

ASSISTANCE

The Essence of Don Bosco's Preventive System (1876-1884)

(Part 1)

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Some important features between the period from October 1876 to May 1884 in Don Bosco's life, are the specification of his educational and pastoral objectives and the consolidation of his "educational style."¹ We would like to focus our present contribution on this style which mainly came into being from his own personal experience. Instead of the term "educational style," the Salesians and their co-workers generally use in their writings the terms "Don Bosco's method of education," "the preventive system" or "the educational system" of Don Bosco. In the course of this study, the different shades and meaning between the terms, will become more clear. It is obvious that the privileged term is the 'preventive system', which goes back to the short treatise Don Bosco published in the autumn of 1877.²

The Official Name of a "Pedagogical System" Already in Use for Many Years

As far as careful research was able to define up until now, Don Bosco named his way of educating 'the preventive system' for the first time in the treatise bearing that same name. No doubt, he was previously obliged to talk about the quintessence of his way of educating to those who questioned him

1. "Consolidate" is indeed the word used by G. Barberis in his notes on April 21 1877 (BARBERIS, G., Cronichetta 12, XII according to BRAIDO, P., (a cura di), *Don Bosco Educatore, Scritti e Testimonianze*, Roma, LAS, 1992, 212/footnote 3.

Cf BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, PB 5, Roma, LAS, 1985,9-10/footnote 7.

2. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 66; 92/566. OE XXVIII, 422-446.

about his system. But in all those years in such conversations he apparently did not use the technical term 'preventive'.³

Probable Influences

Yet it must not be overlooked that he heard the term through the use of it in the context of the fight against poverty and mendicancy, in the framework of legislation concerning the treatment of prisoners and even in the context of preventive action in education.⁴

As far as the last aspect is concerned, he may have come to know the book which Mgr. Dupanloup had written and of which an Italian translation was published in Parma in 1868-69.⁵ In fact, others too may have encountered this publication, since it was available in the library of the Oratory in Valdocco. According to Mgr. Dupanloup "the kernel of the whole accompanying process lies in disciplinary education, because the latter purposely focuses on the will and the character." It must effectively achieve three basic tasks, "maintaining, preventing and correcting." Hence the division into "directing, preventive and repressive discipline."⁶ Here we see the terms *preventive* and *repressive* which Don Bosco, some ten years later, will consider as opposite systems in order to his way of educating. In any case, he does not seem to need the 'directive' aspect to explain his views and experiences.

The Defining Moment

What was the decisive moment for Don Bosco? A meeting, some suggestion or other he received, or simply some reading during his visit to the patronage (Oratory) at Nice in 1877? Or did the spark already spring up

3. Pietro BRAIDO refers to an interview of Don Bosco with minister U. Ratazzi in 1854, but at the same time he accentuates the fact that the contents of that conversation as presented there, presupposes a preliminary knowledge of his booklet of 1877 (BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 67-69; ID., *L'Esperienza pedagogica di Don Bosco*, Roma, LAS 1988, 63; ID., *Don Bosco's pedagogical experience*, Roma, LAS 1989, 66-67).

4. BRAIDO, P., *L'Esperienza pedagogica...*, 20-25. ID., *Don Bosco's pedagogical experience*, 22-27. Cf BRAIDO, P., *Breve storia del "Sistema Preventivo"*, PB 13, Roma, LAS 1993, 60-67.

5. Monsignor Félix Antoine Philibert Dupanloup (1802 -1878), Bishop of Orléans, France. Prominent catechetical and educational author of *L'oeuvre par excellence* (1869), *L'éducation en general and La haute éducation intellectuelle* (1850), *La femme studieuse* (1869), and *Lettres sur l'éducation des filles* (1878).

6. BRAIDO, P., *Breve storia...*, 74-75; ID., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 234-235; ID., *Prevenire non reprimere, Il sistema educativo di Don Bosco*, Roma, LAS 1999, 80-83. Cf BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 39-41.

at the end of February, when, on his way back from Nice to Turin, he stayed with the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Marseille and conversed with them about his 'method'? E. Ceria wonders about this as well.⁷ And quite rightly, for on April 6th 1877, Don Bosco himself talked to G. Barberis about his stay in Marseille. Then he had told him: 'They (the staff) asked me how I could so quickly gain the good will and love of youngsters wherever I went I gave them some explanations on our preventive system, on loving kindness, etc., whereas in boarding schools in general only the repressive system is used, the superiors being serious and stern...'⁸

We may also point out that, according to the notes taken by G. Barberis, in this conversation Don Bosco, quite sure of himself, called the preventive system "our preventive system." He does so as if it were the most evident thing in the world. At the same time he sharply confronts the two systems named above. And he considers the crux of the contrast between the two to lie in the educators' attitude towards the youngsters: those who are affable, kind, good-hearted, easy to relate to, as opposed to those who are distant, reserved, and aloof.

Yet, in the light of this hypothesis, it remains rather strange that Don Bosco did not broach this new and unexpected but striking elaboration of his way of educating in his speech on March 12th in Nice, France where, in his own words, "new things are much more readily accepted and where he thought it necessary that they should get to know him better."⁹

Another possibility, of course, is the context of the preparation of the First General Chapter. In that same month of April, Don Bosco was intensely preoccupied with it. According to E. Ceria he mentioned it for the first time on April 21st 1877. Don Bosco's first thought is obvious, "I want this chapter to make history in our Congregation. When I die all our affairs will have been

7. MB XIII, 101/2 and 102/footnote; EBM XIII, 77-78.

8. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 13/2. Cf BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 211/footnote 1 and NANNI, C., *Don Bosco e la sua esperienza pedagogica*, Roma, LAS 1989, 29. The word "amorevolezza" has been translated here as "loving kindness." MB XIII, 101/2 (EBM XIII, 77-78 does not quote G. Barberis's notes literally).

9. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 13/3. Cf BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 216/2.

settled and organized.”¹⁰ Indeed, in those months he wanted to record things precisely and, in a sense, definitively.

On that same 21st of April, G. Barberis wrote down in his ‘*Cronichetta*’, “And so he (Don Bosco) gave a description of the whole feast (that had taken place in Nice March 12th), elaborated the speech (he had made there) and added to all this a summary of the ideas he held as to the educational system we advocate and that is called the preventive system.”¹¹ One should not be surprised for the fact that G. Barberis uses the terms ‘system’ and ‘preventive.’ On the contrary, just as he noted down from Don Bosco’s own words ‘our system’ a good fortnight before, so he uses ‘we’ himself as if it had never been otherwise for years.

This shouldn’t astonish us in the least, as both he and Michael Rua were collaborating closely with Don Bosco for weeks and months at the time. Don Bosco divides the work and insists with both of them that they should make it a priority. “As soon as I arrive in Turin, you must give me the Regulations of the House and I will read them through at once,” he writes to Michael Rua on March 24th 1877 from Sampierdarena. And in the same letter he inquisitively and urgently asks, “Has Don Barberis got his part ready yet?”¹²

Don Bosco made heavy weather in drafting his thoughts. “The work took him several days. He wrote and rewrote it three times. And he complained that his writing was not to his own liking. Once he threw everything on the table...Yet he didn’t give up. His expectations were too high, “I believe that this booklet will do a lot of good in France; there they are not as hard-headed as here. They are more spontaneous, they are easily excited, and they accept new things more readily. Besides, we need to be better known there.” And almost prophetically he added, “The Preventive System will be accepted and picked up especially by the press. It will cause a stir.”¹³

Consolidation of the Name or Term

To what extent in fact did papers and periodicals recognize that Don Bosco had really seized the quintessence of his method with that official

10. MB XIII, 243; EBM XIII, 177/3.

11. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 13/2. Cf BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 215-216.

12. E III, 160/8°. Also see BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 212/footnote 3.

13. For the whole paragraph BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 13/3. Cf BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 215-216; ID., *L’Esperienza pedagogica...*, 62/footnote 41; ID., *Don Bosco’s pedagogical experience*, 65-66/footnote 41.

name? And did they in any way contribute in making that name stick so as to signify his pedagogical and pastoral work among the young? These remain unanswered questions. Yet, a journalist of the *Journal de Rome* in April 1884, seems to have shown sufficient insight. In one of his questions to Don Bosco he uses the latter's favourite term 'system' (not "method") connected with the suggestive 'your.' "Would you please, tell me what your educational system is?"¹⁴ With a reporter's eye, he was convinced he had spotted something quite specific in that system and which, to his knowledge, was missing in other educational methods used at the time.

