

IV. PEDAGOGICAL AND DIDACTIC PRINCIPLES AND DISCIPLINARY MATTERS (1846-1879)

The ten brief documents that follow—some perhaps less known than the previous ones in Salesian history—are also interesting from the point of view of the maturing and practice of Don Bosco's educational system. We have a necessarily limited selection here of personal letters to people responsible for public education, or to young people and teachers, and circulars on pedagogical and didactic issues.

The first, addressed to one of his most important helpers in the work of the oratories, Fr Borel, was written three decades before he published his booklet on The Preventive System in the education of the young in 1877. Already in 1846, Don Bosco had reacted when confronted by the fact that one of his helpers, Fr Joseph Trivero, was dealing rather strictly with the boys ("with much energy").

A letter to the Superintendent of Studies, Francesco Selmi, is of particular interest. Don Bosco gives precise answers to criticism of some of his writings and highlights the lack of any basis for certain allegations made against him and against the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales.

His letter to the city magistrate in Turin, sees important aspects of the real situation at Valdocco 1865 emerge. Reference is made to the problems created by "some boys mostly sent by the government." One of the boys "is not only incorrigible, but insulted, threatened and swore at his assistant."

Instead Don Bosco assures student Emanuele Fassati, that he will continue to pray for his success in studies, but adds: "You have to make an effort: work, diligence, knuckling down, obedience are all part of your passing your exams."

Amongst these documents, all addressed to different people, we find other topics that were common at the time in Don Bosco's writings and addresses: holidays as danger time, discipline (not understood as "punishment or the whip, things we never talk about here," but "as a way of keeping to the rules and customs of the institute").

In 1875, replying to the young Salesian priest Fr Joseph Bertello on the way to stir up a love for study in his pupils, Don Bosco advises him: "Think of them as your brothers; loving kindness, sharing, respect."

*In 1879, in a letter to Prince Placido Gabrielli, who— in the name of the Administration of the Hospice of St Michael in Ripa—wanted Don Bosco to look after the running of this social welfare and educational place for boys in Rome, Don Bosco was interested; he pointed out however that in houses run by the Salesians “we use a very special disciplinary system called preventive, where we do not use punishments or threats.”*³⁸

157. Letter to Fr John Borel

Critical ed. in E(m) I, pp. 71-72.

Castelnuovo d’Asti, 31 August 1846

Dear Father,

Well done. Your detailed letter was wonderful reading for me and some of my friends. I am very happy that things at the Oratory are going ahead as we hoped. It is good that Fr Trivero is helping at the Oratory. But note that he is rather over-energetic with the boys and I know that some of them have been quite put off by that. See that every dish at the Oratory is made tasty with oil. I am sending you two pigeons from our coop which I think Fr Pacchiotti will not be unhappy about. I wanted to send two chickens but my mother didn’t want to, because she believes this kind of food should be eaten in the place it was produced. But we can talk about this in another letter.

Yesterday near here a man was buried who had been much talked about. Doctors said his illness was incurable, but encouraged by a pious person he vowed to go to confession, communion and Mass. God was pleased and gave

³⁸ Addressees of the letters in this collection: John Borel (1801-1873), priest, theologian, friend and collaborator of Don Bosco’s (who writes: *Borrelli*). Joseph Trivero († 1874), priest helping in the work of the oratories. Lorenzo Turchi, farmer, father of John Turchi (1838-1909), student at the Oratory. Magistrate at Borgo Dora in Turin in 1865 was Giovanni Devalle (E[m] II, p. 122). Emanuele Fassati (1852-1874), son of Marchioness Fassati, whom Don Bosco write to regularly. John Cinzano (1854-), priest, former Salesian. Joseph Bertello (1848-1910), priest and Salesian, General Councillor for Vocational Schools (1898-1910). Placido Gabrielli (1832-1911), son of Prince Mario Gabrielli and Carlotta Bonaparte, nephew of Luciano Bonaparte Napoleone.

him back his health. But the man forgot about what he had promised to do and although his wife and others warned him to keep the word he had given the Lord, he did nothing about it. He enjoyed about a month of good health but suddenly fell ill last Saturday, and went to eternity within a few hours, the poor man, without being able to go to confession or communion. Everyone was talking about this yesterday at his burial.

