

JOURNAL OF SALESIAN STUDIES

July – December 2015

Volume 16, Number 2

© 2015 – Salesian Society (SUO)

ISSN 2333–4061 (print)

ISSN 2333–4118 (online)

Subscription information and digital versions available online at:
SalesianJournal.org

A semiannual journal founded in 1990 and published by the

INSTITUTE OF SALESIAN STUDIES
DON BOSCO HALL | BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

*a work of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales
USA - West*

Editor in Chief

Emmanuel Camilleri, SDB

Editorial Board

Arthur J. Lenti, SDB
Francis J. Moloney, SDB
John Roche, SDB
Joseph Boenzi, SDB
Michael Mendl, SDB
Thomas Juarez, SDB
Thomas Prendiville, SDB

Design & Layout

PeerCreative

ASSISTANCE

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

(Part 2)

by Rik Biesmans, SDB

The assistance Don Bosco wanted is preventive in two ways

In the course of the exposition so far it often appeared that one of the doubtless objectives of assistance, consists in preventing evil, disorders, and especially what Don Bosco summarily calls “offending God.” Through constant presence and influence he wants to prevent the boys’ positive development from suffering or being damaged. He wants to safeguard every chance for the betterment of their human and spiritual development.

The protective aspect of assistance

That is why in this context we may speak of a protective or rather “forestalling” function of assistance. (Indeed, the Italian word “impedire” means to prevent, *to impede*.) The term “protective prevention” was neither coined by Don Bosco, nor by his co-workers. However, it typifies a specific target that is aimed at by the constant presence of the educators. It is obvious to consider this aspect as a kind of negative side of prevention. It aims literally at restraining the pupils from committing faults. “The impossibility of committing faults” comes from outside, be it in a gentle or friendly way. The second function that appears more clearly from his detailed description in the well-known little treatise, may rightly be called the promotional, constructive or positive one.⁸⁴ It consists in good advice, support, orienting,

84. For this, see among others BRAIDO, P., *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco*, Zürich, PasPAS, 1964, .208, /a e and 21, 0/b). ID., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 238, nr. /2. ID., *L'Esperienza pedagogica...*, 134, nr. /4. ID., *Don Bosco's pedagogical experience*, 139, nr. /3. ID., *Breve Storia del "sistema preventivo"*, Rome, LAS, 1993, 75. ID., *Prevenire non reprimere...*, 80-83. Cf. also footnote 5 at the beginning of this study. BELLERATE, B., *Ragione, religione, amorevolezza* in NANNI C., (a cura di), *Don Bosco e la sua esperienza pedagogica*, 70, nr. /3. The qualification “impeditive” would define better the already treated aspect of “assistance” in Don Bosco’s practice. However, due to practical reasons the term “protective” will be used.

i.e. in assistance in the broadest sense of the word which is intended to help the youngsters to become autonomous and responsible persons, and who are able to choose what is good for them. Then the force comes from within.

The presence of the educators should avert disorders

In both versions of the *Regulations* “impedire” (to prevent, avert, stop from occurring in a rather physical way) is, as it were, the only topic, though sometimes expressed in related verbs or phrases. In the Sunday and feast day Oratory, this is precisely the peacemakers’ (reconcilers’), games-masters’ and protectors’ task. The peacemakers must prevent “scuffles, quarrels, cursing and all sorts of foul talk.” “The chief leader,” just like the assistant at church services in fact, “must see to the prevention of disorders.” Normally those responsible in the Sunday [and feast day Oratory] are somewhat older and more reliable. The protectors for their part have the most important task of placing the poorest and most abandoned boys with an employer. Moreover, they have to “take care that boys with an apprenticeship and those frequenting the Oratory don’t land up with an employer who is a danger to their eternal salvation.” Moreover “whenever they find out that a boy has been put in a dangerous situation, they must assist him so that he does not go astray”⁸⁵ and in so doing compromise his present development and his future happiness.

For “all those” who are in one way or another active in the Oratory, it is true that “supplying an illiterate with some articles of faith or preventing a single sin is a real achievement.” The latter idea is in complete agreement with the principal concern in the first of the ten *General Articles*. It also fits in well with the opinion of A.M. Teppa, who impresses on educators and teachers that “their first and principal concern should be to carefully preserve the youngsters’ innocence,..., to keep them away from vice, to bridle their passions and to keep them from present dangers....”⁸⁶ The educators ought to prevent the boys at all costs from acquiring bad habits. Indeed, the latter obscure the intellect and the formation of a correct conscience. Teachers in day and evening schools can provide a special preventive contribution. Indeed, by

85. Respectively: OE XXIX, 50, art. 1; 54, art. 7; 38, art. 1 and 2; 56, art. 1. This intensive care to prevent shortcomings before children can commit them had been shared for some time already by Don Bosco with many contemporaries. See STELLA, P., *Don Bosco nella storia... II.*, 453-459; BRAIDO, P., *Breve storia...*, 68-105.

86. OE XXIX, 58, art. 3; BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 289, nr. 5-6. TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti...*, 8, nr. 2..

being punctual, they can “impede disorders before and after lessons.”⁸⁷ Such disorders can undoubtedly be pernicious.

The directives in the *Regulations for the Houses* are often almost literal repetitions of the *Regulations for the externs* frequenting the Oratory. Thus, the prefect, in dialogue with the prefect of studies and the catechist, has to take care that “teachers, workshop-masters and assistants are at their places when the boys enter the church, the study room, the classrooms, the workshops and the dormitories. In this way they must avert the disorders that usually take place at these moments. In addition, the catechist “should often confer with the prefect so as to be able to prevent any kind of disorder.”⁸⁸ With no less insistence the teachers, crafts masters and assistants at Valdocco are reminded once more individually of the necessity of punctuality.⁸⁹ In the little treatise this leads up to the norm, “As far as possible the assistants ought to precede the boys to the place where they assemble.” The expression “as far as possible” may sound a little attenuating. Yet, probably it is not meant that way, because, in the context, it concerns only the presence of the specific assistants and because the principal objective remains, “Care should be taken that the pupils are never alone.”⁹⁰

Assistance will forestall harmful influences

In this way, teachers, crafts masters, and educators can also prevent “fights, indecent or foul conversations, offensive language, improper actions and immoral reading.”⁹¹ All these are negative and destructive elements Don Bosco fears like the plague. Thus, it is quite normal that the echo of this important concern is to be found in the treatise, “Let the greatest vigilance be exercised so as to prevent bad books, bad companions or persons who indulge in improper talk from entering the college.”⁹² They are all forms of shielding the young from evil, of protecting them against harmful influences. Thus, an

87. OE XXIX, 58, art. 3; 81, Chapter IV, art. 1. As to the first General Article see BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco educatore...*, 289, nr. 5.

88. ⁸⁷ OE XXIX, 120, art. 18; 122, art. 8.

89. *Ibid.*, 129, art. 1; 131-132; 134, art. 2. Also see *ibid.* 133, art. 3. Cf. for the formation of assistants and teachers MB XII, 397, nr. 2; EMB XII, 286-287.

90. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 85/442-444. Cf *ibid.* 83/391. *Constitutions...*, 249 and 247.

91. OE XXIX, 131, art. 11; 132, art. 7; 133, art. 4; 134, art. 4; 137, nr. 5.

92. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 87/477-478. *Constitutions...*, 250/5. Cf the advice, which may date from the seventies, in MB XIV, 840/Ricreazione 2; not translated

essential kind of assistance, of rendering help consists in preventing wrong where it starts.

During the first General Chapter, the third and fourth sessions were devoted to the theme ‘teaching and reading-matter.’ Once more, they recalled the necessity of doing one’s best to prevent boys from obtaining bad or potentially bad books. The same care had to be taken regarding prize books. These must “preferably be selected from our own publications.”⁹³ In this way of preventing, the doorkeeper is assigned a particularly important role in both regulations. In his treatise, Don Bosco describes this role in such a particular way that his wording could become a catch phrase, “A good door-keeper is a treasure for a house of education.”⁹⁴

The same can be said of the people responsible for the theatre, music and academic sessions, during both rehearsals and the performance.⁹⁵

Special attention is given to the delicate point of possible thefts. For this reason the game-masters at the Sunday and feast day Oratory should check that nothing is missing after the game, put away all equipment, close the room and take the key to the prefect.” The assistant of the workshops “is to put valuable things under lock and key to preserve them from being stolen.”⁹⁶ Preventing thefts through such measures is certainly not the most pleasant of ways. Yet, experience has taught Don Bosco that this is the only efficient way because of the presence of various categories of boys. Everybody, eventually, must be concerned about doing good to a wide variety of characters, in other words to “all” but “without creating the opportunity for anyone to

in EMB XIV. Also see OE XXVIII, 319 art. 3; OE XXIX, 395, art. 8 and 9; and OE XXXIII, 23, art. 8; 66, art. 9; 81, art. 5; 82, art. 6.

93. VERHULST, M., *I Verballi...*, p. 127-128 and p. 118-119. Cf OE XXVIII, 318, art. 4; OE XXIX, 396, art. 11; OE XXXIII 82, art. 8. This solicitude obtains a formal ratification in a circular dated March 1885 (E IV, 318-321). However, apparently in 1883 Don Bosco was already thinking about this project and wrote a first letter to the houses on this subject. (MB XVII, 197-200; EMB XVII, 173-177) See hereafter also footnote 101 about a goodnight (address) on the partial theme “bad books.” In this respect G. Barberis also impressed on the prospective educators that they should be very watchful according to Don Bosco’s directives (BARBERIS, G., *Appunti...*, p 228-229).

