is not by mere chance that Don Bosco spoke of himself as «always occupied with the thought of improving his studies», and that he gave a detailed description of his avid reading and of his diligence as a student.

3.4. Study and the holiness of the young

Some indirect but, nonetheless, valuable information is provided by Don Bosco's four edifying accounts of the lives of Luigi Comollo, Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco, which serve to remind us of the truth so finely expressed by P. Braido that «Don Bosco's teaching is incarnated in the faces of the thousands of boys whom he educated».³⁵

Study of these biographies provides ample evidence that the desire to learn, diligence in one's studies, school discipline and application, were seen by Don Bosco as qualities which defined the very nature of perfection in the young. At the same time he never said anything that would suggest that he in any way undervalued knowledge; he was always intensely conscious of the importance of culture in every situation and at every phase of his work.

Thus, we see Michael Magone being transformed from a little street urchin into «a boy outstanding in his studies and in his application»; while Francis Besucco, the illiterate shepherd lad, was turned into a model student. «As soon as the bell went for class, he went there without delaying even for a moment», and «it was beautiful to see how he constantly concentrated, studying and writing avidly, as if he were doing something that he found most enjoyable».

I may add that it was in this biography that Don Bosco coined the triadic slogan – one amongst many that he was fond of – which perhaps best sums up his approach, because it is concerned with daily life rather than abstract concepts: «Joyfulness, Study, Piety».

One can confidently assert that the combination of teaching, culture and school should be seen as an intrinsic element rather than an accidental adjunct of the humanization - spiritualization - salvation process which Don

³⁴ Cf. the recent informative studies by F. TRANIETTO, *Don Bosco e l'educazione giovanile: la «Storia d'Italia»*, in: ID., *Don Bosco nella storia* 81-111; S. PRIVATO, *Don Bosco e la cultura popolare*, *ibid.*, 233-288; F. MOLINARI, *La «Storia Ecclesiastica» di Don Bosco*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 203-237, for an account of the «great social communicator», gifted with an «easy style» and the «mind of a popular educator»; also G. COSTA, *Don Bosco e la letteratura giovanile dell'Ottocento*, *ibid.*, 329-353, where Don Bosco is shown to be endowed with «a simple, economical style», with a «love for the young that was fundamental and rock-like», as he strove to satisfy «the need of providing them with examples for their imitation».

³⁵ G. BOSCO, *Scritti sul sistema preventivo* 175.

Bosco wished to realise through his efforts for the Christian education of the masses. In 1875, writing to the pupils and Salesians of the college at Lanzo, he exhorted them to «consider, preserve and promote three precious gifts: health, learning and morality». His words encapsulate admirably what I have been trying to say so far.

4. A problem

So far I have dealt only with the first half of my initial hypothesis; we must now pass on to the more significant question of the integration of school and extracurricular activities within the developing Salesian institutions.

I shall not dwell on the scholastic aspects of Don Bosco's work, except to point out that, despite an almost obstinate conservatism regarding the content of classes, which resulted from his moralistically rigorous upbringing,³⁶ he displayed, in other ways, great originality and creativity in his approach to catechetics (the use of pictorial material and of dialogue),³⁷ to teaching the classics (staging plays),³⁸ to literary classes,³⁹ to the expressive arts, such as singing, music and acting,⁴⁰ and to active pursuits (abandoning militaristic

³⁶ In Don Bosco's «popular works and readings for adolescents» the ideological content was of prime importance (cf. F. TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco e l'educazione giovanile*, *passim*, regarding his traditional, Guelph approach to history and the preeminence of the papacy in church history). The «subordination of the human to the religious and moral» was taken for granted. He was also constantly engaged «in the systematic search for a style that was simple, clear and precise, so that his thought would be immediately understood» (P. ZOLLI, *San Giovanni Bosco e la lingua italiana*, *ibid.*, 113-141).

³⁷ E. ALBERICH - U. GIANETTO, *Don Bosco maestro di educazione religiosa*. These authors suggest that his catechetical instruction was imparted within «a human and educational context» (p. 190) which shunned any «division between catechesis, religious formation and education» (p. 189).