Please send me a copy of the booklets: *The Six Sundays etc.*, *Louis Comollo*, *Guardian Angel*, *Church History*, which you will find in the wardrobe near my desk.

My health continues to improve, just that I have had a toothache for some days: but this *hurts for a while then goes away*. The grapes are ready, tell Fr Pacchiotti and Fr Bosio, and think about it yourself ...

I'd be very happy if you can give me more news of Genta, Gamba, the two Ferreros and Piola, if they are behaving well or causing chaos etc.

Greetings to our colleagues Fr Pacchiotti and Fr Bosio, and believe me I am with all my heart always, in the Lord,

Your affectionate servant and friend,

Fr John Bosco.

P.S. Give this letter to Fr Vola. I am leaving now to go to Passerano for a break.

**158. Letter to the Superintendent of Studies in Turin,
Francesco Selmi**

Critical ed. in E(m) I, pp. 588-590.

*Turin, 13 July 1863

Your Excellency the Superintendent,

Heartfelt thanks to Your Excellency for clearly explaining things to me that, were they true, would put our classes for poor boys in contravention of government regulations. I believe you would want to accept my observations

as sincere. The differences, as you like to call them, were limited to a few accidental things which I believe should not cause any apprehension.

Just the same I would like you to understand well what I was saying in passing about your observations, so I would ask you to allow me to put my political profession of faith into just a few sentences.

I have been in Turin for 23 years and I have always put whatever I had and all my efforts into the prisons, hospitals, our city squares, all on behalf of abandoned boys. But I have never sought to get mixed up with politics, not while preaching nor when writing (these items are all printed with my name to them), nor in any other way. Being linked with any newspapers is forbidden in every respect in this house whatever their persuasion. Whatever is said otherwise is just unfounded rumour. With regard to the accidental matters that you noted, let me say:

1. They say that we instruct the clerics to be against the Government - this is not true because the only classes they are given here are Greek and Latin literature. For Philosophy, Hebrew, Bible, Theology they attend classes at the Seminary.

2. *History of Italy* is only used in our classes for Roman history. As for the Duke of Parma and other characters where I leave out their blameworthy behaviour, I did that to support the principle established by the famous educators Girard and Aporti, who advise that we omit anything in books for children that would leave a bad impression on the youngsters' tender and fickle minds. Nevertheless, in the next reprint I will also modify and take out any passages you have indicated to me or should still wish to.

3. We use no other curriculum than the Government ones as the Inspector, Cavaliere Torsi and your secretary Dr Vigna were able to observe.

4. The *Catholic Readings* cannot be called anti-political since they never speak of political matters. If there are things that someone considers inaccurate then I must ask them to forgive a poor historian who does what he can to write the truth and often cannot satisfy the reader, either because there are things he does not like, or because he has drawn from insufficiently 'purified' sources.

But here too I accept what you have indicated verbally. Note of course that I am merely a collaborator for the *Catholic Readings*. The office is in Turin, the management is made up of other individuals. The only thing I do is to print them, because it gives work to our poor boys.

5. Then there was an accusation that we have no picture of the King. This is completely incorrect, there is more than one of them; there is one in each of the three offices, in the secretary's office, in the parlour. It would be difficult to find a house of education where they pray for the King more than we do and for all the Royal family. With regard to the classes, if you allow me to continue this way until the current teachers have finished their exams, you will be doing something good for our poor boys, otherwise I will have to find registered teachers and therefore refuse admission to a good number of poor boys. But I very much hope that you continue your favourable approach.

Then remember that we are both public personalities: you by authority and I by charity. You need nothing from me but I need a lot from you. We can both deserve God's blessings, the gratitude of human beings by helping poor youngsters and taking them off the streets. May God bless you abundantly and all your family. Forgive me bothering you again and believe me that I am, with all respect,

Your Excellency's,

most indebted servant,
Fr John Bosco.

159. Letter to the City Magistrate, Turin

Critical ed. in E(m) II, pp. 120-122.