94. OE XXIX, 79-80; 143-145 and BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 87/478-479. *Constitutions...*, 250/5.

95. See BIESMANS, R., *Doelstellingen van opvoeding en opleiding...*, 54-72. For example: OE XXIX, 81, art. 3, 432-437. VERHULST, M., *I verballi...*, 348/302-303

96. OE XXIX, 55, art. 12; 135, art. 9.

do harm to the others.”⁹⁷ According to the concise treatise itself this means that “good boys” could not be harmed by the presence of “boys who have already contracted bad habits.” The latter “could not have a bad influence on their companions, nor would the good boys suffer any harm from association with them, since there is neither time, place, nor opportunity, because the assistant, whom we presume to be present, would speedily intervene,” states the educator Don Bosco.⁹⁸

The emphasis on preventing evil or harmful influences through the presence and the appropriate intervention of the educators may have increased in the course of the years. In a letter to G. Bologna, dated March 21, 1880, Don Bosco insists on “assigning duties in such a way that nothing and nobody, not a single boy or place is left without being entrusted to a responsible person.”⁹⁹ After all, this is only a repetition of the norm in the concise treatise (1877) that has been quoted above and that prescribes never to leave the boys alone.¹⁰⁰ In a dream that he would recount three years later, a deceased confrere inspires him with a kind of a *strenna* (a yearly motto), “For your boys I recommend work and vigilance.” This is still reinforced by Don Bosco’s question “What else?” and don Provera’s next answer, “Further: vigilance and work, work and vigilance.”¹⁰¹

Yet, one should be prudent when supposing that the emphasis on the preventive or protective function increases with the years. For in April 1877 for example, Don Bosco in a goodnight had already encouraged constant vigilance in his confreres to prevent the boys from reading certain books. In this respect the educators were considered as unwelcome controllers by a number of boys who voiced their displeasure. When Don Bosco hears about this displeasure, he reacts sharply. “How thoughtless they are!” he exclaims. Nevertheless, he does not lose his composure and justifies his educators’ attitude, “They (the assistants) act as they do in order to prevent evil, and this is for your own good. The superiors, furthermore, will have to account to God if they neglect their pupils and consequently allow them to fall into sin.” Imperturbably he concludes, “I say this only for those who need to hear

97. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 290/17-18.

98. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 90/525. *Constitutions...*, 251-252.

99. E III, 553/4. See also MB XIV, 444; EMB XIV, 343/footnote 7. The letter has not been translated.

100. See footnote 89.

101. MB XVI, 16; EMB XVI, 4.

it.”¹⁰² However, this very statement again means that he does not denounce the guilty ones publicly, despite his resoluteness and severity. He undoubtedly wants to give them another chance. On the other hand, the whole affair may also hint at a certain shortcoming in his evaluation. At that moment Don Bosco was probably unaware that certain forms of impeding, preventing, anticipating assistance and paternalism might have become an oppressive presence having just the opposite effect and going unnoticed.

A constant presence that averts transgressions, and precludes the necessity of punishments

General confrontation with rash behaviour should itself be a sufficient punishment. In fact, the avoidance of real punishments is one of the most important objectives of the preventive system in the sense of protective assistance. His “system excludes all violent punishment, and tries to do without even the slightest chastisement. It is precisely through such an approach that a boy may recognise the assistant as a friend and benefactor who “wishes to spare him vexation, punishment, and perhaps dishonour.”¹⁰³ This will be seen still more clearly in the following paragraph.

At the end of the third General Chapter (September 1883) Don Bosco urges, that all that “concerns punishments, whether it is convenient or inconvenient (2 Tim. 4:2) (*opportune et importune*) insist that the preventive system be practised.”¹⁰⁴ In its context, this statement means in the first place that the educator-teacher may reprimand and admonish, but that corporal punishments are absolutely excluded. However, it also and above all means that appropriate intervening with a word of warning or a piece of good advice may and must prevent punishment. Exactly in this respect, the first part of his statement remains true, “We have assistance and games.”¹⁰⁵

Good is achieved through timely, constant and assiduous presence and through adequate action forestalling eventual evil and cutting off menacing disorders: through omnipresent vigilance preventing transgressions and

102. MB XIII, 421/2; EMB XIII, 330/3. “Superiors” is in the Italian version “gli assistenti.” Cf MB XIII, 420/6 respectively EMB, 330/2, “The culprits who now hear me will know I mean them.”

103. Both quotations in BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 83/396-397; 84/419-420. *Constitutions...*, 247 and 248.

104. MB XVI, 417/5°; EMB XVI, 331/5°. The theme ‘punishments’ remains a worry. Precisely in 1883 in Valdocco they start drafting a circular letter, which however will lie in the drawer for years. See further footnote 193.

105. See footnotes 63; 109; 160.

consequently unpleasant punishments: and through a committed presence, preserving the boys from negative, harmful and unpleasant experiences. All this, however, is just one dimension of the assistance that Don Bosco conceived and lived.

The constructive, equipping or promotional function of assistance

In Don Bosco's day-to-day practice the protective role of the educator is a very important dimension. Yet, when he describes the preventive system in his concise treatise of 1877, he doesn't breathe a word about that dimension. At any rate, he does not refer directly to the role of the educator as one who must prevent faults, shortcomings and sins through his punctual and caring presence. On the contrary, he does draw attention there to that other essential function of a constant presence: the constructive, promotional function. It consists in supporting, assisting and actively promoting the many-sided development of the youngsters. "The director or the assistants" should not only diligently look out to forestall evil, they also, and above all, should promote good. It is their task to help and equip the young in order that they themselves may choose and do what is good. For that purpose, "they must converse with their boys like loving fathers; to that end they must be their guides under all circumstances, give them good advice and kindly correct them." Then he concludes that this kind of assistance, precisely "places the pupils in the impossibility of committing faults."¹⁰⁶

Constructive assistance is the main aspect

In the whole of Don Bosco's statements and practice, however, this conclusion is one-sided and certainly too negatively formulated. His practice is on a par with A.M. Teppa's who typifies both aspects in a more concise and more balanced way. According to him, education has two tasks, "Promoting good and preventing evil."¹⁰⁷ Promoting is "promuovere" in Italian, hence the possibility of calling positive constructive assistance also "promotional" assistance. It is the latter that Don Bosco means. The point is to enable the

106. See footnote 54.

107. TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti...*, 13/2. Cf. with the Brothers of the Christian Schools more than a century earlier, "Vous ne devez pas vous contenter d'empêcher les enfants qui sont confiés à vos soins, de faire le mal, il faut aussi que vous les engagiez à faire le bien et les bonnes actions dont ils sont capables » (BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 231/ footnote 35).

boys to live their lives as Christians and citizens in an independent way and with a sense of responsibility.¹⁰⁸

In spite of this verbal similarity, there is an enormous difference between Don Bosco's concrete way of working it out and that of A.M. Teppa. The latter wants to accomplish this double educational task in two ways, "*directly*, i.e. through a correct use of moral authority, and also *indirectly*, through good example." He devotes four of the nine chapters (IV-VII) of his book to that correct use. That moral authority should play a part in "commanding, instructing, stimulating, admonishing, reprimanding, punishing, praising and rewarding."¹⁰⁹ With Don Bosco it is not authority that takes first place but assistance. There are obviously two different angles. If Don Bosco's above-mentioned statement "we have assistance and games" fits in somewhere, it must be here.¹¹⁰

With regard to this, an article that Don Bosco added to his recommendations to the rectors in 1876 is certainly as relevant as the paragraph on the precise nature of his method in the concise treatise about the preventive system. In this insertion he writes, "When you succeed in discovering a grave transgression, summon the guilty one or the suspect to your room, and in the most charitable way try to get him to admit his fault and the wrong he has committed. Then admonish him and invite him to set his conscience at peace. In this way and by giving constant and kindly assistance to the pupil wonderful results are obtained and improvements that one would never have thought possible."¹¹¹ The end of this recommendation refers again to his extremely positive pedagogical experiences. But more important here is that the latter are due to a persevering, helpful, available,

108. In this sense the title of Don Bosco's meditation and prayer book, "*Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri, degli esercizi di cristiana pietà...*", i.e. "The well-equipped boy" may be symbolic. (The official English title is, "*The Companion of Youth*.")

109. TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti...*, 13/3 and 28/2. Cf. the very conveniently arranged table of contents in his book.

110. See footnote 104.

111. BRAIDO, P. *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 164/137-143. For the dating see, Fr., *I "Recordi confidenziali ai direttori" di Don Bosco*, RSS (4), 140-141. Cf EMB X, 450/footnote 11. Teachers and assistants, on the contrary, were forbidden to receive pupils in their rooms. This was decided during the first General Chapter (1877) and confirmed in the second (1880) (respectively OE XXIX, 428/art. 13; VERHULST, M., *I Verbali...*, 344/199-200 and OE XXXIII, 63/art.13). Therefore, the lessons and recreation times were more important for them for personal contact in order to warn and give advice (OE XXIX, 130/art. 7).

constructive assistance, which guarantees personal conversation, dialogue. The latter must not be ignored and in no case be given up. One should always and everywhere continue being present and assisting in word and deed.

We shall now try to describe the elements that form the content of assistance through which it can help the young to grow up into good Christians and honest citizens.