³⁸ According to G. PROVERBIO (*La scuola di Don Bosco e l'insegnamento del latino*, in F. TRANIELLO, *Don Bosco nella storia* 143-185), the teaching in the «ginnasio» and «liceo» followed «methods and programmes that were rather traditional» (this can be confirmed from the autobiographical memoirs – taken up by P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1870)*, Roma, LAS 1980, 481-493 – of G. NESPOLI who speaks of impatience with the «mechanical method» used in the classroom), though there were also more innovative features, like the reading of authors, even in the lowest class, the «academies» with recitations in various languages, the use of plays, the emphasis on grammar as only an instrument for the clearer understanding of language. However, the most remarkable thing is still on the level of content, where Christian authors are placed side by side with Latin pagan authors.

³⁹ Don Bosco affirmed that his method of teaching reading in the Sunday classes (study of the alphabet, then syllable by syllable, followed by direct application to the questions of the catechism) was so effective that, after only «eight Sunday lessons [...] some were able to read and study, unaided, whole pages of the catechism».

⁴⁰ Cf. M. SODI (edit.), *Liturgia e musica nella formazione salesiana*, Roma, Ed. SDB 1984; M. RIGOLDI, *Don Bosco e la musica*, Carugate, 1987; S. STAGNOLI, *Don Bosco e il teatro educativo salesiano*, Milano 1967-1968; S. PIVATO, *Don Bosco e la cultura popolare* 276-279; Id., *Don*

exercises in favour of real games and the enjoyment of sport).⁴¹

The point that here interests us more directly is concerned with the problem of discipline but, even more, with relationships in general, since the central issue of our reflections is linked to those two features. I shall try to discover whether Don Bosco did really achieve in the Oratory a harmonious synthesis between what we may call the pedagogy of the playground and the pedagogy of the classroom, or whether the gap between these two spheres remained to some extent unbridged.

For the sake of analysis let us divide the period we are to examine into two distinct phases. In the first phase schooling and the rest of the life of the Oratory formed parts of one unified educational environment: Don Bosco's own memoirs and other copious records show that the difference between being a pupil or inmate of the Oratory was barely perceptible, since both were equally «sons» of Don Bosco. In the second phase, which was associated with the growth of the boarding schools, the development of classical and professional education, the spread of the Salesians in Italy and Europe and, finally, worldwide, conditions led to an increasing divorce between the two, as if they were running on parallel tracks, with ever fewer points of contact. Let us now look at this situation in more detail.

In the Regulations and even more in Don Bosco's Letters for rectors and other superiors in Salesian institutions, one may note, over and above any preoccupation with the minutiae of discipline and administration, an anxiety that the essential characteristics of the preventive system should not be lost; such things as «making oneself loved rather than feared», devoting one's greatest attention to the weakest and least fortunate, talking to the boys «often» and spending «as much time as possible with them», helping «in the parish», always being «kind and gentle in word and behaviour», «never, as far as possible, making use of punishments» (*Ricordi confidenziali ai direttori; Il Sistema Preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*). In particular he returned time and again to the question of punishment, constantly repeating that «forms of coercion were never to be used, but only persuasion and charity». He insisted that, if punishment became strictly necessary, then recourse should be had to «fatherly correction», and only in private. Time «should be allowed for reflection», shunning haste or emotional outbursts, and «avoiding arousing fear or distress when giving correction»; one should rather «offer a word of encouragement» so that there is room for «hope» as the pupil «feels himself helped back onto the path of virtue by the kindly

Bosco e il teatro, in: C. NANNI (edit.), *Don Bosco e la sua esperienza pedagogica*, Roma, LAS 1989, 100-112.

⁴¹ S. PIVATO, *Don Bosco e la cultura popolare* 280-282. The «ingenious and lively gymnastic exercises» that Don Bosco devised «do not indicate any real interest in the idea of competitive sport»; they are more typical of the «original Catholic idea of sport [...] proposed as an aid to religious formation and to a more intense life of piety».

hand of [his teacher]». All violent and harsh measures were, above all, totally excluded, since «one cannot educate [...] the will by placing unnecessary restraints upon it»; the primacy of love and of religion should always be respected in interpersonal relations, since education is «an affair of the heart» of which «God alone is the master» (*Dei castighi da infliggersi nelle case salesiane*).⁴²

Our analysis helps us to perceive his transition from a typically, not to say wonderfully, «charismatic» phase, in which all he did was unified by spontaneous affection,⁴³ to an «entrepreneurial» phase, during which his positive successes were, sadly, paid for by a loss of unity, as organizational detail became more necessary; there was a discouraging loss of intimacy; communication tended to be effected through the handing down of commands rather than through direct involvement in the life and activities of the community, as Don Bosco was compelled to act through the less than perfect mediation of others, rather than deal with everything in person.