[Turin, 18 April 1865]

To the City Magistrate, City of Turin,

Having seen the accusations against cleric Mazzarello, an assistant in the book-binding workshop at the house known as the Oratory of St Francis de Sales; having likewise seen those concerning the youths Federico Parodi,

Giovanni Castelli, Giuseppe Guglielmi, and also carefully noting the attitude of Fr John Bosco the director of this establishment in wanting to resolve the matter with the least disturbance to the authorities at the city magistrate's court, he believes he can intervene in the name of all concerned in the matter concerning the youth Carlo Boglietti. He is ready to respond adequately to whoever requires it.

Before taking up the matter in question it would seem appropriate to note that article 650 of the penal code seems to be quite extraneous to this matter, since if one were to interpret it in the sense indicated by the city magistrate's office it would mean that families, parents and whoever takes their place could no longer correct their offspring nor prevent insolence and insubordination, [things] that would be injurious to private and public morals.

Moreover, to hold certain boys in check who are for the most part referred by government authorities, we have been given the faculty of taking what we consider to be appropriate action, and in extreme cases to request the arm of the Law, as we have done more than once.

Now coming to the case of Carlo Boglietti, we must regretfully but frankly assert that he was given fatherly advice on a number of occasions but to no avail; that he showed he was not only incorrigible but insulted, threatened, and swore at his assistant, the cleric Mazzarello, in front of all his mates. The assistant is of a very meek and mild nature and was so terrified that since then he has been ill and unable to re-assume his duties. He is still ill.

After this event, Boglietti ran away from the house without saying anything to the superiors he was sent to, and we only learned from his sister that he had taken flight, when she learned that he wanted to go to the police. She did not do this because she wanted to preserve his reputation.

Meanwhile his mates continued with their uproar and it was necessary to ask some to leave the establishment, while unfortunately we had to hand others over to the police, who sent them to prison.

So it is with great regret that we see a young hoodlum insulting and threatening his superiors and having the audacity to report those who have

dedicated their lives and livelihood for his benefit to the authorities. Public authority should come to the aid of private authority and not vice versa.

Should we wish to come to a detailed examination of what happened with the witnesses we have nominated, we would not oppose Carlo Boglietti being sued for costs that may be incurred and being held responsible for any serious consequences that may still eventuate.

Meanwhile we are requesting reparation for damages to the assistant's honour and person at least so he can resume his ordinary work.

We would like the costs of this to be borne by this young man. We also request that neither Carlo Boglietti, nor Mr Stefano Caneparo, his relative or adviser, no longer come to the above-mentioned establishment and repeat these acts of insubordination and the other disturbances committed at other times.

Fr John Bosco.

160. Letter to young Emanuele Fassati

Critical ed. in E(m) II, p. 253.

Turin, 1 June 1866

Dear Emanuele,

In the letter you were kind enough to send me, you asked me to pray to the Virgin to grant you the good will and energy to study. I did this willingly and with all my heart throughout the month of May. Of course, I do not know if my prayer was heard. I would dearly love to know, though I have every reason to believe that it is so.

Papa, mama and Azelia are well; I often see them at half past five in the evening and our conversation is mostly about you. The others are already afraid that you might not go ahead with your studies and so they add further concerns to the many you have already had this year. I always console them, supported by Emanuele's intelligence, good will and promises. Am I wrong? I believe not.

Just two months more and then what great celebrations if you pass your exams well! So then, dear Emanuele, I will continue to recommend you to the Lord. But you have to make an effort: work, diligence, knuckling down, obedience are all part of your succeeding in your exams.

May God bless you dear Emanuele. Always be your parents' consolation with your good behaviour. Also pray for me. I am with all my heart,

Your most affectionate friend,

Fr John Bosco.

161. Circular: Holidays

Critical ed. in E(m) II, pp. 517-518.

[Turin, April 1868]

[Worthy Sir,]

Given frequent requests from many respectable fathers of families and after many invitations by people who have experience in educating the young, I thought it well to take the following decision. Holidays throughout the year will be reduced to just one month: from September 15 to October 15. This decision was taken for the following reasons.