Positive assistance means admonishing the youngsters in time

Both in the course of the short treatise and in the well-known ten articles, as well as in the regulations, foremost Don Bosco places the task of “avvisare”. This “avvisare” means in the first place “to warn.” Nevertheless, it also comprises “advising, giving a hint or a directive, drawing attention to, suggesting.” Whoever warns or gives directives or advice, often also wants of course to prevent transgressions or shortcomings. Yet, there is a difference with the protective-preventive component. Indeed, it is no longer the adult who directly prevents the youth from doing something negative; it is no longer the adult who by means of his vigilance and attentive approach directly creates a quasi- impossibility of making deplorable, harmful and practically irreparable errors. On the contrary it is the warned, advised, attentive youth himself who eventually decides and acts.

According to Don Bosco the youngster will “doubtless” or “certainly” choose what is good if “a friendly voice” [(“if a friend’s word”)] warns or admonishes him in good time. He sticks to his terms “doubtless” or “certainly” in his definitive text, even when his secretary wants to weaken the term and substitute “probably” for it.¹¹² The sentence as a whole is quite clear, “A youth indeed often becomes culpable and deserving of punishment, which he had not even thought about, and which he had quite forgotten, when heedlessly committing the fault he would certainly have avoided, had a friendly voice warned him.”¹¹³

112. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 83, 408-409 and don G. Berto’s version for line 409. The first French translation is as decided as Don Bosco with the expression, “qui ne lui seraient point arrivées” (OE XXVIII, 427, chapter II). Also see BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 122/457-458). But in the French translation the idea that the youngster himself acts, is lost. Indeed, in the Italian version it reads, “that he (the boy himself) would have avoided.” Still in 1880 the French are more prudent in their periodical “*Bulletin Salésien*”, “et l’on peut assurer qu’il aurait agi différemment” (BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 153/II.). For the use with the Salesians themselves however it remains, “il aurait certainement évité cette faute» (ibid., 148/2).

113. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 83/408-409. *Constitutions...*, 247-248. Also see footnote 110.

In the same little treatise Don Bosco expresses his conviction that “the pupil who has been forewarned (informed or made aware) preventively, does not remain humiliated (belittled or offended) in his sense of honor on account of the faults he has committed.” And he adds, “nor does he resent the correction he receives or the punishment threatened or inflicted, because it is always accompanied by a friendly preventive warning, which appeals to reason, and generally enlists his accord, so that he sees the necessity of the chastisement and almost desires it.”¹¹⁴ This conviction, based on experience over many years, highlights at the same time the positive outcome of an active and constructive assistance with youths. As he continues, Don Bosco explicitly takes up that correlative aspect again, “The pupil becomes a friend, and the assistant a benefactor who advises him, has his good at heart, and wishes to spare him vexation, punishment and perhaps dishonour.”¹¹⁵ No wonder then that, years later, the educator may still talk to him, “counsel him, advise and even correct him.” In these quotations the use of the same suggestive words strikes us. The past pupil indeed “will always be a friend of his educator and will ever remember with pleasure the guidance he received. He will always look upon his educators as fathers and brothers.”¹¹⁶ Through this comforting experience, Don Bosco summarizes all the “talking, guiding, advising and admonishing” in the word “guidance,” both given and received.

This does not preclude that, in the course of a study, the elements in his definition of the preventive system may be treated separately. Provided one does not forget that in practice they complete and interact with each other or are used even at the same time – and provided one does not forget that conversation, dialogue and chatting with the young are so important.

At the end of the first General Chapter, he will express this once more and explicitly. On that last day, G. Bonetti is asked to write a treatise on sacred eloquence for the theology students. Don Bosco agrees but finds it necessary

114. *Ibid.*, 83/399-402. ... *Constitutions...*, 247. The Italian text, “L’allievo preventivamente avvisato,” “in esso vi è sempre un avviso amichevole e preventivo.” The fourteenth volume of the *Memorie Biografiche* contains a document “Avvisi di Don Bosco in confessione.” These are hints or pieces of advice that Don Bosco had given in the period 1879-1883 on the occasion of his pastoral work in confession (MB XIV, 712-714; EMB XIV, 586-588). A.M. Teppa devotes a whole chapter to “Warnings (avvisi), corrections (correzioni) and reprimands (repressioni)” and he makes a gradation from “incentives” and “simple warnings or counsels” through “more serious and friendly admonitions” to “a rather strong and severe rebuke” (TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti...*, 31-40). Through this quotation we can evaluate even better Don Bosco’s concepts and insights.

115. *Ibid.*, 84/418-420. *Constitutions...*, 248. Also see footnote 102.

116. *Ibid.*, 90/511-513. *Constitutions...*, 251/1. Guidance is “direzione” in Italian.

that the little treatise “should embody our preventive system of education and emphasize that education should entirely be based on it. Youngsters should be drawn by love to do what is right through constant supervision (*sorveglianza*) and guidance (*direzione*), not by systematic punishment for transgressions after they have been committed. Experience proves that this latter method of education more often than not arouses lifelong hatred in young people toward their educators.”¹¹⁷ Here he again uses the word “supervision” or “vigilance” (watchfulness). This seems to point to the preventive or protective function of the teacher-educator’s presence. It is typical for him that this watchfulness is also a manifestation of love and should be felt as an expression of love. Just as typical is that the second function, the positive guidance or accompaniment, which has various aspects, is mentioned in the same breath.

In contrast with A.M. Teppa, Don Bosco in his little treatise does not make a clear distinction between all these ways of talking. He does not distinguish between warnings, exhortations, directives or reprimands and admonitions. This may be ascribed to Don Bosco’s predilection for simple, direct, uncomplicated expressions. However, here it seems to be more fundamentally connected with his choice for prevention. Warnings, directives, advice and hints precede acting. They should prevent shortcomings. Protective and constructive assistance together should place pupils in the impossibility of committing faults, as he formulated himself. Of course, by admonishing and reprimanding, educators also want to avert shortcomings. But the point there is to avoid or counteract relapsing. That is secondary prevention, prevention in the second instance, which Don Bosco also knows and wants. It is partially comprised in the directive to the so-called catechists, “Carefully observe the boys’ defects so that you can opportunely correct them within your line of duty.”¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, the first, the positive prevention is and remains his proper and main objective.

True to Don Bosco, F. Cerruti will express it in his own way in 1886: “(Christian love) requires us to prevent evil as much as possible instead of being obliged to repress (*reprimere*) the evil committed.”¹¹⁹ If the first is

117. VERHULST, M., *I verbali...*, 300/45-54. This last idea, by the way, also occurs in the little treatise on the preventive system. See *Constitutions...*, 248. Cf. MB XIII, 292/5; EMB XIII, 218.

118. OE XXIX, 122, art. 4.

119. CERRUTI, F., *Le Idee...*, 6. This completely coincides with the interpreting French translation in 1877 of a paragraph from Don Bosco’s short treatise, “sa surveillance est dirigée à empêcher préalablement les transgressions plutôt qu’à les punir» (OE XXVIII 425, art. 3).

neglected, one readily follows the way of the repressive system as the word “reprimere” itself suggests. Nevertheless, Cerruti highlights too one-sidedly the prevention of evil. The principal element, namely the promotion of good deeds, stays completely in the shade.

Warning is not at all a once-only instance. The boys in the Sunday and feast day Oratory know that there is a second time, a second chance. When, in spite of all, they fall short in one way or another, they read and hear in the regulations that they can in any case for a first time count on a “fatherly admonition” or remark:¹²⁰ in practice even more than once.

A man like G. Barberis manifests in his lessons a greater attention for nuances in certain measures. In his chapter on “checking and punishing” he again consults P.A. Monfat. Still, he too states that before proceeding to punishments “the important means of advice and warnings ought to be exhausted.” Here again he explicitly appeals to Don Bosco.¹²¹

To assist also means to give good advice

Real assistance, however, is not limited to warning. In the first of the ten articles Don Bosco explicitly connects “warning” or “making aware” with “giving advice”, “All those who hold an office or assist the boys are responsible for admonishing and counselling any of them whenever need arises. In addition, in the sixth article he reminds us that “youngsters of ordinary character and disposition need brief but often repeated urging, admonitions and advice.”¹²² Don Bosco remembers only too well his own years of formation. He knows what the lack of a guide meant in those years. But he also knows what it means to have a good counsellor. When he was fourteen, he experienced in the parish priest Don Calosso what it meant “to have a regular spiritual director, a faithful friend of one’s soul. I had not had one until then. Soon he forbade me a penance I used to practise; he deemed it unsuited to my age and circumstances. He encouraged frequent confession

120. OE XXIX, 60, art. 6.

121. BARBERIS, G., *Appunti...*, 348/2 (referring to Don Bosco); 350/2 and 351/3. He emphasizes the idea of “exhausting” by using the verb no less than three times in a couple of paragraphs. Cf. MONFAT, P.A., *La pratica...*, 165/3.

122. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 289/2-5; 290/22-24. 290/32-33. In this respect too Don Bosco couldn’t agree more with A.M. Teppa who instructs his readers that “they should not bore and trouble the pupils with lengthy and inconvenient incentives” and that “a teacher should never get tired of warning his pupils. He should briefly and kindly remind them of their duties, resolutions and promises made “ (TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti ...*, 32-33; 33/3).

and communion. He also taught me to make a short daily meditation, or more accurately, a spiritual reading.” What a contrast with his seminary years, “My heart yearned for more. The rector and the other superiors usually saw us only when we returned after the holidays and when we were leaving for them. The students never went to talk to them, except to receive corrections. The staff members took weekly turns to assist in the refectory and to take us on walks. That was all. How often I would have liked to talk to them, ask their advice, or resolve a doubt and could not.”¹²³

This does not mean in the least that he wanted to converse for hours. On the contrary, he clearly dislikes long, endless moralising “sermons.” This is true in all cases and to a greater degree still for a third category of youngsters, namely for the few difficult “cases.” For them the brief talks of any superior should consist of “short examples, maxims, anecdotes and the like.”¹²⁴ They ought to strike home and sink in. They must be a real help.