We can see that the critical point came with the transition from the direct, limited relationships of the «educational village» of Valdocco (modelled on family life and a father-figure) to the less intimate relationships, formalised, structured, regulated and affectively remote, of schools and institutes that were complex organizations (modelled on professional businesses). From that point on Don Bosco had the profoundly painful experience of trying to maintain continuous contact between the two areas of his work as he attempted to carry over the spirit of the Oratory into the schools. It was an attempt in which he was less than wholly successful.

According to P. Stella's view, the movement from Valdocco into new enterprises involved adaptation and resistance to change, and, in the final

⁴² Cf. M. CASOTTI, *La pedagogia, passim*. This author has brought out clearly the intrinsically human and non-violent nature of education according to the preventive system, which is based on the primacy of love. The Christian optimism of Don Bosco's method should not, however, be confused with an ingenuous belief that his boys were angels. Casotti makes this clear, in contrast to G. DACQUINO, *Psicologia di Don Bosco*, where he attributes to the saint «a total faith in the goodness of human nature» (p. 159).

⁴³ I have taken from X. THÉVENOT, *Don Bosco educatore* 704 et ss., references to the fundamental features of Don Bosco's charismatic approach to education. Such features are his «sense of the supernatural», his tendency to make «radical decisions», and the «evidence of his power to attract others». Combined with this, however, was his realistic «sense of human limitations and of the need for patience», so that each case had to be examined rationally and in its own moral context. It is, therefore, worth repeating that the charismatic element in Don Bosco's approach can be respected, without falling into any dangerous exaggeration, as G. DACQUINO rightly points out (*Psicologia di Don Bosco*). He refers to such features as Don Bosco's «generous and dynamic self-oblation» (p. 182); his gifts as a «tenacious fighter and leader who drew others after him and gave them confidence», and, «above all, his spirit of sacrifice, of constancy and humility» (p. 174); his «belief in himself and his sureness», linked to «a perception of his own gifts». He can be summed up as an «extrovert personality», «versatile» (p. 23), «a likeable priest, an athlete and a juggler», possessed of an extraordinary «natural ability for sharing the feelings of young people» (p. 96).

analysis, the accepting of work that did not completely coincide with the founder's original intentions. He observes, in fact, that «private schooling [...] was not congenial to Don Bosco, whose work in the oratory was based on gathering together a great number of boys by making the best possible use of only a few helpers».⁴⁴ Stella points out that his followers were so convinced and proud of the value of this approach that Don Bosco had a certain amount of difficulty when «he had to clarify the fact that the opening of Valsalice was in response to an insistent command of the new archbishop, Lorenzo Gastaldi: only thus was he able to obtain the consent of the Superior Chapter of the Congregation». It was clear that «running colleges involved a movement towards the middle classes, while the Salesian conscience and public expectation dictated that their efforts should be on behalf of poor and abandoned boys».⁴⁵

This brought to the fore the most intricate problem of ensuring that enterprises which were involved with a bewildering diversity of aims, objectives and changing circumstances remained faithful to the same Salesian ideal of «preventive» education, even though the model of the Oratory became steadily more peripheral and less capable of direct application.

Alongside the fragmentation occasioned by new undertakings we may conveniently place the problem of distance that affected communication as missionary activities multiplied. Although his missionaries were a source of great consolation to him, they also gave him cause for thought and action, to ensure that they, too, came within the scope of the critical review which the saint undertook in his last years. He was «aware that what the Congregation most needed, both in Italy, where it had existed for some time, and in Latin America, to which it was being transplanted, was something more than unified and stable structures: the guarantee of a future for the Salesians was in the hands of the confrères and their helpers, provided they remained faithful to their original spirit, namely, to the method and style of education that had characterised the life of the Oratory at Valdocco».⁴⁶

Three letters of August, 1885, to Mons. Cagliero, Don Costamagna and Don Tomatis respectively, express with considerable clarity the essence of the problem. One letter makes a heartfelt plea for «charity, patience and kindness», and then affirms, in even more explicit terms, that there should be «no humiliating reproofs, no chastisement»; one must «do good to everyone we can and harm nobody». The second letter states clearly his disappointment at being so far away and having to communicate indirectly («I should like to give you a sermon or, better, a talk on the Salesian spirit that

⁴⁴ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia economica* 124.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 143 et s.