1. The most respected colleges in Italy and the ones with the best results in studies only grant one month of holidays to their pupils.
2. Years of experience show that youngsters who spend three months away from school lose much of the profit they gained during the school year.
3. Time is gained for older students who might need to complete their course of studies more quickly.

I hope, good sir, that you will accept this modification which has been made solely in view of the advantage it can bring to our boys for whom we show all our good will in the Lord, to whose honour and glory we have dedicated and continue to dedicate our poor efforts.

During the warmer months we will try to see to extending the recreation and that they have more frequent outings so that the boys can maintain the necessary health of body to put all possible effort into their studies. This is for the comfort of the parents.

Your most humble servant,

The Director,
Fr John Bosco

162. Circular to Salesians on discipline

Critical ed. in E(m) IV, pp. 177-180.

Turin, 16 November 1873

To my sons in the house of ...

On discipline

As we begin this school year, beloved sons, it would be good for me to fulfil my promise to speak to you about the basis of morals and study which is discipline for our students.

I do not pretend to be giving you a treatise on moral or civil precepts which refer to discipline; I only want to explain what I have found to be fruitful ways of achieving good results in my experience of over 45 years.

I hope these efforts and results can help you in managing the various tasks that may be entrusted to you.

By correction I do not mean punishment or the whip, things we never talk about amongst ourselves, nor do I mean skill or mastering something or other. By discipline I mean *a way of life in conformity with the rules and customs of an institute*.

To get good results from discipline, first of all it is essential that the rules are observed in everything and by everyone.

Take a family where many are involved in collecting things but one loses things; or take a building where many are working to construct it but just one is working to tear it down—we will see the family end up ruined and the building collapse into a pile of rubble.

This kind of observance has to be found in the members of the Congregation and the youngsters which Divine Providence has entrusted to our care. Discipline will have no effect if the rules of the Society and the college are not observed.

Believe me, dear friends, that the moral and educational benefit, or their ruin, depend on this observance.

At this point you will ask me: what are the practical rules that can help us for acquiring such a precious treasure?

Two things: one general, the other particular. In general if you observe the rules of the Congregation, discipline will triumph.

Let no one ignore the rules proper to his role; let him observe them and have his dependants do likewise. If the one who presides over others is not observant, he cannot expect his dependants to do what he overlooks; otherwise they will say: *medice, cura te ipsum* (physician, heal yourself).

But to come to some practical situations, I would mention things that refer to individuals in particular.

1. *The Director*: He has to know about the duties of all the members and others who are part of the staff [*congregati*], who does what.

It is not that he has to do so much work, but he has to see that each does the task assigned to him.

Our houses can be compared to a garden. There is no need for the head gardener to do too much; it is enough that he has good practical workers, teaches them horticulture, helps them, alerts them in time, and is there for more important matters to help people who find the major occasions awkward. The Director is this gardener, the pupils are the tender plants, the staff are all

gardeners dependent on their employer or the Director, who is responsible for everyone's actions.

The Director will benefit then if he is not away from the house entrusted to him, except for serious reasons; and if these serious reasons arise he will never be away without first establishing who takes his place should anything happen.

He should often move around amongst them in all charity, or at least ask them to account for dormitories, the kitchen, infirmary, classrooms and study.

He should constantly be a loving father who wants to know everything, do good to everyone and evil to no one.

2. *Prefect*: The Prefect or one looking after discipline should see that the timetable of the house is observed. As far as possible he should prevent boarders from mixing with people from outside; he should see that assistants, and in general those in authority are amongst the boys during recreation.

He should see that outings keep on the move, meaning that there are no breaks where the boys can escape from the assistants' watchful eye.

No one should be allowed to step out of line, go of to cafes, taverns; they should not mix with outsiders or bring in books, newspapers, letters that have not been through the hands of the superior.

3. *Catechist*: The catechist should remember that the spirit and moral benefit of our houses depends on promoting the Altar Boys, the *Immaculate Conception*, the *Blessed Sacrament* and *St Aloysius sodalities*.

He should see that everyone, especially the coadjutors, find it easy to go to confession and communion.