Assistance consists in encouraging and stimulating

Along with, and certainly of equal importance to admonishing, making aware and advising, the superiors should be intent on encouraging and rewarding the youngsters. This is the affirmative aspect of their continuous presence. This is already impressed upon them in the sixth general article,¹²⁵ and more strongly in the Regulations. Priests and Salesians in training, as well as the older boys themselves who are engaged in catechizing, “must always use encouraging and never disparaging words when admonishing and advising (or warning). The young peacemakers should urge their companions in the course of the week to continue frequenting the Oratory. Moreover, during a novena or when a solemn feast-day is drawing near the teachers should say some encouraging words in class.¹²⁶ Words, we may suppose, that not only recall to mind the meaning of the feast but also stimulate the practice of some virtue that a young Christian needs in order to live as a good Christian and an honest citizen. Still more, “Every evening after night prayers before the

123. For the whole passage: BOSCO, G., *Memorie dell’Oratorio...*, 47/397-402; 91/126-132; 109/555-557; 116/696-704; also 56-57. ID., *Memoirs...*, 44; 80. It is about confidences that G. Bonetti had not yet spread through his publications in the “*Bolletino Salesiano*” (from 1880 onward). Neither had he in his book *Cinque lustri di storia dell’Oratorio Salesiano*, Turin, 1892.

124. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 290/27-33.

125. *Ibid.*, 290/25.

126. OE XXIX, 48, art. 16; 51, art. 6; 131, art. 13. Cf. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 160/46-47.

boys go to rest, the Rector or someone in his stead shall address them in a friendly way, giving them advice or counsel concerning what is to be done or what is to be avoided. Let him try to draw some striking ideas from events that have happened during the day in the house or outside. That ‘goodnight,’ Don Bosco says, “is the key to good behaviour, to the smooth running of the house and to success in education.”¹²⁷

Don Bosco himself set the example in this for his co-workers. During the novena in preparation for the feast of St Francis of Sales in 1876 for instance, he stimulated the boys in a somewhat longer goodnight in the following way, “Now what shall I suggest to honour our patron saint? As you know St. Francis de Sales is the saint of meekness and patience. I would like all of you to strive to imitate these virtues. During the novena store up a great amount of meekness in your heart so that you will always be inclined to love your companions without getting angry with them and without using an insulting or sarcastic tone of voice. Always be good to them whenever you can ...On this score I would really like you to resolve to show your love for your companions by giving each other good advice and never – as happens sadly in the world – leading each other into evil (through improper suggestions)...On the contrary – and this is true – a companion can do a lot of good with timely, friendly, wholesome advice...How much good you can do for yourselves and for your companions if, in this novena, you start to follow my advice and continue to do so for the rest of your life?”¹²⁸ Thus, the youngsters are encouraged to actively engage in their turn in the educational process.

127. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 87/481-486. *Constitutions...*, 250. Also see VERHULST, M., *I Verballi...*, 344/209-211; OE XXIX 429, art. 20; OE XXXIII 64, art. 22. One of the seven secrets of his way of educating according to a declaration in June 1875 consisted in “addressing a few kind words every evening after prayers” (MB XI, 222/6^o; EMB XI, 203-204). The Salesian tradition has come to consider the few words of Mamma Margherita in May 1847 as the starting-point of Don Bosco’s goodnight talks. (BONETTI, G., *Cinque lustri...*, 149. Also see E. CERIA, *Annal idella società salesiana III*, SEI Turin 1946, 856-857.)

Other influences, however, may not be excluded. Mgr Dupanloup for example dwelt on the eventual meaning of “the evening address.” “The evening address should be given a quarter of an hour before bedtime. It is a paternal address, in which everything is communicated just as in a family. ... The educator expresses ... all he has on his mind, be it for or against his boys” (According to MONFAT, P.A., *La pratica...*, 91/1). Mgr Dupanloup’s work, however, was published in Italian in 1868-1869 only. At that time Don Bosco had already been holding his goodnight talks for years. Cf. BONETTI, G., *Cinque lustri...*, 199-200. See also footnote 196.

128. MB XII, 32/2; EMB XII, 20/2.

Assistance implies that the educator knows how to reward

An efficacious means of encouraging and confirming is no doubt rewarding. That is why “one should praise those who deserve it” and not readily have recourse to admonitions.¹²⁹ In his basic pamphlet Don Bosco formulates the following norm, “Praise of work well done, and blame in the case of carelessness are already a reward or punishment.”¹³⁰ It is rather strange that he does not devote a separate and elaborate chapter to this topic as A.M. Teppa does. This may be the consequence of the observation that praise and congratulations may sometimes have undesired effects. Don Bosco seems to have explicitly warned against it, “Do not single out a boy for special praise. Praise can ruin the most brilliant talents – Someone who sings well and another who recites fluently are at once highly spoken of. They have many admirers and are considered as very important people: the main reason of the deterioration of order and discipline in our college is to be found in the theatre. – The Oratory is a continuous proof of this truth.”¹³¹ A.M. Teppa, in fact, was no less aware of this danger. He writes in a well-balanced way about this topic. He wants praise and prize-giving to be “discreet and prudent.” For it might happen that what is meant to be a stimulus to virtue becomes a hidden breeding ground of vice.¹³²

Yet Don Bosco’s statements about the possible negative side of praising and rewarding have to be taken with a grain of salt; in the sixth of the *ten articles* he writes that boys should be encouraged “even by means of small rewards.”¹³³ In actual practice, he too encouraged, affirmed, and rewarded. The solid tradition of the preparation and carrying-out of prize giving at the end of the school year and the autumnal outings confirm this. In this respect Lazzero resolutely followed in Don Bosco’s footsteps.¹³⁴ G. Barberis for his part, taught the young Salesians that a good educator should always be kind and inclined to be content, and look pleased and encourage: consequently

129. OE XXIX 48, art. 17.

130. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo...*, 91/537-538. *Constitutions...*, 252/1.

131. MB XIV, 847/ item 7. Not translated in EMB.

132. TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti...*, 52/2.

133. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 290/25. Cf. footnote 124.

134. For this see among others BIESMANS, R.,, *Doelstellingen van opvoeding en opleiding...*, 46-54; especially 48 with the notice about the clash in this matter between G. Lazzero and Don Bosco. Cf. also PRELLEZO, J.-M., *Valdocco nell'Ottocento...*, 47/153; 83-85; 109/176-177; 247/397; 251/499-507.

he is pleased when he can praise. In some cases, “one may even suppose that the boys are good and praise them for some good point. This behaviour makes them grow in their self-esteem, (and) urges them on to deserve the appreciation that is shown, convinces those who have the impression of being less worthy...and gives them the courage to become good. Benevolence is the stone of the wise that changes lead into gold.” But G. Barberis too is on his guard, because “praise and congratulations may turn their heads...” and, if it’s always the same ones who are praised, this will “arouse the jealousy of the others.”¹³⁵

If the quotations about warning and admonishing in time could create the impression that even formative assistance aimed above all at the prevention of transgressions of the regulations, this is certainly no longer the case for the quotations and examples that illustrate encouragement, confirmation and reward. For these are aimed precisely at the boys’ development and formation. Through an alert, stimulating assistance which knows how to encourage and reward in good time, Don Bosco seeks to promote in a pleasant and respectful way the practice of virtue or good behaviour, religious practice, study and progress in mastering manual skills.

All these elements of assistance treated up till now are to be found in a concise, meaningful paragraph from a conversation of Don Bosco with minister U. Ratazzi. This conversation may have taken place in the eighteenth-fifties, but was drafted, refined and published only in 1882. That is why the report of that interview bears the marks of later insights and wordings, especially from the period we are considering here. This is obvious from the following quotations. “The former (the repressive system) sets itself to educate people by force, repression and punishment when they break the law and commit a crime. The latter (the preventive one) seeks to educate them with kindness, and gently helps them to observe the law, and provides them with the most suitable and efficacious means for the purpose. This is precisely the system we use.”

These paraphrases and the well-known definitions of the two systems in his short treatise are like peas in a pod. In this conversation, the same angle is chosen: both systems essentially aim to ensure that people obey the existing laws. According to the spirit of the age, only this observance makes a just, humane and stable society possible. Furthermore, the aspect of aid, assistance and “providing the most suitable and efficacious means,” that is, the

135. BARBERIS, G., *Appunti...*, 328/4-5. The author however does not quote Don Bosco. But he does copy literally without any scruples from MONFAT, P. A., *La pratica...*, 124-126/15.° a). He means of course that boys may think too much of themselves in that case. Also see BARBERIS, G., *Appunti...*, 357/3.

constructive, stimulating, promotional aspect is again emphasised even more strongly. Then a digression follows on the proper and characteristic procedure in the second system, “We direct them on the path of good and sustain them with appropriate and kindly counsel, and especially with the life of prayer and religion. Over and above this we surround them, as far as possible, with kindly assistance in recreation, classroom and work place. We encourage them with gentle words, and at the first sign that they are neglecting their duties we remind them in a courteous and friendly way and recall them to a good way of behaving. In a word, we do all the things Christian charity suggests so that they might do good and avoid evil ruled by an enlightened conscience and supported by Religion.”¹³⁶

In this study as a whole, it is important to mention the *classroom*, the *work place*, and the *playground*. Assistance implies presence and help at any time and anywhere. Moreover, the text seems to indicate that this presence, this assistance is meant as gently encouraging, reminding in a friendly way of their duties, and proffering a good way of behaving.