Don Bosco Himself Propagates His Radical Choice

Just as Don Bosco took the lead in spreading the motto "educate to make good Christians and citizens worthy of respect," in the same way he took the initiative when propounding the "preventive system." For instance to his Salesians, in the course of the 26th session of the First General Chapter (5th

14. MB XVII,85/4; EMB XVII, 64. Later still the Director of the Major Seminary in Montpellier will regret that he could not have a personal interview with Don Bosco. He would have liked to ask him about "all those little secrets of his to lead souls to love Our Dear Lord." Yet he may have been able already to ask him, "What is your secret in governing and guiding such a great number of children with so few assistants?" To which Don Bosco must have answered that he "instilled fear of God into their hearts." On this Director Dupuy reacts in his letter of 2nd July 1886, "But that is only the beginning of wisdom. What I need to know is how you manage to guide souls to the summit of wisdom, which is to love for God." Then he tells Don Bosco that at the monthly recollection with the priests he had spoken about the method that St Vincent de Paul and St Francis of Sales used to take souls to perfection. And he explains to him wherein, in his opinion, the difference between the two consists. Finally he asks Don Bosco, "It would be most kind of you if, dear father, you who have carefully studied those two great saints, were to let me know if our conclusions were right" (MB XVIII, 656/Doc. 20; EBM XVIII, 592) It can hardly be doubted that the director of the seminary meant Don Bosco's method of spiritual guidance. When they read that letter to Don Bosco, he seems to have called out, "They want me to state what my method is! Really...I would not know what it is myself. I have always gone along as our Lord inspired me and as the circumstances demanded" (MB XVIII, 126-127; EBM XVIII, 96). In this way Don Bosco took the word 'method' over from that letter. But did he at that very moment quite realize what the author actually meant? Later some Salesians certainly interpreted Dupuy's question differently. For them "method" meant "pedagogical system" both with Dupuy and with Don Bosco. Cf MB XVIII, 127/1; EBM XVIII, 96. But that is not quite evident.

October 1877), speaking about a treatise on Sacred Eloquence, he said, “ Our preventive system of education should be an integral part of it.”¹⁵

This propagation of his preventive system was done not only among his Salesians but also when speaking to outsiders. Thus G. Bonetti asserts, “Don Bosco often gave ample conferences in order that all might well understand and follow his fatherly system (*paterno sistema*). Several Turin priests took part in these conferences, among them the late Mgr. Eugenio Galetti, bishop of Alba.”¹⁶

When the provincial government in Turin – around 1878 – started negotiations concerning taking over the direction of Turin’s youth-prison and for the re-education of young offenders, Don Bosco seems to have remarked not without a touch of irony, “I repeat that my system of education will not be quite to the government’s liking.” But he was wrong. The Prefect really wanted to take Don Bosco on board. Therefore, Don Bosco felt obliged to make conditions, among which he lists “utter freedom in imparting religious education” and “total independence in management.”¹⁷ Which means among other things “no state interference in its direction.” This was indispensable to guarantee him the free and total application of “his system.” All of this was not problem for his negotiator. But for the latter’s superior, the minister, it was. That’s why the project fell through.

One might argue that Don Bosco took such a firm stand because in actual fact he did not want to take over that public institution. That may indeed have been one of the reasons. However, even his closest collaborators were unrelenting when the question was about the free and integral application of Don Bosco’s system, “our system,” even where they truly wanted to start a new work.

In the course of the transactions concerning the taking over of Saint Michael’s Hospice in Rome, on the contrary, Don Bosco shows himself ready for compromise, at least to a certain extent . He was willing to keep “the domestic staff and the subject masters in so far as the administration recognizes their merits and aptitudes. In this way the administration would get all the financial profits desired, maintain the institute’s aim intact and exercise full authority, whereas the Salesian Society on its part would be

15. MB XIII, 292/5; EBM XIII, 218/2. VERHULST, M., *I Verballi del primo capitolo generale salesiano (1877)*, Rome, 1980, 300/46-50.

16. BRAIDO, P., *L’Esperienza pedagogica...*, 63/3; ID., *Don Bosco’s pedagogical experience*, 67/2.

17. MB XIII, 558/2 and 6; EBM XIII, 431-432.

able to use all means indispensable to achieve its end. For in our houses we use a disciplinary system that is really very special and which we call “the preventive system.”¹⁸ The similarity between Don Bosco’s formula, namely “disciplinary system,” and the one used by Mgr. Dupanloup, is striking here.¹⁹ That system, which he calls “our educational system,” he wants to apply freely. That is something fundamental, a condition *sine qua non*, as he informs the negotiator Gabrielli in July of that same year.²⁰ It could hardly be expressed in a more self-assured and more intransigent way.

Nor does he mince words in the presence of Canon Clement Guiol in Marseille in September (?) 1879, “But your letter ...is coming up with other conditions. They turn our educational system upside down. With us all repressive means are excluded and to guarantee discipline and morality we need an absolute authority over our pupils with autonomy in education.”²¹ We don’t find here a less incisive affirmation “they might turn our system upside down.” No, Don Bosco doesn’t leave the Canon the slightest room for, or the least a glimmer of hope, a compromise. “Our system” has to be fully preserved.

His Co-Workers Corroborate His Terminology

During meetings of the staff, Giuseppe Lazzero continues employing the well-known booklet of the Barnabite Teppa and also A. Monfat’s work that became available some time later.²² This, however, does not alter the fact that he thought it necessary and useful in October 1883, when teachers, assistants, priests and superiors were present, to freshen up the contents of the little treatise by reading a chapter and adding analogous and appropriate remarks

18. MB XIV, 321/10. The letter to Prince Gabrielli has not been inserted in EBM XIV, 244. One may read E. Ceria’s note preceding this letter in E III, 481.

19. See footnote 5.

20. MB XIV, 322/8. Cf E III, 499/1: in Italian, “il nostro sistema di educazione.” As to EBM XIV see footnote 17.

21. E III, 520/point 6. Cf. the practically identical wording used by E. Ceria in a summary, “We have a special educational system, known as the ‘Preventive System of Education’ and it is impossible to apply if the pupils are not totally under our control and remain independent. We never use repressive methods, relying all times on supervision, reason and religion” (MB XIV, 22; EBM XIV, 9-10).

22. PRELLEZO, J.-M., *Valdocco nell'Ottocento tra reale e ideale, documenti e testimonianze*, Roma, LAS, 1992, 257/663-665; 677-680 and 254/603-604.

to it.²³ At any rate, in this he is conscious of the fact that he is co-responsible for keeping up a specific spirit (“nostro spirito”). Or, worded a little more accurately “at least of the spirit of Don Bosco.”²⁴ From this remark it appears that around that time Lazzero discovered that not everyone in Valdocco was working with the spirit of Don Bosco.

For his closest co-workers the guarantee to be able to educate in that spirit and in accordance with the preventive system counted, in these years, as an important condition before beginning a work elsewhere. When Count Cays was to negotiate with the Rev. Roussel in Paris, he was ordered to make two demands. One of them stipulated “that the preventive system was to be in no way hindered in its full application.”²⁵ Furthermore, in 1878 P. Guidazio was sent scouting to Montefiasconi. Four months later he wanted to leave. Although the superiors there appreciated him, he could not exercise any influence in matters concerning studies and education. He was not allowed “to break through a disciplinary tradition which has held for two centuries and has driven this school into the ground...” Thus he said that he could not even “do one tenth of the good” he “should be doing there.”²⁶ He insisted that the Salesians should be allowed to take everything in their hands, meaning, of course, working freely according to “their own educational system.”