⁴⁶ F. MOTTO, *Introduzione a Tre lettere a salesiani in America*, in: G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 357.

must animate and guide everything we do and say»), and then goes on to condense into a few vigorous lines what he wanted to insist upon: «The preventive system must be our distinguishing mark. No harsh punishments, no humiliating words, no rebukes given in the presence of others. Kindness, charity and patience are what you must practise in your classes. No sarcastic words, no striking a boy even lightly. Punishment should consist in withholding something and should be so administered that the culprits are turned into friends and never leave us feeling depressed». The final letter makes the dry comment: «It is not enough to know the things to be done; one has to put them into practice».⁴⁷

We now come to the justly famous Letter from Rome of 10 May, 1884, which, as we seek to engage in this exercise of self-criticism, surely should be considered the document of most interest and importance.

Don Bosco takes as his starting point an imaginary dream (it is a sort of «counterdream», if compared with the one he had when he was nine, a kind of «Utopia in reverse», compared to the positive Utopia of long ago). He uses this device in order to present what is really the most pitiless description of the loss of the true Salesian spirit that results from divorcing teaching from recreation.

«The teacher alone at his desk is seen as a teacher and nothing more; but if he goes into recreation with the boys he becomes their brother». It was essential to return occasionally to this fundamental practice, joining in the boys' games, encouraging them to enjoy themselves, while always keeping a close eye on things. Admonitions were to be given without any threats and one had to accept inconvenience in order to love what the boys love, rediscovering ways of spontaneously expressing affection with homely familiarity («Nowadays the superiors are considered superiors rather than fathers, brothers and friends; they are consequently feared but little loved»).

It seems that the approach which had turned the little world of Valdocco into a model of truly Salesian education had begun to disappear, giving cause for deep regret and for the nostalgic hope of a return to those days. «Let us hope that those happy days of the early Oratory will return: the days of affection and Christian trust [...], days marked by a spirit of forbearance and harmony out of love for Jesus Christ [...], the days when hearts were opened with total simplicity and candour, days of charity and of real happiness for everybody». The final impression is of a design that has somehow vanished and fallen short of achievement. The great unified enterprise has somehow been broken and fragmented.

⁴⁷ The ability to be «consistent in every situation» seems to sum up perfectly the essence of what has been testified concerning the various Piedmontese saints of Don Bosco's day. Cf. F. PERADOTTO, *La «scuola dei santi» di Torino*, in «Vita e Pensiero» 81 (1988) 735-744.

5. Lessons to be learnt

Let us now conclude with a few observations and reflections. We have traced, in outline, the course of Don Bosco's work, from the charismatic unity of his early educational apostolate to the stage where he saw that this unity needed to be restored; this would have to be done in new circumstances, by means of a pastoral awareness that took into account changes in culture, methods and structures. That pastoral approach would be based on «reason», combined once again with «religion» in a spirit of unfailing «kindliness». It was not something that could be achieved without hard effort.

It is clear that the part to be played in this process by extracurricular contacts, based on the approach of the Oratory, was of primary significance, though the special contribution of the school had not to be overlooked.

The main lesson that we can draw is the need to be aware both of the primacy of the Oratory-style approach and of the necessity of integrating school activities and extra-curricular activities in one educational synthesis. In this way school activities can be given a more humane quality, richer relationships, a vitality, joyfulness and relevance that they so frequently lack. But schools (even those of Don Bosco and his Salesians) show that it is not easy, in practice, to live at all times in the spirit that animated the founder's original educational endeavours.

If Don Bosco found the task a difficult one, we are certainly not going to find it easy. That fact should induce further reflection, as we renew our commitment and seek to avoid facile but dangerous illusions.