In order to accompany the youngsters as positively as possible, the educator must make an effort to know them well. Don Bosco regularly reminds his Rectors of the need for this knowledge. From 1876 onward we find it in the well-known formula, “Let the pupils get to know you and get to know them by spending all the time possible with them.”¹³⁷ A striking element in this piece of advice is without doubt the reciprocity. He also states, in the *Regulations for the Houses*, that “it is extremely important to get to know the boys’ characters to some extent before definitively accepting them in a house.”¹³⁸ In connection with the nature or character of the youngsters, he impresses on all teachers and educators the usefulness of dividing the boys

136. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 77-78; MB V, 52-53; EMB V, 36-37. About the date and editorship of the encounter and the conversation, see BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 67-69.; ID., *L’Esperienza pedagogica...*, 63/2. ID., *Don Bosco’s pedagogical experience*, 66.

137. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 163/105-106. See especially RSS (1984), 4, 155/variant in the lines 90-91. According to an announcement by G. B. Lemoyne, Don Bosco once gave his young co-workers the advice to start a notebook with the title “Experience,” wherein they should “jot down all the irregularities, breaches of discipline, and boners [blunders] occurring in classrooms or dormitories, on weekly walks, in the relations of boys among themselves, of superiors and their pupils, or superiors and superiors, or superiors and parents, outsiders, and civil and ecclesiastical authorities ... “He urged that they review such notes from time to time, especially if the same trouble were to arise so as not to repeat past errors” (MB VII 523/2; EMB VII 316/1).

138. OE XXIX 157, art. 5.

into groups of characters. This division should not remain an interesting theoretical piece of information. No, it is the basis of day-to-day efficient acting, “It is our stringent duty to study the means that are appropriate to make these diverse characters agree to do good to all without leaving any possibility that they could harm each other.”¹³⁹ It may be even more correct to understand “conciliare” (reconcile, reach agreement) as “favorire,” i.e. “be helpful,” “promote development or favour it.”

To express it in Don Bosco’s words from an interview in April 1884, the point in his educational system is in fact “to discover the germs of their talents and provide for their development.”¹⁴⁰ In the second part of this statement, it cannot be over-emphasised that the boys finally are the true protagonists of their own development. The assistants, i.e. the adults who are involved in the educational process have to launch this self-activity and ensure its continuity.

In order to accomplish this task it is obviously necessary that educators “discover the germs of their talents,” – they must get to know the boys as well as possible. They must also be able to evaluate the boys’ capacity for education and training according to where they belong in the three categories that Don Bosco distinguishes in the ten well-known general rules. To that end, patient observation and consequently continuous presence are needed.

Assistance as actual help

Whoever wants to be among the boys in a positive, stimulating way should not limit himself, however, to assisting through words alone. On the contrary, that is why Don Bosco declares, “He (a good educator) will show in his words and more so in his actions that his only concern is the spiritual and temporal good of his pupils.” He does not consider it as superfluous to insist once more in the third general rule, “assisting: few words, many deeds.”¹⁴¹

139. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore ...*, 290/15-18. A.M. TEPPA also is convinced that an attentive observation of the boys can be the best help to get to know everybody’s tendencies and consequently also the most efficacious means to direct them correctly (TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti...*, 11). P A. Monfat makes a list with finer shades as he holds that there are a thousand other nuances (MONFAT, P.A., *La pratica...*, 80-82). Don Bosco is less complicated and more practical. Barberis emphasizes that it is truly necessary for an educator “to get to know the pupils. And this not only as human beings but also as individual persons” (BARBERIS, G., *Appunti...*, 32/2; 215).

140. Cf MB XVII, 85/5; EMB XVII, 64. See also TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti ...*, 12-13.

141. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore ...*, 289/7- 11. A. M. Teppa is more prolific in words, “But all the proposed educational means would have little effect if the educator’s words were not confirmed and strengthened by his *example*. In addition, he adds, “If actions do not tally with words.” In this last sentence, he uses, just like Don Bosco after him “fatti” for “acts (deeds)” (TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti ...*, 54-55). See also Mgr. Dupanloup

Efficacious help while teaching

In the chapter about prevention as a social involvement, in the preceding article, it became clear that in the context of social development a good education and an appropriate training are very important. Thus, it is quite normal that Don Bosco points out precisely to teachers their task of effectively helping and giving assistance (lending a hand). How heavily the preparation for life lies in their hands! How much time they spend with their pupils! In this way, not only can they get to know every pupil well but also follow him up individually, advise, warn and admonish him. Nevertheless, those forms of positive assistance are not sufficient. In situations of teaching, training and educating, those various forms will only be successful if the teacher is also good at teaching and training and gives the example of a qualitatively high virtuous life.

Therefore, both *the Regulations for boarders* and *the Regulations for the Houses* prescribe in almost identical terms that the teachers should carefully prepare their lessons. “Such preparation will efficaciously contribute to help the pupils understand the more difficult aspects of the subjects.”¹⁴² Furthermore, “they should often test each and every pupil and show great esteem and affection for all, especially for the slow learners. They should avoid the pernicious habit of some teachers who leave less-talented pupils to their own resources.” That would be a sin against the principle of assistance, of effectively rendering service. That principle, indeed, requires rather that “the less-talented ones in a class be cared for first. One ought to encourage them. One should never humiliate them.”¹⁴³ This presupposes in the teacher-

in STELLA, P., *Don Bosco nella storia ...II*, 458/5. A catchword of Don Bosco's seems to have been “A hundred nice speeches without a living example are worthless” (MB XIV 849/6). We know the maxim ‘*example is better than precept*.’ See also the phrase in the letter with confidential recommendations to the Rectors (BRAIDO, *Don Bosco Educatore ...*, 162/82-83 and 165/ 188; EMB X, 449.) Cf a maxim of St Ignatius of Loyola.

142. OE XXIX 129, art. 2 and 82, art. 2

143. Ibid., 129-130 and 82, art. 5. Cf ibid. 82, art. 4 and 129, art. 4 (The Italian word ‘*idioti*’ has been translated by ‘less-talented’). It is a prescription that is not yet found in the school regulations of the sixties (See MB VII, 866-867). Cf OE XXIX 392 art. 4; OE XXXIII 79, art. 45 and especially MB XI 217-218; EMB XI 200. Apparently Don Bosco never forgot the kind behaviour of his teachers in Chieri, namely E. Valimberti and T. Pugnetti (BOSCO, G., *Memorie dell’ Oratory...*, 56-57; ID., *Memoirs...*, 51).

educator sufficient empathy to enter into the boy's situation. Such positive procedure will forestall revolt, dropping-out and embitterment.

An exchange of views during the first General Chapter preceded the definitive wording of those articles. Strong emphasis was put on the "need for friendly assisting of the pupils in their various classes...Help given to all and to each one in particular: assistance that gives of the best for everybody is the main concern. "Teachers in particular, should bear in mind that they should take the greatest care of the boys who are the furthest behind in class." The reporter leaves no shadow of doubt about it, "The aspect that was most insisted on during this (third) session was the search for a method to ensure that the more backward pupils of a class were not abandoned. They had already at their disposal what the *Regulations for the Boarding schools* had stipulated concerning the teachers and they intended to draft a new, similar article. "Besides this Don Bosco ordered that the prefect of studies should be urged to bear this in mind, to go and visit the classes from time to time and to get private information as well. In any case "the prefect of studies has to remove this evil."¹⁴⁴ The evil of course is not caring about boys who have problems with their studies.

This strong privileged tradition in Salesian schools is consolidated by G. Barberis with a quotation from the non-Salesian world, "There will be no injustice if for the weekly or monthly marks one favours the weaker ones a little. Of course this little partiality should not be entirely undeserved and the occasions or motives for such behaviour should be truly disinterested."¹⁴⁵ Quoting an outsider evidently has the advantage that he can better resist the objection that in this way they are lowering the standards in their own schools. The results of the pupils of the Oratory in August 1877 must have

144. VERHULST, M., *J. Verballi...*, 114-115; 119/132-139. Also, see *ibid.* 119-120. Cf OE XXIX, 392, art. 4. In the seventies already Don Bosco insisted: "When a boy who before was lazy or badly behaved, begins to improve but doesn't manage to finish his work or to behave well for the entire lesson, teachers should be tolerant, encourage and help the boy." (MB XIV, 841, item 8). The second General Chapter (1880) confirmed those prescriptions of the regulations and sometimes slightly retouched them. Thus the phrase "those who are furthest behind" for example has been changed into "less-talented pupils" (OE XXXIII, 79, art.5). Don Bosco gave his constant attention to this, as appears from a fascinating report by G. Barberis (MB XI, 217-218; EMB XI, 200). It is a preference that G. Bonetti already stresses in Don Bosco during his years of study at Chieri, "He was the defender of the weak, he was the teacher and tutor of the less-talented, he was the aid of the needy." (BONETTI, G., *Cinque lustri ...*, 10-11).