If, on the contrary, the Salesians were given a free hand, success was guaranteed. G. Marengo had to set up a new Oratory in Lucca in very difficult circumstances. But he was successful. “At first we were told that we would never keep the work up because we did not know the boys.” They were “shirtless, shoeless, dirty, uncouth lads.” Some time later, proud and happy, he writes to Don Bosco, “Now, watch these same people, (i.e. these same sceptics) devoutly attending services, catechism sessions and classes and sermons, and they remark: “Really, the Salesians have a different method!”²⁷ The exclamation mark here is meaningful. Which concrete aspect of the

23. Ibid., 258/708-709. Unfortunately “those analogous considerations” are missing in the account. G. Lazzero also uses the expression “educational system” for a given aspect in the general way of handling the problem. Thus on 24th October 1883 (Ibidem. 259/711-716). Cf for consultation of the little treatise see a former assembly, namely on 8.2.1881 (Ibid., 246/360) and 9.3.1883 (Ibid. 258/ 688-690).

24. Ibid., 258/685-686.

25. MB XIII, 737/3; EBM XIII, 565/2.

26. MB XIII, 693-694; EBM, 533/2.

27. G. Marengo’s letter on August 27 according to MB XIII, 683/1-2; EBM XIII, 524-525.

method or of the preventive system is meant here, will be further explained in another context.

The fact that the young Marengo, who was only twenty-five at the time, speaks to Don Bosco himself about the “method” and not about “our” or “the preventive system,” should not astonish us too much. Even G. Barberis uses the two words interchangeably in his lessons. This can be seen already in the high-sounding introduction to the important chapter of his “Appunti” in which he copies the title of Don Bosco’s little treatise: “On the application of the Preventive System in the Education of the Young” However, in the first paragraph he writes of “the necessity of a good system to educate successfully.” He greatly regrets that even people who are concerned about education “don’t sufficiently study the right method for succeeding and often act blindly and unsystematically.” He insisted with his students that they should be on their guard against this. That’s why he tackles the question consistently, “Let us not delude ourselves. Supposing that all our life should be devoted to the education of youth, let us try with all our might to learn how to succeed.” By ‘this way’ he does not think of an existing, traditional method. He of course knows that “every religious family that sought to educate youngsters, made intense efforts to develop an appropriate method.” And he ascertains that “thousands and thousands of youngsters in this way received a good education from the Benedictines ...and the Jesuits.” And yet, he has “our system” in mind. By reminding us of these great orders, he wants us to understand that “our system” can be placed alongside these generally recognized educational methods. Therefore, his “own method” is by no means secondary or inferior.

G. Barberis asserts this with a solid argument which, however, he does not elaborate. Just like his illustrious predecessors, he says, that “our unforgettable father John Bosco has exerted himself all his life to give us a method.” It is not the result of a fortuitous and hasty scrambling together of opinions and experiences. Far from it! With great certainty he affirms, that “Through his life, he (Don Bosco) explained how to practise his system,” sometimes by simply putting it into practice. But this is not the same as the deliberate, detailed description of a systematic pedagogical handling of the method. It’s of course quite clear that Don Bosco’s way of acting as described by G. Barberis, must guarantee the purposeful shaping and the specific character of the method. Besides, the results yielded from the education in the houses, prove the distinctiveness of the method. The latter will also be experienced by the young Salesians, “If we apply this method, we shall be able, in accordance with changing times, circumstances and general procedures, to give such an

education that we shall, without any doubt whatsoever, reach the proposed objective.”

Then G. Barberis prepares his audience for the fact that Don Bosco has left only a partially elaborated script, “He wrote only the most important traits.” “But,” he immediately continues, “In the conferences to all the confreres, in the chapter’s meetings with the superiors and through the direction of general practice he saw to its application.” No doubt, the reference is to the concrete and detailed application of the method.. Furthermore, Barberis insists that, “Don Bosco has written only the main ideas of the system. But he applied it to the full right before our eyes..” And he concludes his introduction with the highest appreciation of the concise treatise of Don Bosco and with a penetrating appeal, “As a sign of appreciation for the work I quote Don Bosco’s words without any further commentary...except for a few little notes. These are his words: let us listen to them attentively, meditate them profoundly and faithfully and with perseverance put them into practice .”²⁸

Elsewhere in the preparation of his lessons, G. Barberis habitually uses the expressions “Don Bosco’s system” and “the system of our colleges.”²⁹ The latter, however, is a rather unfortunate limitation, probably caused by the context wherein a given task in “our colleges” is compared with a similar one in many other non-Salesian colleges. In all this no thought is given with regards to technical schools.

With no less appreciation or enthusiasm, the Salesian Francesco Cerruti writes in 1883, “The preventive system in education is presented in just a few pages in an unpretentious booklet, wherein however, more and better sound

28. For the whole passage BARBERIS, G., *Appunti di Pedagogia sacra, esposti agli ascritti della Pia Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, Litografia Salesiana, 1897, 275-278.

29. BARBERIS, G., *Appunti...*, 292/footnote and 298/footnote 1. It is quite possible that some Salesians preferred the word ‘method’ to the term ‘preventive system.’ Extracts from a letter of don Guidazio to M. Rua about the beginning of the work in Randazzo (Sicily) in 1879 are introduced by E. Ceria with the summarizing sentence, “... which were also in Sicily the salutary results of Don Bosco’s method.” (Cf MB XIV, 353/2; EBM XIV, 268/2.) E. Ceria himself uses “educational system” with the same ease. See for instance MB XIV, 358/1; EBM XIV, 272/2.

pedagogical basic rules are to be found than in so many other voluminous writings.”³⁰

Acknowledgement by People Outside the Congregation

But even outside their own circle Don Bosco's particular method was known and recognized. Proof of this is an article from 1888 in the periodical '*Revista di discipline carcerarie*.' However, the personal experiences of the author Dr Giulio Benelli, director of the prison in Turin, which underlie the article, refers to, among other things, to the visits to the Salesian institutes, particularly to the college of Lanzo, in the year 1879. This is how he formulates his observations, "The disciplinary system (*il sistema disciplinare*) in Don Bosco's institutions is not based on fear (intimidation)."³¹ Because of his personal task G. Benelli has above all an eye for the disciplinary aspect, where by the word 'intimidation' he probably means threatening with punishment and thus inspiring fear. For he remained persuaded that for a successful re-education of his young prisoners a strict discipline excluding every compromise was in principle necessary. Yet, he was now convinced that this uncompromising discipline should go together with "that gentle care (concern) which one finds in a well-run, upright family."³²

Don Bosco's treatise on the distinction between the repressive and preventive systems, was known as far as the island of Sicily. When Prior Giochino Leone Zappia, director of a college in Bronte, wanted to convince Don Bosco in 1880 to send him Salesian personnel, he wrote, "For the past hundred years this school has been run by the 'coercive' system and here I cannot find teachers who know any other way." That was the reason why the number of pupils had dropped dramatically. Therefore he now asked for a few assistants, priests or clerics who could introduce "the excellent system inspired in him (Don Bosco) by the Holy Spirit with his seven gifts."³³ Even if we were to suppose that the rather bombastic-sounding phrase should be

30. According to BRAIDO, P., *L'Esperienza pedagogica...*, 64/1; ID., *Don Bosco's pedagogical experience*, 67/2. F. Cerruti will later constitute himself the champion of the preventive system and of "vigilant and cautious assistance" (CERRUTI, F., *Le idee di Don Bosco sull'educazione e sull'insegnamento e la missione attuale della scuola*, S. Benigno Canavese, 1886, 6).

31. MB XIV, 359-360; EBM XIV, 274.

32. Ibidem.

33. MB XV, 297/2; EBM XV, 248/3. In the issue of 25th April 1884 the interviewer of 'Journal de Rome' will qualify the preventive system in the same manner, "Your educational system is really excellent" (MB XVII, 86/2; EBM XVII, 64).

ascribed to the southern temperament and to the clerical, diplomatic attempt to attract somebody, it ought nevertheless to be admitted that this man too knew something more about Don Bosco's system and its much talked-of results. Instead of repressive, however, he uses the term "coercitivo." But the latter is undoubtedly a first cousin of "repressivo."