If people involved in domestic work ever need instruction, he will see that no one misses out on receiving communion, being confirmed, serving Mass and the like.

He should talk to them some time before feast days are celebrated or with little talks or some sort of example prepare the students with all the decorum and solemnity possible.

4. *Teachers:* Teachers should be the first in the classrooms and the last to leave.

They should love all their pupils equally, encourage them all and show disregard for no one.

They should feel sorry for the more ignorant members of the class, look after them carefully, often question them, and if needs be speak to whoever is in charge to see that they are given help outside the classroom.

A teacher should never forget that he is a Christian teacher, so when the subject matter or some feast day offers the opportunity to offer a good thought, some advice or a warning to his pupils, he should never miss the opportunity.

5. *The assistants:* All those who have some authority in classrooms, dormitories, the kitchen, the reception or any other part of the house should carry out their duties in every respect, practise the rules of the Society, especially religious practices, but they should take great care to prevent murmuring against superiors or the way the house is run, and especially insist, recommend and spare nothing to prevent bad conversations.

6. We are all encouraged to tell the Director everything that can help promote what is good and avoid the Lord being offended.

The Lord told his disciples one day: *Hoc fac et vives*. Do this, that is, observe my precepts, and you will have eternal life. I say the same to you my dear sons. Put into practice what this loving Father has explained to you and you will have the Lord's blessing, enjoy peace of mind, discipline will triumph in our houses and we will see our pupils grow from virtue to virtue and take the secure road to their eternal salvation.

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ always be with me and you, so that we may all constantly love and serve him in this life to one day praise him and bless him forever in Heaven. Amen.

Yours affectionately in Jesus Christ,

Fr John Bosco

163. Letter to cleric John Cinzano and his pupils

Critical ed. in E(m) IV, pp. 244-245.

Romae, nonis martii [7 March] 1874

My dear Cinzano and all your very dear students,

That is an excellent suggestion you made when you asked your pupils to promise to give me two weeks of good behaviour as a gift. That was a praiseworthy idea and its success deserving of even more praise still.

You did not tell me about yourself, but by telling me that everything has been excellent, I believe that in the word 'everything' your own reverend self would be included. Is that right?

So thanks to you and thanks to all your students for the gift you have given me. I will demonstrate my gratitude once I return home. A glass of the best, a nice dish, a candy etc. etc. will be a sign of satisfaction that I will give everyone.

I will be with you all again shortly; you have all been occupying my thoughts and concerns. I will be with you who are the masters of my heart, and as St Paul says, wherever I go you are always *gaudium meum et corona mea*. I know you have prayed for me and I thank you for that. I will be able to tell you the results of your prayers.

But, my dear sons, *motus in fine velocior*, I now need you to redouble your prayers and fervour and continue in your good behaviour.

There is very little I can do for you but the thanks God is preparing for you are great. I will also pray for you, bless you with all my heart, and for me, go to communion once, with an *Our Father and Hail Mary* to St Joseph.

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ always be with you. Amen.

And you, *Cinzano my son, age viriliter ut coroneris feliciter, perge in exemplum bonorum operum. Argue, obsecra, increpa in omni patientia et doctrina. Spera in*

Domino: ipse enim dabit tibi velle et posse. Cura ut coniuges comites Viancino visites, eosque verbis meis saluta, eisque nomine meo omnia fausta precare. Vale in Domino.

Joannes Bosco sacerdos

164. Letter to Fr Joseph Bertello

Critical ed. in E(m) IV, p. 448.

Turin, 9 April 1875

My dear Fr Bertello³⁹,

I am doing what I can to reawaken love for study amongst your pupils, but you do what you can as well to cooperate in this.

1. Look upon them as your brothers; loving kindness, forbearance, respect. These are the keys to their hearts.

2. Get them to study only what they can and no more. Get them to read and understand the textbook without going off the topic.

3. Question them often, invite them to explain, read, explain, read, explain.

4. Always encourage, never humiliate; praise as much as you can without showing disregard unless it is a sign of displeasure as a punishment.