145. BARBERIS, G., *Appunti ...*, 329/2. Here too he literally quotes MONFAT, P.A., *La pratica ...*, 126/2. The value Don Bosco attached to weekly marks even made him write about them in Fr. Besucco's biography (OE XV, 337/3).

been a real comfort for Lazzero. When they sat for the examinations together with boys from other colleges, they were able to distinguish themselves. This appears from the results registered in the *Memorie Biografiche*.¹⁴⁶

Helping sick boys

The same spirit is shown in the attention for sick youngsters and the caring presence they experience, especially in a boarding school, “Care will be taken that the sick do not lack anything of a spiritual or a temporal nature,”¹⁴⁷ especially when the boy is in a terminal phase. Don Bosco has described this assistance at length in “*The little Shepherd from the Alps*” or “*The Life of the young Francesco Besucco*.” One of the things that have struck lieutenant Eysautier is precisely the “assistance” that the boy obtained from Don Bosco during the last moments of his life.¹⁴⁸

Rendering services in many ways

A truly assisting presence is expressed in the interest shown in the young at all levels and in appropriate help. This is expressed in some detail for assistants in the dormitories in a meeting of the staff in November 1876. They can show “their interest for the boys and their wellbeing by showing them how to make their beds, how to arrange their clothes and their linen and how to keep everything in good order.”¹⁴⁹ This shows that the educator should have an eye for the needs – even the commonest – of those who have been entrusted to him and that he should actually cater for them. It is almost an insignificant example hardly worth mentioning. However, the positive living together often consists in doing small services. Without hesitation, we may assume that the active help adults can give to youngsters in Don Bosco’s eyes often replicates what he admired and accentuated in Dominic Savio and Michael Magone. “What Savio said (literally, “expressed in words”) he confirmed with deeds.” The same combination of words is striking indeed. Savio is concerned about the situation of less fortunate fellow-pupils. He is the valued nursing auxiliary.¹⁵⁰ Magone in his turn “offered to write letters for those who wanted

146. PRELLEZO, J.-M., *Valdocco nell'Ottocento ...*, 59/479-480. Cf MB XI, 220/3-4; EMB XI, 202.

147. OE XXIX, 122/art. 7. Cf MONFAT, P.A., *La pratica ...*, 98/3.

148. OE XV, 399-414, especially 410. The story was published again in 1878. Cf the end of M. Magone’s life in DESRAMAUT, Fr., *Saint Jean Bosco*, Namur, 1958, 125-130.

149. PRELLEZO, J.-M., *Valdocco nell'Ottocento ...*, 266/157-158

150. OE XI, 205, art. 1; 211-212; 212, art. 2

this. He was very fond of rendering services such as cleaning other people's clothes, fetching water, making the beds, sweeping, serving at table, handing over games, teaching catechism or songs, explaining difficult problems in the lessons."¹⁵¹ The point is to actually love by being aware of needs, even small ones, and by finding solutions for them.

Assistance as “sharing life,” especially during recreation

If one thing is clear and important, it must be this: an assisting presence cannot be aloof. Nor can it be exclusively physical. On the contrary, interested contact, spontaneous empathizing and the simple, but constructive sharing in all the aspects of ordinary, day-to-day life must characterize it. Has this ever been better typified than by a certain Professor Fabre? In June 1884 he took the floor at a past pupils assembly and declared, “I recall the former years when Don Bosco was in the flower of his life. When we boys used to press around him and he shared all our joys, our sorrows.”¹⁵² The scene the man recalls is evidently not inspired by one unforgettable action of Don Bosco's but by daily occurrences. Without the slightest doubt, it refers especially to his presence among the youngsters at that little breakfast handout or at the short recreation before night prayers, during recreation in the playground or on a shorter or longer walk. This recreation of pupils together with teachers and educators was in itself also a source of a beneficent pedagogical ambience full of the joy of life.

Following his example, every rector “should spend as much time as possible with the pupils,” especially “during the moments of recreation. His presence and participation in the games gave him the opportunity repeatedly to say a personal, individual word of encouragement, approval, advice or a brief admonition. Not only the rector but every educator as well should take the initiative to do the same.”¹⁵³ In order to further this Don Bosco inserts a

151. «Mortifications of the senses” in the life of Domenico Savio (BOSCO, G., *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, Turin, 1880, 71).

152. MB XVII, 170-171; EMB XVII, 146. Already in 1877 the French translator of Don Bosco's little treatise understood rightly: “Ceux-ci vivant toujours au milieu d'eux sont comme des véritables pères» (OE XXVIII, 47, art. 3. Also see BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo ...*, 122/438-439).

153. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 163/105-106 and annotation..

couple of models in his circular to the rectors. Therein he shows how they, as well as other Salesians, can manage to start a conversation and develop it.¹⁵⁴

His biographies for the young also bring out his practice. This, for instance, is the case with “Severino” or “*The Adventures of a boy from the Alps.*” Severino testifies: “When the rector of the Oratory noticed this he made several proposals and offered a variety of invitations.”¹⁵⁵ Several pages reveal just what those ways or manners consisted of. A model may doubtless also be a conversation with Michele Magone. The boy has just arrived at Valdocco. At recreation time, he runs up to Don Bosco. A short conversation begins in which Don Bosco asks him what he would like to do: to study or learn a trade. Thus, Don Bosco clearly lets us know that he wants to take into account the boys’ preferences, desires, dreams. To this then Michele replies, “If I may choose, I would prefer to study.”¹⁵⁶ Such passages indicate how an individualized approach and personal hints, admonitions and directives pave the way of getting on with the young through familiar dialogue.

Albert Caviglia has described this aspect of assistance very correctly, “In Don Bosco’s tradition, life in the playground, as he realized and impressed on others, is an essential and indispensable factor for the complete education of the young. It is also a basis of his system. So we understand why he insisted so much on it for the Salesians in his writings and sayings... Take away the life in the playground from Don Bosco’s life and from the life in a House and there remains only a figure without any character. And in the House appears a big void that cannot be filled and wherein a big part, a really big part of the typical educational edifice irremediably collapses – namely the part of

154. Ibidem, 163/105-107; 163/110-122. Cf TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti*, 26/2. As for the filling out of a conversation, it concerns an addition of Don Bosco’s from the seventies (RSS (1984), 4, 155/note on lines 94-104) and microfiche 1362 (11-12). Cf with the examples in MONFAT, P.A., *La pratica ...*, 98/1 and 3. See also Don Bosco’s personal testimony in BOSCO, G., *Memorie dell’ Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, LAS Rome 1991, 160/600-607; ID., *Memoirs...*, 136..

155. OE XX 52. See DECANCO, B., “Severino”: *studio dell’opuscolo con particolare attenzione al “primo*

Oratorio,” RSS (21), 253-254.

156. OE XIII, 162-164; DESRAMAUT, Fr., *Michel Magon* in *Saint Jean Bosco*, Namur 1958, 60-61. That conversation seems to be a forerunner of the interview with Bartolomeo Garelli, that Don Bosco will describe later in his *Memorie* (BOSCO, G., *Memorie dell’Oratorio ...*, 121-122; ID., *Memoirs...*, 103-104. BONETTI, G., *Cinque lustri ...*, 21-22 and which J.B Lemoyne will complete with striking detail (MB II, 73-74; EMB II, 57-58: “Can you sing? – Can you whistle”). Cf the conversation with Fr. Besucco (OE XV 329-330).

personal contact, which is the most necessary of all.” The author appreciates the pedagogical help during recreation so highly that he does not hesitate to declare, “From his youthful years with the Salesians a pupil of Don Bosco does not remember the lessons or sermons so much as the wise way in which his educators in the freedom of life in the open air of the playground or under the gallery...spoke to him with words that stayed in his mind, because they were said casually, kindly and for him alone.”¹⁵⁷

Yet, in contrast with the preceding years, according to Caviglia, there cannot be found much in this period of that “insisting on writings and sayings.”. In any case, not in the most important texts. Still, there is Don Bosco’s sermon in which he asks his Salesians to beware of staying idle (passive) at recreation time, “Let us keep busy even during recreation and, if it is our duty, let us watch our pupils, leading them in their games and keeping them together in the playground. Even if it is not your task, join in...”¹⁵⁸ A true assistance, a real presence among the boys implies that the teacher-educator joins with them and is actively interested in what the boys like and empathizes with them. In this spirit of Don Bosco’s sermon a decision had been taken by February 1877 at the annual assembly of the rectors. At the end of the assembly, Don Bosco approved eight points drawn up by the confreres, the seventh of which reads, “Recreations were to be enlivened with games appealing to the boys.”¹⁵⁹ That speaks volumes. The boys’ well-being stands at the centre. The educator can contribute to it by his organizing and participating.

157. BRAIDO, P., *Il sistema preventivo*, footnote 35. Also see ID., *L’Esperienza pedagogica...*, 146/footnote 15; ID., *Don Bosco’ pedagogical experience*, 151/footnote 15. In order to find out more accurately what is proper to Don Bosco, one ought to compare his directives and his practice with A.M. Teppa’s and A. Monfat’s in greater detail (TEPPA, A.M., *Avvertimenti ...*, 26/2; MONFAT, P.A., *La pratica ...*, 82/1). De Damas is even opposed to the teachers/educators’ playing together with the young, “Ne point jouer, ne point s’environner de monde dans les récréations, de sorte qu’on ne puisse observer ce qui se passe»; and also « Dans les récréations, ils se mêleront avec les enfants, prenant part à leurs conversations, mais sans perdre de vue leur surveillance ». These directives are somewhat toned down maybe by the remark, “Ils se font tour à tour, enfants avec les enfants, sans pourtant se dépouiller de cette dignité qui attire le respect ni descendre à cette imprudente familiarité que suit ordinairement le mépris» (DE DAMAS, A., *Le surveillant dans un collège catholique*, Paris 1857, 297/4 and 300/1 ; 288/3). He clearly points up surveillance and aloofness.