In France too, the word "system" was much respected. The writer of an article in the *Pèlerin* of 12th May 1883, confirms this in an account of an informal interview he had with Don Bosco in Turin, "We have seen this system in action."³⁴ A number of observations made by the author and the answers given by Don Bosco, point very distinctly towards the preventive character of "this system," even if they don't elucidate it systematically and though no publicity is made for the little treatise itself.

The specific name that Don Bosco himself has chosen had really become a solid, distinctive mark, a well-known flag. The question now is what cargo this flag covered

On the Meaning of the Word "Preventive" in the term "Preventive System"

However decisive the publication of that "unpretentious" booklet may have been, it has never been considered as the only true gospel to spell out what the term "preventive system" actually contains. We have, indeed, only to recall how a person like G. Barberis thought it absolutely necessary, as proved above, to get "the conferences to all the confreres" and "the chapters with the superiors" explicitly involved in it. Furthermore it should not be forgotten that Lazzero continued consulting the books of A.M. Teppa and A. Monfat.

Moreover, both of them probably chose not to consider a *pro memoria* composed by Don Bosco in February 1878 for Francesco Crispi, the Minister of the Interior. That memorandum, however, has an extraordinary importance for a complete understanding of what Don Bosco meant by "preventive system." Neither did they consider the "General Articles" that Don Bosco published in 1877 together with the "Regulations for the Houses of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales." Those too are very important. For in Don Bosco's opinion and practice, prevention has not only to do with the manner, and the style used by the teachers/educators in their contact with youngsters:

34. MB XVI, 168; EBM XVI, 131.

it also has to do with the manner in which they try to influence the social situation itself in which the youths with social problems live.

Prevention as a Social Intervention

While sojourning in Rome in February 1878, Don Bosco had, according to the *Memorie Biografiche*, an interview with Minister Francesco Crispi. In the course of the conversation the topics “riots in youth prisons” and “educational systems” must have cropped up. Thereupon, the minister must have asked him for a “programme” or a written exposition of his system. Basing himself on this, he would be able to form a good idea of the system for himself.³⁵ In actual fact, on 21st February Don Bosco addressed a letter to the Minister of the Interior. It begins with the following communication, “I have the honour of presenting to you the basic principles through which the preventive system can be applied to vulnerable youths on public roads or in educational institutes.”³⁶ Furthermore, he says he is willing to co-operate by accepting those youths provided the government helps materially and financially.

A Fundamental Document

Don Bosco proposes the basic principles in his accompanying note with the same title as the short exposition of 1877, “*The Preventive System in the Education of Youth.*” However, from the first two paragraphs it becomes clear that he adapts his original text to the circumstances. Primarily, what the Minister needs is not a good pedagogical management in schools and boarding establishments, but a humane approach and efficient guidance in prisons for young offenders. Yet in his note Don Bosco remains true to his experiences and opinions. He pays less attention, or no attention at all, to young convicts. And that is true then for Rome and elsewhere in Italy. In his explanation he shows another priority and conceives the idea of “preventive system” in a different way, yet not in a pedagogical, methodological way. His starting-point here is, “Although the laws (the law-makers) have the culprits

35. MB XIII,483/3; EBM XIII, 375-376. Also see BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 259/4. ID., *Prevenire non reprimere...*, 29; 227-228. Cf E III, 366-367/Lettera 1794.

36. E III, 298-299. “Giovanetti pericolanti,” translated here as “vulnerable youths” means literally “boys in danger,” running the risk of ending up on the margin of society, problem-youths indeed. For the following quotations we use the text-critical edition BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 302-305. The importance of that note is so great for Don Bosco that he is willing to give a new copy to G. Zanardelli, who succeeded minister Crispi in March of that same year, should the original one have been lost (E III, 366/Lettera 1794).

in mind, they should make serious efforts to reduce their number.”³⁷ This may sound as covert criticism of society, but it is in no way obscure. His standpoint is clear: prevent them from getting into prison; prevent rather than cure. This is evident in his proposals. He is thinking especially of the number of youngsters that according to law should be in jail. The main thing in his view is “...to look after those who are in danger” or – and that again is a version of Don Bosco’s – “take care of those who are abandoned or in danger.”³⁸

Only those remarks, added by him to the original text, render comprehensible and admissible the sub-title found above the following little paragraph of his definitive considerations, “Which young people can be said to be at risk?”

The Type of Youth Concerned

Don Bosco himself distinguishes four categories of youth. The first group consists of boys who leave their homes in search of work in other towns or villages. They usually have a small amount of money that is soon spent. “If they do not find a job then,” says Don Bosco, “they run the real risk of starting to steal and take on a way of life that leads to ruin.”³⁹ At the same time he suggests that the best prevention consists in getting a job for such boys.

Orphans who have nobody to look after them form a second group. Left to their fate, they become vagrants and fall into the hands of real criminals. But he is convinced that “A friendly hand or an affectionate word could have set them back on the right way of a citizen worthy of respect and esteem.”⁴⁰ Here Don Bosco’s suggestion sounds less concrete, unless one looks at it

37. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 302/16-17. Cf. G.BOSCO, *Memorie dell’Oratory...*, 120/756-761; ID., *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales*, New Rochelle, 2007, 101-102. In those autobiographical notes he takes the same stand. He considers it as his life’s work.

38. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 302/note to line 17.

39. Ibid., 303/21-25. Concerning the meaning of “find employment” in those days, see e.g. Mia DOORNAERT, “Jospin wants money for jobs, but not for relief” (*De Standaard*, 22nd January 1998, 6). Likewise Mgr. M. MUSKENS, bishop of Breda, “People want to be reckoned with materially and socially. They must work, work, otherwise they are not regarded socially” (*Eindhovens Dagblad*, 21st March 1998, W 19).

40. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 303/26-29. Cf. the wording in: BOSCO, G., *Memorie dell’Oratory...*, 122-123; ID., *Memoirs of the Oratory...*, 104.

against the background of his years-long interest in working with youngsters and orphans.

The third group – according to Don Bosco – consists of children whose parents are unable or unwilling to take their offspring's education to heart. They either put them on the streets or leave them to fend for themselves. Unfortunately, the number of such negligent parents is considerable.⁴¹ Here he does not yet indicate any preventive measures.

The fourth and last group is composed – according to him – of vagabonds who fall into the hands of the police, but who are not yet real villains or criminals. If these young people could be given a home where they could receive instruction and some training for work, it would certainly not be necessary to lock them up; they would be kept out of prison and rehabilitated into society.⁴² Don Bosco quite obviously prefers preventing, providing for and accompanying rather than to re-educating in a youth-prison.

Don Bosco's Criterion for a Preventive Approach

Following the rules of a well-balanced exposition, there was no need, in listing the four categories, to announce anything about the manner of preventive action appropriate for each group. All this could well be kept for the his following brief paragraph on "Measures." Indeed, he introduces that short part in the following way, "Experience has shown that efficient help can be given in each of the four categories." And then he briefly outlines the components of his strategy.

For a large number of those boys Don Bosco simply thinks of opportunities for recreation and a little formation on Sundays and feast-days. From his own experience he knows that they can fairly easily be brought

41. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 303/30-33.

42. Ibid., 303/34-37. That means: integration or re-integration into society. Don Bosco's enumeration is based on simple practical experiences. It can without any difficulty be re-worded in a more scientific and stricter way according to the three categories of G.Milanesi. The latter distinguishes three levels: the primary, secondary and tertiary preventions. The primary level concerns "une population non sélectionnée de sujets, pour lesquels il existe un risque général de déviance, de marginalisation ou de pathologie sociale." The secondary "des sujets qui manifestent déjà des symptômes d'adhésion, quoique non définitive et non encore structurée, aux modèles de comportement déviant..." and the third "des sujets qui ont déjà structuré un comportement socialement inacceptable..." (MILANESI, G., *Prévention et marginalisation chez Don Bosco et dans la pédagogie contemporaine* in AVANZINI, G., *Education et Pédagogie chez Don Bosco*, Paris, Editions Fleurus, 1989, 225/footnotes 68; 69; 70). For the whole context NANNI, C., (a cura di), *Don Bosco e la sua esperienza pedagogica*, Roma, LAS, 1989, 148-165.

together for “pleasant recreation, music, gymnastics, running and jumping games, recital and theatre.” Such sound recreation naturally keeps them away from dubious bars, gambling and moral decadence. Besides recreation he also offers them formation “by means of evening lessons, instruction on Sundays and catechizing.” Through such activities, those boys not only get “what is strictly indispensable,” but also “appropriate moral nourishment” (let us say, education in value judgement) that will help them to spend the week decently. Quite a number of those who are helped in this way will have some accommodation and work as well.