Try putting that into practice then let me know the response. I will pray for you and yours and believe that I am, in Jesus Christ,

Your most affectionate friend,

Fr J. Bosco

³⁹ Cf. Giuseppe BERTELLO, *Scritti e documenti sull'educazione e sulle scuole professionali*. Introduction, critical text and notes by J.M. Prellezo. "Istituto Storico Salesiano". Roma. LAS 2010, pp. 10-11.

165. Letter to a mother concerned about her son

Published in E III, pp. 411-412.

Turin, 11 November 1878

My good lady,

Your son is certainly in a bad situation. Age, knowledge, substances are terrible snares the devil uses to lure so many unwary youths to spiritual and bodily ruin. A Christian mother in this case should:

1. Take him in hand, go with him everywhere if he will put up with it. Reason with him, advise him to go to the holy sacraments, listen to the sermons, do some good reading. If he does not give in, have patience, but keep it up.

2. If you want you can tell him that for sure, if he does not control himself better, his life will be short and maybe ...

3. Try to get him to mix with other family members or other upright people, and keep away from bad companions.

4. Pray to God and St Monica.

In my own poor way I will pray especially to Mary Help of Christians. And then, I also have much need of your spiritual and corporal charity. I have an abundant harvest in my hands; we could win over many souls, but I lack the material means.

May God bless you and all your family, and pray for me too. I will always be, in Jesus Christ,

Your humble servant,

Fr John Bosco

166. Letter to Prince Gabrielli: The offer of the Saint Michael Hospice at Ripa and the practice of the preventive system

ASC A1710601 *Handwritten original by Don Bosco* ms by G. Berto with corrections and original additions; ed. in E III, pp. 481-482⁴⁰.

Rome, [30 June 1879]

Your Highness,

A number of affairs over these past days made it impossible for me to have the pleasure of responding promptly to your letter of 4 June.

Now I can offer my humble thanks to you and all the administration of the St Michael's Hospice for which you have been kind enough to turn to the Pious Salesian Society of St Francis de Sales to run that Religious Institute.

I would like the respectable administration to achieve its purpose and for my part I would like to satisfy the request. So it would be good for me to explain something about the most essential part of your letter: entrusting us with the direction of the boys and their immediate dependence and supervision.

In general all this is acceptable, and I would try to put it into practice as follows:

1. The administration exercises its authority in everything to do with finances, personnel related to that, buying, selling, building, repairs and the like.

2. Father Bosco will offer a Director, Bursar, Prefects, Doorkeeper, Trade Teachers, school Teachers and others for the number needed to ensure discipline, good morals and the personal benefit of the pupils. A fair remuneration will be established for the staff, individually or as a group.

3. The administration will pay a daily or monthly wage according to the boys it intends to have admitted to the Institute.

⁴⁰ The formalities that had begun did not conclude with a positive outcome: cf. G. BARBERIS, *Cronachetta* 1879, Quad. 15, p. 13.

4. The director of the boarding section will be responsible for everything regarding the Institute and will accept young pupils according to the conditions established by the administration.

The Director is prepared to retain current service personnel and trade teachers that the administration thinks convenient and who have proven their worth.

This way the administration will have all the financial advantages it wishes, the purpose of the Institute would be kept intact and it would be able to exercise its authority, while the *Salesian Society* for its part would put into practice everything essential for it to preserve its purpose, because we use a very special system of discipline in our houses which we call preventive, where we never use punishments or threats.

Kind ways, reason, loving kindness, and a very special kind of supervision are the only means we use to gain discipline and good morals amongst our pupils, as Your Highness would have noted from the Regulations of the house in Turin which is also in use for all our houses in Italy, France and America.

I would be very pleased if Your Highness or some of the gentlemen of the administration, should they be in Turin, would honour us with a visit to our hospice and see what could be taken from or added in applying this to the Regulations for the St Michael's Hospice in Ripa.

I have briefly explained some of my thinking here; should we need to talk about this further you could write to me, and I will ask a friend in the Roman Prefecture or the Ministry for the Interior who know something of how we do things, and they can offer the necessary clarifications and also take up matters in my name.

May God keep you in good health, and I am, with the greatest of respect,

Your Highness' humble servant,

Fr John Bosco