158. MB XIII, 801-802; EMB XIII, 619/2, where a significant detail is left out, “e prendere parte” = taking part in them (the games). Also see footnote 77.

159. MB XIII, 85; EMB XIII, 64.

No less relevant are the very important meetings of the staff on Nov 15 and 16, 1882 at Valdocco. Lazzero notes with his characteristic conciseness, “1[°] Recreation time. The boys are not assisted.” Therefore, the decision is taken to hold an assembly the next day. Meanwhile the superiors want to give an immediate instruction, “To look out for new games.”¹⁶⁰ A physical presence in the playground is not sufficient. Neither is looking on watchfully. On the contrary: an important part of their duty of assisting consists in animating the games. As a point of interest, this agrees well with the above-mentioned decision of February 1877.

This specific attention to being among and taking part with the boys during recreation cannot be thought of separately without Don Bosco’s inspiring example or his conviction quoted several times already, “We have assistance and games” and other similar declarations.¹⁶¹

Don Bosco is not afraid that, because of this, the educator will be less respected or lose his authority. “On the contrary,” P. Stella concludes, “he wants the educator to take part in the games in an active manner and to be as interested in them as the pupils themselves.”¹⁶² This is a very proper characteristic of Don Bosco and his followers.

But in the Salesian tradition this idiosyncrasy has led to a quasi-identification of active presence among the young in the playground with assistance *tout court*. Thus, it may have led to a rather one-sided, exaggerated emphasis on it. Don Bosco himself, however, in spite of an unmistakable preference for games, kept going on about the preventive and constructive meaning of being present everywhere, “The most important aspect of the duties” of teachers and assistants and people in charge of dormitories is, “to arrive punctually where the boys gather to rest, attend lessons, work, recreate or the like.”¹⁶³ Thus, Don Bosco sums up practically all the activities of the young wherein the educators should take part in a stimulating and purposeful way. Under certain circumstances, an enthusiastic participation could also lead to neglecting or losing the opportunity of the pedagogical supporting and correcting “little word.” That too was an unpardonable shortcoming. For in Don Bosco’s eye the personal little “word in the ear” was a very powerful

160. PRELLEZO, J.-M., *Valdocco nell'Ottocento ...*, 253-254. Also see footnotes 75 and 76.

161. Also see footnotes 63 and 77; in addition footnote 104.

162. STELLA, P., *Don Bosco nella storia ...II*, 461/3 ; 465/3. Cf., footnote 157.

163. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore ...*, 161/64-65. Cf. the same idea in the interview with minister Ratazzi (*ibid.*, 77/148-149).

means in education. Assistance means: to be present in a qualitatively rich and enriching manner.

Assistance as personal and collective guidance

For our research into the constitutive elements of assistance, we have been guided by Don Bosco's description of the "preventive system" in his short treatise. In order to penetrate still further into his ideas and practice it is advisable to approach it from another angle: namely, to take into account that assistance has both an individual and a collective component.

Personal accompaniment

Since this personal guidance in education meant so much for him, he recommended to Don Rua, and later to all the rectors, to spend as much time as possible with the boys and to use this time freely to whisper "a kind word in their ears." Though this is often only a brief contact, especially at very active moments in recreation, the word that is said must be relevant. This requires pedagogical skill. To promote this skill he does not however give any theoretical directives to his personnel. Yet, approximately from 1871 onward, he does give very practical examples, to which we have already referred. This "making contact and addressing personally," Don Bosco writes, "is the great secret that will make you master of their (the pupils') hearts."¹⁶⁴ For it is a token of the educator's interest in them, of his love for them and of the fact that they really mean something to him.

Brief, but efficacious contacts, instigated by the educator

The way in which Don Bosco himself set about it is shown to best advantage in the books he wrote for the young and re-published in the period 1876-1884. He often took the initiative himself to make a brief but decisive contact in the playground. One day, when he was standing among his boys (who were playing) he saw a medium-sized, sandy-haired boy with a freckled face and dressed like a mountaineer. He was looking wide-eyed at his playmates. When his gaze met Don Bosco's, he smiled timidly. With a smile Don Bosco asked him, "Who are you?"

164. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore ...*, 163/105-109. See footnote 153. Cf MOTTO, Fr., *I "Ricordi confidenziali ai direttori" di Don Bosco*, (RSS 4, 136/3 ; 155-156). Cf EMB X, 449.

“I’m Francesco Besucco from Argentera.”

“How old are you?”

“Nearly fourteen.”

“Have you come to study or learn a trade?”

“I should very, very much like to study.”

“What studies have you done already?”

“The primary school at my village.”

“Why would you like to study and not to learn a trade?”

“Well, I have a strong desire to become a priest.”

“Who has advised you about this?”

“I have always had this desire and I have prayed the Lord to help me realize this desire.”

Then Don Bosco goes still further into the subject and later he tells of the impression that this conversation made on him.¹⁶⁵ When he remarks that Valentino, a boy who has come from another college, doesn’t receive the sacraments, he calls him in the evening to come and see him. “My dear Valentino, do you know what we commemorate tomorrow?”

“Surely,” the boy answers, “tomorrow is the anniversary of my dear mother’s death. If I could, just once, see her again or hear her voice once more!”

“Would you like to do something tomorrow that would afford great pleasure to her and do a lot of good to you?”

“Of course, I would, at any cost.”

Don Bosco knows that Valentino’s mother was a very pious person. So was the boy before. That is why he proposes that he should receive Holy Communion the next day. Valentino at once knows what Don Bosco is aiming at and he doesn’t hesitate to unburden his soul in confession.¹⁶⁶

165. OE XV, 328-332. Cf the conversation with M. Magone through footnote 155. He frequently starts speaking to Pietro as well. See BOSCO, G., *Pietro ossia la forza della buona educazione. Curioso episodio contemporaneo*, Turin 1881, 65/1, 66-67; 69-70. For this last interview, Don Bosco accosts him in the street in the evening.

166. BOSCO, G., *Valentino o la vocazione impedita* (a cura di PULINGATHIL Mathew), PB 6, Rome. LAS, 70-71.

Contacts made through the initiative of the boy himself.

Once the ice is broken, the youngsters often take the initiative themselves. They accost Don Bosco themselves or try to find him. In this way a personal accompaniment of life can begin. Some days after the first interview with Besucco the boy comes to see Don Bosco with a rather depressed face. "What is wrong, my dear Besucco?"

"I am living here among so many good companions. I would like to be as good as they are, but I don't know what to do. You must help me."

"I will help you by all means. If you want to be a good boy, you have to do only three things."

"And what are these three things?"

"Be joyful, study and be pious. That is the whole programme. If you put that into practice, you will be happy and do a lot of good to your soul."

"Being joyful...being joyful.... I am only too glad. If being joyful is sufficient to be good, I will play from morning till night."

"No, not from morning till night, but only when recreation is permitted."¹⁶⁷

Another day Francesco calls on Don Bosco in his room. Just like Dominic Savio he sees a motto there. This time it is the motto, "Every moment is worth a treasure." In his turn Besucco wants to know what this means. His question is an opportunity for Don Bosco to explain in brief, "We can acquire scientific or religious knowledge at any moment, practise some virtue or perform an act of love for God. For God they are all worthy things that can benefit us now and for eternity."¹⁶⁸

It is most interesting to learn that the boy at that moment keeps silent, takes out a slip of paper and writes down the motto in order to use it later as a reminder. It is possible, not to say certain, that in his writings Don Bosco streamlines the so-called "words in the ear." Even so, they give an insight into his normal way of acting and into what he means by the directive that an educator "should converse with the youngsters like a loving father."¹⁶⁹

Reciprocal confidence and regular contact, however, cannot prevent Besucco, who has a tendency for taking things too literally or for exaggerating,

167. OE XV, 332-335.

168. OE XV, 337.

169. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo ...*, 83/392. *Constitutions...*, 247. About his first months of work as a priest Don Bosco declared, "But the greatest pleasure I found

from taking decisions on his own. When Don Bosco discovers that, like Dominic Savio, he is exaggerating, he obliges him to keep within bounds, “Have you no winter-wear?”

“Yes, I have. In the dormitory.”

“Why don’t you put them on?”

“Uh...for a reason you know well. In winter we must suffer the cold out of love for God.”

“Go and put on your winter-wear at once. Take care to protect yourself against wind and weather. If you need anything, ask for it and you will get it.”¹⁷⁰ Once again it must have been a little word ‘en passant’ but to the point.

That is what Don Bosco preferred. Besides, he must not have had enough time for longer conversations. No wonder Dominic Savio wrote home one day, “Dear Daddy, I have some very special news... The news is that I have been able to spend a whole hour alone with Don Bosco. Before that I could never be alone with Don Bosco more than ten minutes. I have talked to him about many things...”¹⁷¹ That has probably no other meaning than that he had been able to unburden himself. At the same time, this shows that Don Bosco knew how to keep his distance. He does not let himself be taken, neither does he make others dependent, in a non pedagogical way.

Written personal advice

Don Bosco knew how to provide other means for personal contact and guidance. He would jot down an admonition on a slip of paper or he would write a short letter “with considerations I judged necessary.”¹⁷² Available

in teaching catechism to the children, in being with them and conversing with them” (BOSCO, G., *Memorie dell’ Oratorio...*, 112/612-618; ID., *Memoirs...*, 97.). Relevant is the passage in the same *Memorie*, 160/600-604; *Memoirs*, 136). Concerning the use of that pedagogical means outside Don Bosco’s houses consult a quotation from Jouvençy’s work in: MONFAT, P.A., *La pratica ...*, 97-98.