However, not all are so fortunate. That’s why, when there are opportunities to meet them, one must try to identify those who are unemployed. For this last group recreation and a little formation will not be sufficient. They need more than this. Employment must be sought for them as well they must be given assistance (material, psychological and moral) during the week.

Even this assistance would be insufficient for boys “who are poor and abandoned, who lack food and clothing, and have nowhere to sleep at night. They can be truly helped only by being accepted in a boarding institution, a foster-home or a farming settlement, where they can learn a trade or a skill.”⁴³ Only in this way can they become protagonists of their personal and social emancipation and advancement. Don Bosco has had the great joy of seeing this become a reality on many occasions. He, rather euphorically, reminds Minister Crispi of no less than a hundred thousand youngsters who, “thanks to his initiative, thanks to his preventive social action, have gone a long way in life.”⁴⁴

The prevention Don Bosco advocates shows two facets. A sort of negative aspect seeks to protect children and youths from bodily and moral harm, and keep them away from or, if necessary, remove them from zones of moral and physical danger.⁴⁵ Seen from a positive perspective, prevention seeks to give them opportunities for personal development and prepare them to build up

43. For the whole passage BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 303-304.

44. Ibid., 305/83-91. This is by far more detailed and graphic than in the original treatise. Cf. therefore BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 90/518-522. Concerning the meaning of such preventive work according to Don Bosco see BIESMANS, R., *Doelstellingen van opvoeding en opleiding gevat in een kernachtig motto*, Don Bosco Studies 11, 1998, 191-199.

45. For “remove from” Don Bosco frequently uses “togliere” (MB XV, 791/4; no translation in EBM). Cf. BIESMANS, R., *Doelstellingen van opvoeding en opleiding...*, 217-218; E III, 166/Lettera 1581. “Tolti alle prigionii” in the petition to minister Crispi in BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 303/37. “Shielding them from danger” is found

their future independently and with a sense of responsibility.⁴⁶ When these youths are given a good training and a good education, they won't become miscreants or criminals who must be punished and put into prison.

On the other hand, it seems that Don Bosco expected little or nothing from efforts of the parents of such abandoned and neglected children and youngsters. In his little talk to alumni-priests in 1880 he expressed this in a particular context: , “You certainly should not neglect adults, but these, with a few exceptions, as you well know, are hardly responsive to our efforts.”⁴⁷ And this comment was meant to be a generic one. Also with respect to the possibility of saving or successfully rehabilitating youths who have already become acquainted with prison life, he seems to be very reserved on the matter. In this respect he leaves Minister Crispi out in the cold.⁴⁸ And this may have been one reason why Don Bosco's letter failed to win over either Minister Francesco Crispi himself or his successor, Giuseppe Zanardelli.

In order to prevent young people from going the same way as some adults, including certain parents, and so many other children and youths, prevention through training, moral and ethical formation and providing employment is all the more important. But Don Bosco has gone through so many things that he knows perfectly well such work does not only require innumerable efforts, but also continuous financial support. So he dares to propose to the Minister a collaboration between State and private initiative. This means that the State provides material and financial support: infrastructure and equipment on the one hand, and daily and monthly subsidies on the other. And he calculates

in a table-talk to past pupils-priests in 1880 as “alontaniamoli dai pericoli” (MB XIV, 513/1; EBM XIV, 402/4).

46. Looking back on his life's work during a speech in Paris (1883) Don Bosco himself distinguishes a double result, “Notre oeuvre obtenait alors un double résultat de préserver du mal des vagabonds que nous recueillions, et de réhabiliter, de raffermir après leur chute les jeunes libérés, à leur sortie de prison” (MB XVI, 527/8; not translated in EMB). That is to say, “(Our work thus took a double benefit: we shielded from evil those vagrant lads whom we had taken in, and we rehabilitated and set back on their feet those who, after having fallen, gained their freedom from prison.)” This very sentence, however, is put in brackets in the Italian version and in the English translation (MB XVI, 236/6; EBM XVI, 184/2). In *the regulations for the houses* (1877) he sticks to the preference for youths belonging to the middle classes and the poor, because they need most help and assistance (helping presence) (OE XXIX, 155/2; literally “soccorso e assistenza”).

47. MB XIV, 513/1; EBM XIV, 402/4.

48. Something similar seems to have happened in Turin. There too discussions about taking over the education of young prisoners broke down (MB XIII, 557-559; EBM XIII, 431-432).

for the Minister that it will cost him per boy only one third of what he is spending now for those who were housed in state-run re-education centres.⁴⁹ At any rate, his preventive system, considered as individual development, social integration and advancement of neglected children and youths is preferable by far to the repressive control, punishing and incarcerating of young offenders

Therefore, in the struggle against marginalisation and menacing moral decadence it is not only vocational training that plays an important role, but also the bringing up of boys as “honest, decent citizens” who deserve respect and esteem. This is clearly shown by Don Bosco’s own words to Minister Crispi.⁵⁰

During the second General Chapter Don Bosco again highlighted the need for faith-led action with an anecdote and its application. [the sentence starting with ‘First’ should be on the same line as the one ending in ‘application’.

First he relates a meeting he had with the Pope, “I still remember what the great Pope Pius IX, of blessed memory, said to me one day, “We are living in a materialistic period. The efforts of good people in prayers, practices of piety and sacraments have no value at all for unbelievers. Outgoing activities are necessary as well. Alongside their philanthropic works we must put our works of charity such as: accommodating boys, visiting prisoners and the like. Thus we won’t only be pleasing to God but even to non-believers, who therefore will leave us alone or even help us with our charitable works.” Then he goes on with the affirmation, “I often have to do with front-rank liberals myself. Sometimes they don’t know me, and the conversation being about us, they say: O yes, Don Bosco is a worker, the Salesians are workers. They take poor boys from off the streets; they are benefactors to civil society. They are doing good things. May priests of that sort live long for the welfare of their fellowmen. We cannot measure up to the challenge of a godless world with ‘Our Fathers,’ or even with miracles. This world wants to see actions: we must

49. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 304/54-73. According to E. Ceria Don Bosco one day (about the same time?) proposed to the government in Turin” to pay eighty centesimi a day for every juvenile offender” (MB XIII, 558/6; EBM XIII, 432/2).

50. P BRAIDO, *Don Bosco Educatore*, 305/82.

take in lots of boys.”⁵¹ His words meant, “We must take lots of boys off the streets and give them a good education and training.”

From a previous research it became obvious that Don Bosco in his exposition for the minister brought only the purely secular packet of his educational targets to the forefront. The reason why he did so was also explained there. Within the select cadre of a General Chapter we hear him put a similar emphasis in the statement mentioned above. Nevertheless, it remains irrefutably true that educating boys to be good Christians was for him more important in order to achieve the full development of young people.⁵²

What has been treated up till now concerns a first facet of prevention. Don Bosco's closest collaborators, especially those favourably disposed towards youths in vocational training, fully agree to this. By taking problem-youths into their institutes and through training activities keeping pace with continually developing social insights, they successfully take preventive action. This indeed is generally appreciated in the years 1876-1884.⁵³

The second and usually better-known facet of his “preventive system” is in fact omnipresent in the contact with the youths admitted into his training institutes. It is the so-called ‘intra-educative’ facet.⁵⁴

Prevention as the Pedagogical Method in the Education Process Itself

The question then is no longer whether you tackle the phenomenon of neglected youths threatened with marginalization and criminalization in a repressive or preventive way: picking them up and punishing them or accompanying them and assisting them. The question is: how to deal with youngsters in a situation of training and education? Indeed by showing the preventive value and efficacy of accepting, training and educating

51. From the accounts of the Second General Chapter according to ROCHOWIAK, J., *Il capitolo generale 2° della società salesiana (1880) Problemi di educazione e di vita salesiana*, Benediktbeuern, 1993, 120/2. Don Bosco is so convinced of this that in an after-dinner speech to past pupils in 1883 he says, “The goal we aim for is well thought of by people, including those who in matters of religion do not see eye to eye with us” (MB XVI, 290/3; EBM XVI, 226-227).

52. BIESMANS, R., *Doelstellingen van opvoeding en opleiding...*, 83-84.

53. *Ibid.*, 204-214.

54. Indeed G. Milanesi uses in this context the term “aspetto intra-educativo” (côté intra-éducatif). Cf. NANNI, C., *Don Bosco e la sua esperienza*, 161/4 resp. AVANZINI, G., *Education et Pédagogie chez Don Bosco*, 207/3.

them, and by pointing towards the intentional pursuing of this influence and its significance, the notion of “preventive” is far from being completely understood. According to Don Bosco and his followers the educational process itself must also and even above all follow a preventive way.

What he meant by this was clearly indicated in the first concise chapter of his little treatise in 1877, “Quite different from this, and I might even say opposed to it, is *the preventive system*. It consists in making laws and regulations of an institute known, and then watching carefully so that the pupils at all times be under the vigilant eye of the Rector or the assistants, who like loving fathers can converse with them, take the lead in every movement and in a kindly way give good advice and correction; in other words, this system places the pupils in the impossibility of wrongdoing.”⁵⁵

This paraphrase, or elucidation, comprises a few essential elements. One gets a better insight by comparing them with the elements in the description of the repressive system. “The repressive system,” so Don Bosco writes, “consists in making the law known to the subjects, and afterwards watching them to discover the transgressors of these laws, and inflicting, when necessary, the punishments deserved.”⁵⁶

First of all, the word “law” as opposed to “prescriptions and regulations.” Both systems have in common that the “subjects,” respectively “the pupils,” are informed previously. But the term “law” evokes something distant, chilly, coercive and menacing. The lawgiver remains anonymous and distant. When saying “prescriptions and regulations,” especially in Don Bosco’s institutes, we mean rather self-evident arrangements, arising from daily life. They directly concern that very life, especially in view of reaching the common and personal object of education and training, which indeed stands out in the regulations. The regulations constitute a sort of supportive *vade mecum* with advice from someone who has the best of intentions towards every single young person. In the *Regulations for the Houses*, Don Bosco time and again addresses the youths directly and confidentially, “Mind, dear boys... The church-building, dear boys...Man, my dear boys...” In the prescriptions themselves the educator is very near, he is personally present. Besides, every week certain directives have to be read out⁵⁷ which can promote the

55. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 83/389-394 . *Constitutions and Regulations of the Society of St Francis de Sales*, Rome Aurelio, 1997, 247.

56. Ibid., 82/380-381.

57. OE XXIX, 155/1. To give only a few examples:159/1; 160/Capo IV; 164/Capo V; then 171/point 10. Reading it repeatedly may cause boredom of course or degenerate into formalism. On the other hand, reading (it) only once e.g. in the beginning of the

knowledge, understanding and acceptance ('interiorization') of them and enhance the preventive action. Finally, the assistant/educator does not punish immediately. First he corrects in a friendly, amicable manner. By doing so, he hopes to prevent truly punishable "faults," to "make them almost impossible."

Further, in both systems, they speak about "watching over," in Italian the same verb "sorvegliare." But the character of watching over is different. The repressive method, says Don Bosco when explaining the two opposite systems, only intends to discover and punish the transgressors. So it does not seek to positively stimulate good actions, worthy of a human being. Those, on the contrary, who choose the preventive system, seek friendly, loving contact, go to the youngsters, converse with them, assist them, give good advice and admonish them before punishing. Yet, even the latter is done in a gentle manner.

It is precisely this assistance, this aid, this supporting presence of the educator or teacher/educator the quintessence, the soul of the preventive system. Don Bosco rejects the term "surveillant" which is often used in boarding institutes and schools, if not radically, at least in most of his utterances. He knowingly prefers the term "assistant" and often also "assistance." Those are the words which were so dear to him and which he used in his work in the Sunday and holiday Oratory.⁵⁸

"Assistance" as the Key to the Preventive System in Education

The ten articles preceding the publication of the little treatise have been given by Don Bosco the title "*General rules for those who have to guide or assist our boys.*"⁵⁹ Mindful of the given characterization of the preventive system where he gives the [di]rector the first place, we should not be surprised that here too he mentions first those "who hold the direction." That title above the ten directives was left out in the first edition of 1877. But this omission is compensated by the first article in which he (Don Bosco) addresses himself to "those who hold an office or assist the boys." The fact that he addresses himself to both categories of educators at the same time is very important in itself. And article eight also pushes "teachers and assistants positively to the foreground.

new school year (cf. PRELLEZO, J. M., *Valdocco nell'Ottocento...*, 258/704-705) might have too little effect.

58. MB XIII, 421/2; EMB XIII, 330/3: 'assistenti' has become "superiors" in this translation. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 289/11. Cf. OE XXIX, 34 and also BARZAGHI, G., *Alle radici del sistema preventivo di Don Bosco*, Milano, L.E.S., 1989, 116-117.

59. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 288/1-2.

The idea and the conviction that “assistance” in the meaning of “being with the boys” are indispensable and absolutely necessary in his educational system never leaves him. In the *Regulations for the houses* he describes in detail the assistants’ tasks in classes and study-rooms, in workshops and dormitories. The same is true for the assistants, the ‘peacemakers’ (those who settle disputes) and the games masters in the *Regulations for the day-boys*.⁶⁰ Already from the special attention alone appears the pivotal function of assistance in the whole of his educational system.

In order to better focus on Don Bosco’s preference and vision it may be useful to compare his emphasis with A.M. Teppa’s vision. The latter concludes his first chapter with a view on the repartition of his work. He thinks that the twofold aim of education (“promoting the good and preventing evil”) must be realised through another twofold approach, “*directly* through a correct use of authority, and *indirectly* through good role-models.”⁶¹ It is obvious that according to him, the correct use of authority is pivotal. The object pursued is unquestionably identical. But the way he maps out how to achieve it shows a different angle of incidence. Yet Don Bosco’s way will more than once cross Teppa’s or run parallel with it. With the discussion of the draft text in the first General Chapter and the publication of the definitive version in 1877, Don Bosco consolidates the central role of assistance. Indeed most elements of both regulations go back to earlier versions of them.

Centrality of “Assistance” in Don Bosco’s Words and Writings (1876-1884)

No wonder that he feels very concerned about the proper emphasis he wants to see in the course of pedagogy for the confreres’ formation. He insisted that this course should be given in a way that was in keeping with their tasks as Salesians. He would even have liked greater attention be given to an exposition about “The Salesian teacher and assistant.” “Such lessons would be given during the novitiate and then printed to serve as textbook for our use.”⁶² Again we see that very special attention is given to assistance, which had already appeared in the late sixties or early seventies. At that time he rewrote the pieces of advice he had given to Don Rua in 1863 in order to pass them on to other rectors as well. An insertion that he would keep till the 1886

60. OE XXIX, 132-137; 38-39. In the Sunday Oratory some youngsters act as “surveillants,” “peacemakers” or reconcilers and “games masters” specific assistance tasks (ibid., 43-44; 50-51; 53-55).

61. TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti...*, 13/3. The first part contains pages 14-54, the second one the pages 54-69.

62. MB XII, 397/2; EBM XII, 287/1.

edition testifies to this, “Their most important duty (i.e. the assistants’ task) is punctuality at their posts: dormitory, classroom or workshop, playground etc..”⁶³ Being with the boys and being with them from the very beginning of an activity is really essential for him.

With this assistance the system stands or falls. During an interview with the “*Pèlerin*” in May 1883 he coins the following aphorism, “But instead of punishment we have assistance and games” (“For punishment we substitute friendly and informal supervision and recreation.”). With this, he puts “his system” on a par with assistance and games, although organising games and participating in them are only a part of true assistance. It sounds all the more strange in this context that in his further explanation he does not so much emphasize playing with the boys but rather watching over them (*sorveglianza*), and thus lets the “assistance,” so to speak, change into “surveillance,” i.e. vigilance, supervision, “Infractions of discipline mostly take place because of lack of supervision. Vigilance cuts wrongdoing sufficiently to eliminate punishments.”⁶⁴ In other words, if Salesian educators are watchful, they sufficiently prevent evil and so they are not obliged to repress (*reprimere*) or, expressed differently, to intervene authoritatively.

In 1879, while on another visit to France, when speaking to Canon Guiol, he had used the term “*sorveglianza*” (surveillance, keeping watch, supervising), “We have a special educational method, known as the ‘Preventive System of Education.’...We never use repressive means – relying at all times on supervision, (surveillance), reason and religion.”⁶⁵ There surveillance, and consequently – in the context of the discussion with the Canon – the physical presence of the Salesians has pre-eminence. This presence is so indispensable that the Salesians may not take up tasks that would prevent them from being

63. MOTTO, F., *I “Ricordi confidenziali ai direttori” di Don Bosco* in: RSS (4), 153/53-55 and annotations to the lines 53-54. EMB X, 448.

64. MB XVI, 168; EBM XVI, 131. The opposition of “*si previene*” and “*reprimere*” got lost in the official English translation. In any case Don Bosco abides by his favourite terms “assistance” and “assistant.” That preference dates back to years before. See also BRAIDO, P., *Il sistema educativo di Don Bosco*, Torino, SEI, 1972, 39/2 and BARZAGHI, G., *Alle radici del sistema preventivo...*, 116-118; 136-142. This utterance by Don Bosco tallies fairly well with an idea of A.M. Teppa’s, “The frequency of punishment always betrays either negligence or inexperience in the educator. Negligence in watching over the pupils, in teaching, stimulating, warning, admonishing and cleverly eliminating occasions wrongdoing” (TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti...*, 41/2).

65. MB XIV, 22; EBM XIV,9-10.

actually present among the boys, even though it were to satisfy some of Canon Guiol's pastoral desires.

In the course of this study it will be further demonstrated that 'watching over' is certainly an aspect of assistance. But it is much more than that. In a letter to Gabrielli Don Bosco himself leaves little doubt about this, "Friendliness (i modi benevoli), reason, gentleness (loving kindness) and a very special surveillance are the only means...as you have been able to gather yourself from the *Regulations of our House* in Turin which is the same for all houses in Italy, France and America."⁶⁶ Of course the term "very special" (with the word surveillance) is open to interpretation. It can indeed stand both for a special intensity and for a special character (kind). Don Bosco gives his correspondent a tip by referring to the Regulations. But this does not directly give the desired distinction. In any case, through this special mention at the end of the enumeration, the notion "watching over" gets a very specific accent.

Assistance: the Heart of the "System" in the Lessons of Giulio Barberis

The systematic elaboration of the theme wanted by Don Bosco above all "the Salesian teacher and Assistant," that came up for discussion and that could have given an unequivocal insight into the very specificity of assistance, has, however never took[?] off. Yet, it is worthwhile to check how G. Barberis has treated the subject in the preparatory notes for his lessons in pedagogy. In the third chapter of the fourth part he proposes to talk about the "accomplishers" or protagonists of "moral education." The reference is to "the director, the prefect, the catechist, the director of studies, the teachers and the assistants." But in his exposition he restricts himself to "copying" the articles in question of the *Regulations for the Houses* and to adding only a couple of explanatory footnotes. Yet the very fact that he chooses exactly those passages of the Regulations is most significant. Besides, one of the notes is no less so. In the latter Barberis admonishes his young listeners to learn by heart the articles concerning teachers and assistants.⁶⁷ Through this he undeniably underscores the value of assistance in the educational system, and also of assistance quite

66. E III, 482. Cfr also MB XIV, 321/10; EBM XIV, 243-244. Don Bosco's letter itself, however, has not been inserted in the official English translation.

67. BARBERIS, G., *Appunti...*, 306(1). With this he contributes to the carrying out of a decision of the first General Chapter in 1877. The latter determined, "In the course of Sacred pedagogy, which is prescribed with us for all first year students in philosophy, the rules that teachers and assistants must observe are to be read out several times and explained as well." (OE XXIX, 392/item 7).

in general. They should prepare themselves most thoroughly for this crucial task; it is an essential element of their identity as educators.

As he had announced, in the introduction to the third chapter by copying a few little chapters from the Regulations, he sheds more light on the role of the assistant and of assistance itself in a part of the following chapter about the “means to assure discipline.”⁶⁸

By moving the exposition about assistance and assistants within the frame of discipline, he obviously runs the risk of treating only one side of assistance as Don Bosco had wanted it and meant it in the well-known little treatise. This risk grew bigger as he almost exclusively made use of three chapters from P.A. Monfat’s book for the treatment of this theme. Indeed this author used only the notion “sorveglianza, ,” that is, surveillance. One may, however, accept that G. Barberis, a few pages before, had tried to cover himself with the question, “Don’t we get the impression that we are hearing our Don Bosco himself speaking in these different statements?”⁶⁹ It remains ambiguous, all the same, even if it must be said that he consistently replaces Monfat’s term “prefetto” by “assistant,” the term so familiar and proper to Don Bosco’s houses, and less consistently sometimes the term “sorveglianza” by “assistance.”⁷⁰ By doing so he remains on Don Bosco’s track. Because of the many quotations from Monfat and the chosen angle of view, however, the whole does not leave the formal impression of going back to Don Bosco and the practice at Valdocco.

Nevertheless, in those few pages the central position of assistance in the educational process is clearly visible. This can be seen especially when referring to assistance as a form of surveillance in order to obtain order and discipline. That position becomes clearer yet if one takes into consideration

68. BARBERIS, G., respectively 291/2; 315 and 335-347.

69. Ibid., 321/2. Yet another form of one-sidedness comes up with him by the fact that he uses only the word “colleges” and not also “evening schools” nor “Oratories.” Certain paragraphs from the *“Regulations for the Oratory of St Francis de Sales...”* would, however, have been relevant as well.

70. Ibid., 336/4; 337/2; 338/5; 345/1. Cf. Don Bosco himself via footnote 10. Yet the importance of this substitute must be somewhat reduced, for in a footnote G. Barberis puts the notions “prefetto” and “assistente” on a level without the slightest reserve. “According to the system in our colleges the prefect is so to speak a vice-rector. He has nothing to do with the task that in many non-salesian colleges is connected with that name (prefect) and that has no other meaning than assistant” (298/1). For a better understanding of that note one should read MONFAT, P.A., *La pratica della educazione cristiana*, Rome 1879, 151-154. The term “that has no other meaning (than assistant) shows to which degree G.Barberis recognizes the salesian theory and practice in Monfat’s writing.

the fact that for G. Barberis a good education is impossible without a solid discipline and that for Monfat “discipline is the very essence of education.”⁷¹ In order to guarantee this essential assistance in the sense of “surveillance,” is absolutely necessary.

Assistance: the Core of the “System” in the Practice of Giuseppe Lazzero

If the young Salesians received theoretical basics from Barberis, Giuseppe Lazzero gave them both confirmation of the theory and supplementary practical guidance. Like his predecessor Michael Rua, Lazzero, after his appointment as vice-rector, devoted the first meetings of the house council to the assigning of specific assistance-related tasks. But on 11 November 1876, he went further by availing himself of the prescribed monthly meetings of the educational staff of the college, to particularly discuss, in detail, assistance in the dormitories. He was not only anxious to hammer home the directives that accurately describe what assistants must do and not do in order to act preventively. He also took time to describe, and recommend, fundamental attitudes that, in the spirit of Don Bosco, pedagogically justify the way they must conduct themselves: in other words their assistance, and their presence among the boys in both the dormitories and on the playground.⁷²

He found that meeting, so valuable that he came back to it at the beginning of the school-year, not only for the assistants of the college, but also for teachers, for those who were responsible for the trade school, for the prefect of the house, the vice-prefect, the director of studies, and the catechist.⁷³ Since the system – as has already been said above – stands or falls by the quality of this assistance, he, as the one mainly responsible, devotes much time and attention to it.⁷⁴ In the final analysis, his insistence seems to imply that the practical execution of assistance was not without fault on several occasions.

That supposition is reinforced by the praise he gave Leveratto, who “was always in the midst of the boys.”⁷⁵ This is not just forced praise but the expression of high appreciation for a presence among the boys, something

71. BARBERIS, G., *Appunti...*, 315/1; MONFAT, P.A., *La Pratica...*, 42/1.

72. PRELLEZO, J. M., *Valdocco nell’ Ottocento...*, 217/32-33 (cf 209-212 and further 233-237); 266-267.

73. *Ibid.*, 267-268.

74. *Ibid.*, 255/622; 258/682.

75. *Ibid.*, 84/1214.

which was very dear to Lazzero's heart, because it is so essential to the system, and because he does not find that consistency in others.

In the 1882 – 1883 school year, assistance was found to be lacking to such a degree that he convoked several meetings in the course of November. Only once did he limit himself to diplomatic suggestion, “in church the teachers should, if possible, assist their own classes in order to give good example.” Some ten days later, he clearly states, “During recreation time, the boys have no assistance,” which is why the following day, all those who had to deal with the boys – all young confreres, and priests – were called given a few directives.⁷⁶ This meeting was called “the great assembly.” Thirty-five Salesians were present. The first question that was addressed was significant, “Who is an assistant?” Which in reality means, “Who should assist?” The answer was short and to the point, “All of us.” A further clarification followed, “We must spend recreation time with the boys, not with one another.” Lazzero noted very specifically that Don Bosco himself came in at a quarter to seven and approved and confirmed everything.⁷⁷ What else could be expected? For during a meeting of the yearly assembly of rectors on the occasion of the Feast of Francis of Sales in February 1877, Don Bosco had already said, “Assistance must be a concerted effort. No one is to consider himself excused when it comes to prevent an offence to God Almighty.”⁷⁸ Everyone, individually

76. Ibid., 253/5576-557; 253-254. It is, however, surprising that one should learn that the situation is so bad. For in April the diocesan priest Orioli still spoke highly of what he had experienced at Valdocco. Because of special circumstances his bishop had sent him to Turin to spend some time with Don Bosco. He affirmed, “And how your surprise grows when you see them (the directors) in the midst of their young students or poor artisans showing themselves to be more friends than superiors. In Don Bosco's House you do not find the oppressive aura of discipline (authority) that pervades other boarding schools ...It does your heart good to see these degreed professors so modest in manner, unconcerned about their genuine talents. (MB XV, 563; EBM XV, 469/1.

77. For the whole paragraph PRELLEZO, J.M., *Valdocco nell'Ottocento...*, 254/590-601. Cf. Don Bosco himself MB XIII, 85; EMB XIII, 65 and PRELLEZO, J.M., *Il sistema preventivo riletto dai primi salesiani*, Quaderni pedagogici, (36), n. 1, 1989, 46.

78. MB XIII, 85; EBM XIII, 65/1. This he seems to have said also in former years, “All young confreres (chierici) and priests have the duty to spend recreation time together with the boys. They must animate the games.” (MB XIV, 840 Ricreazione; Document VII has not been translated in EMB XIV.). The same spirit is revealed in an idea in an occasional sermon in August 1878, “Let us keep busy even during recreation and, if we are assistants, let us watch our pupils, leading them in their games and participating in them and keeping them together in the playground. Even if you are not assistants, you must do your share too, and let recreation time really give you an uplift to dispel gloom, worries, and disturbing and dangerous thoughts” (MB XIII, 801-802; EBM XIII, 619/2-

and collectively, are responsible for what, in his eyes, is this all-important preventive influence of assistance.

Assistance: a Constant Presence; Accompaniment: a Demanding Method

Identifying causes of the rather conspicuous failures to observe such an essential task is far from simple. Things that happen almost a year later may throw some light on this affair. The members of the house council notice at that time that things are again not running smoothly at Valdocco. On 24th October 1883, during one of a rapid succession of assemblies, they appear to be questioning their organisational structure. They speak about “the educational system introduced into the Oratory a few years before” which at that time consisted “in putting the whole education or the whole weight of it on the shoulders of the Director of Studies. Now they want to go back to the old system, by which the greater part, not to say the whole responsibility lies with the teacher. The assistant should be his support and form as it were, a unity with the teacher.” Possible consequences were considered, and it was decided to start the experiment.⁷⁹ The use of the term “educational system” in this context is, to say the least, surprising, since it addresses only a partial aspect of it, namely the general and shared responsibility. The emphasis on the unity between teacher and assistant, however, undoubtedly touches the main nerve: assistance is a matter for each and every confrere.

What the members of the council meant by the words “introduced a few years before” and combined with “educational system” is still unclear. Maybe they are hinting at a decision of the first General Chapter, which had determined in 1877 that “discipline in class, at recreation and everything that has to do with good order, the walks and suchlike activities depend on the Director of Studies.”⁸⁰ Maybe the application of this decision in the course of

3) Yet the question may be put whether the expression “do your share too as much as possible” did not open a back door to escape all assistance. Which is more: does the expression “if you are not assistants” taken literally not lead to the idea that after all there is a difference between the duty of the official assistants and that of the non-official ones? (See also VERHULST, M., *I Verballi...*, 202/159-171 and MB XIII, 272-273; EBM XIII, 201 Years later F. Cerruti will still strongly attack the idea, “For heaven’s sake do not listen to the slogan of some people, a slogan that indeed betrays love of ease and tickles our self-love and that proclaims that the continuous, never-failing contact with the youths is detrimental to authority and that especially priests should abstain from doing assistance because of their priestly dignity. (CERRUTI, F., *Un ricordino educativo-didattico*, Turin, SAID, 1910, 35).

79. PRELLEZO, J.M., *Valdocco nell’ Ottocento...*, 259/711-716.

80. OE XXIX, 393/item 12.

years degenerated from a planned co-ordinating and stimulating action into a form of absolute power, so that the others felt less and less responsible and held back. At any rate, the reshuffling of responsibilities in the way the house council envisaged it according to the report, makes us suppose this..

A week later, however, it would become clear that the council had not hit the mark. Had they not evaluated “the possible consequences?” Or did the staff feel rebuffed because the decision had been taken without their collaboration whilst they were merely informed of it? This too is suggested by the report. Or did some fail to understand that the cause and the remedy of the malaise in (their) education were to be found in themselves? In any case, only after eliminating some objections was the decision for the change taken unanimously, both by the teachers and the assistants.⁸¹ That doesn't imply that after this, all remained serene. If that were the case, “the so-called circular of 10th May 1884” would not have been necessary.

Perhaps there were causes even more deep-seated to explain this irritating malaise that Don Bosco had already put his finger on. It was surely not just an off-the-cuff remark when, in the little treatise, he put in parenthesis the incisive phrase, “The assistant...whom we suppose to be present...” Then, in an even more realistic way, he went on to write, “Some may say that this system is difficult in practice...To the educators it certainly does present some difficulties...He (the educator) should always be ready to face every difficulty and fatigue....”⁸² Indeed, “every difficulty and fatigue” because it concerns assistance, the core of the system.

It is a pity again that Don Bosco does not enlarge upon the difficulties, which, in his experience are, for the educator, part and parcel of the application of the preventive system and especially in the area of assistance. It is also a pity that he does not give a short enumeration of the specific problems he was thinking of at that moment.⁸³ The next exposition, in a the second part of the article, will treat the subject of what assistance entails, and will also show that quite a number of elements may have been on Don Bosco's mind.

81. PRELLEZO, J. M., *Valdocco nell' Ottocento...*, 283/718-721. The centralising directive of the first General Chapter (1877) was cancelled in the second (18880). See for the matter OE XXIX, 393/art. 12 and OE XXXIII, 80.

82. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 90/526, which, according to the textual variant, happened after some reflection; and also 90/503-506. *Constitutions...*, 252 and 251.

83. This was probably not necessary for his closest co-workers. They must have known it. This is proved by their decision during an assembly on the occasion of the Feast of St Francis of Sales in February 1877, “Sacrifices are to be made when necessary, in order to be with the boys and watch over them” (MB XIII, 84/item 2°; EBM XIII, 64/point 2).