170. For the different passages from the biography of Fr. Besucco: OE XV, 332-333; 336; 365-366. For D. Savio see OE XI, 188/1; 251; 258. About the way Don Bosco accosts the boys see BIESMANS, R., *Op weg naar de ‘brieven’ van 10 mei 1884*, Don Bosco Studies 8, 52 (footnote 1).

171. BRAIDO, P., *Il sistema preventivo di don Bosco*, Zürich, PAS-Verlag, 1964, 226/ footnote 79.

172. That is the expression in BOSCO, G., *Pietro ...*, 97/1. Brief letters from that period in E III, 287; 347.517; 539; 558. In fact, all are replies to cards or letters from the addressees. Examples of personal recommendations in MB VII, 6-10; EMB VII, 5-9.

documents give us insufficient evidence to conclude whether, to what extent, or how often he explicitly advised his co-workers to follow him in this as well. However, were such stories not a kind of vade mecum too or a mirror for his educators and teachers?

Personal guidance in the sacrament of penance

Then there was also the sacrament of penance. In the introduction to the nineteenth chapter of the biography of Francis Besucco Don Bosco apparently addresses himself to more mature young readers and over their shoulders to adult readers, “One may say whatever one likes about the different systems of education, but I do not find any solid basis except frequent confession and communion. And I do not think that I exaggerate when I say that where these two are neglected, a good moral behaviour can not be expected.”¹⁷³ In his memoirs he expresses, in almost identical words, his expectations and his later experience after taking the exam for confession, “This put me in a better position to cultivate discipline, morality and the good of the souls of my youngsters in the prisons, at the Oratory and wherever it was necessary.”¹⁷⁴ On the occasion of a feast of our Lady Francis Besucco walks up to Don Bosco (the boy again takes the initiative) and asks if he may make a general confession. “Since I want to place my soul in your hands,” he says, “I want to open my conscience completely to you. In this way you will get to know me better and give me advice with greater certainty. This will help me to save my soul.” Don Bosco gives him the permission and praises him, because he wants to choose “a regular confessor.”¹⁷⁵

Such choice and fidelity have the greatest importance for him as an educator. They give him the opportunity to guide boys personally and to follow and assist them especially on a religious and moral level. That is why he inserted this article in his Regulations, “Though it is not a sin to change your confessor, I advise you to choose a regular confessor, because for the soul you can do what a gardener does for a plant and a doctor for a patient.”¹⁷⁶ In this way he also emphasizes for confessors the ‘father and doctor’ approach more than that of ‘teacher and judge.’¹⁷⁷

173. OE XV, 342/1.

174. BOSCO, G., *Memorie dell’ Oratorio...*, 126/912-915 ID., *Memoirs...*, 107.

175. The nineteenth chapter in OE XV, 342-343.

176. OE XXIX, 68, art. 6. Also see *ibid.*, 159, art. 4. Cf among other things the biography of M. Magone: OE XIII, 180-181; DESRAMAUT, Fr., *Saint Jean Bosco*, 75/2.

177. DESRAMAUT, Fr., *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle*, Paris 1967, 129/2.

In the sixth chapter of the fourteenth volume of the *Memorie Biografiche* E. Ceria declares, “A ministry at the Oratory which Don Bosco never relinquished was that of hearing confessions..... Don Bosco regularly heard a large number of penitents in a relatively short time because his advice was brief and forthright.” Ceria illustrates this with a few examples.¹⁷⁸ These recommendations constitute a very important part of confession.¹⁷⁹ They were directly related to or contained the core of the good and firm resolution of the penitent concerned. The wording and above all the carrying out of a resolution were essential for Don Bosco.¹⁸⁰

Moreover, when the penitent had the habit of writing down the main idea of those brief recommendations – the so-called good resolutions – in order to use it more conscientiously, the integrating and formative influence of the sacrament of confession in the pedagogical process could but increase.¹⁸¹ This appears from the considerations he inserts in Michael Magone’s biography, “Go often to see your confessor and follow his advice.”¹⁸² With the help of his advice, they would remain on the right path and make good progress.

According to the theological language of that period we can speak here of the priority of the *ex opere operantis* over the *ex opere operato*. This means that the beneficent effect of the sacrament of confession actually depends more on the contributions of the penitent and the confessor than on the inner force of the sacrament “received.”¹⁸³ This human contribution consists in the

178. MB XIV, 121/2 and 712-714; EMB XIV 86/2 and 586-588. A striking example also in MB XVI 31-32; EMB XVI 16-17. Cf STELLA, P., *Don Bosco nella storia ...*, II, 311/2 and DESRAMAUT, Fr., *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle*, 134/1.

179. OE XXXV, 98, art. 6. Also see the dream tale in January 1883 in MB XVI 16; EMB XVI 4, “firm resolutions in confession.” Cf SCHEPENS, J., *Pénitence et eucharistie dans la méthode éducative et pastorale de don Bosco III*, Rome 1986, N 199/foot note (330).

180. See OE XXXV, 226; 232, art. 1. Also BRAIDO, P., *Prevenire non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di don Bosco*, Rome, LAS, 1999, 264-265.

181. About the meaning of noted ‘words of advice’ in general, see Fr. Besucco (footnote 167). A goodnight talk given on 31 August 1877 is also very significant, “Now I ask you all to do me a favour: write down my suggestions for a happy vacation to remember and keep” (MB XIII 433/5; EMB XIII 341/5). Cf also MB XII 150/3; EMB XII, 121/2.

182. *La vie de Michel Magon* in: DESRAMAUT, Fr., *Saint Jean Bosco*, 75/2; OE XIII, 180-181.

183. Also see STELLA, P., *Don Bosco nella storia ...II*, 317/2; 323-324 and BRAIDO, P., *Prevenire non reprimere...*, 264/2. Cf DESRAMAUT, Fr., *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle*, 134-135.

completeness of the avowal, the sincerity of the contrition and above all in the solidity of the resolution and the perseverance in carrying it out. “Only then will progress in some virtue be noticed” each time.¹⁸⁴ On the other hand it is beyond doubt that Don Bosco counted both on the influence of divine grace and on the effect of human effort.

An appropriate, trustful and brief reception of the sacrament, often have an effect beyond confession. Indeed Don Bosco concludes the account of his conversation with Francis Besucco with the observation, “After making his choice he kept to it all the time he was with us. He put his full trust in him (the confessor), asked him for advice outside confession as well, prayed for him and was very glad whenever he received from him some good advice for his life.”¹⁸⁵

With this high appreciation of the sacrament of penance and personal guidance in mind, one understands the more easily that Don Bosco asks the rectors to “let them see that you willingly hear anyone’s confession.”¹⁸⁶ Constructive assistance means repeatedly being present and disposed to listen to the boys and then helping them to the best of one’s own ability with their human, religious and moral development, most certainly through the sacrament of confession.

On the other hand, it is also remarkable that he clearly restricts this important service to the rector. Only in the second instance does he want to entrust it to ‘other priests’, “But give them (the boys) full freedom to go also to confession to someone else if they wish to do so.”¹⁸⁷ In the Regulations for dayboys in 1877, the ‘others’ (“someone else”) are officially “the spiritual director and the prefect. And on special occasions, priests invited from outside the institute.”¹⁸⁸ Such sporadic contact between confessor and penitent of

184. E III, 436/3.

185. OE XV, 343-344.

186. MOTTO, Fr., *I “Ricordi confidenziali ...*, RSS (4), 149/87-88: 156/105-107; BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 163/124, 164/146-147..

187. Ibidem. Also see the minutes of the assembly of rectors on the occasion of the feast of St Francis of Sales in February 1879 in MB XIV 45-46; EMB XIV 28/4. Besides it is a pity that G. Lazzerio in his notes limits himself to the sentence, “Afterwards Don Bosco gave various norms for confessors in our houses” (PRELLEZO, J.-M., *Valdoco nell’Ottocento ...*, 75/929) The reports of the first General Chapter also remain vague: VERHULST, M., *I Verballi...*, 197/25-26; 203/182-184.

188. OE XXIX, 67-68; Cf The first General Chapter in VERHULST, M., *I Verballi ...* 190/86-93; In some notes to prepare a pontifical audience in 1880 he regretted

course does not promote true guidance. The investigation into the reasons for this behavior would exceed the scope of this study. Nevertheless, whatever those reasons may have been, it was a directive that could reduce the effect of confession in two ways. Firstly, through this practice the regular guidance normally given was dropped. Secondly, in this way a number of educators, teachers and assistants were deprived of an excellent opportunity – according to Don Bosco’s teaching and practice – for a sustaining accompaniment and behavioral guidance. This seems to have been the blind spot in Don Bosco’s way of evaluating and providing educational opportunities and responsibilities.

Personal approach when punishing

In cases where boys do not respond as requested by assistants or teachers, and there is a need to remedy or punish, the advice to all is the same: as educators they should act kindly and in almost every case start a personal conversation. The latter point he strongly emphasizes in his little treatise, “Except in very rare cases, corrections and punishments should never be given publicly, but always privately and in the absence of companions; and the greatest prudence and patience should be used to bring the pupil to see his fault, with the aid of reason and religion.”¹⁸⁹ The same emphasis he puts on one of the ten preceding *General Articles*, “Should it become necessary to reprimand, correct or admonish them, it should never be done in the presence of their companions.”¹⁹⁰ And when in 1884, he struggles through a period of serious illness and painfully writes down a few memories that often contain a suggestion or a directive for his closest co-workers, the idea again appears, “In order to correct efficaciously one should not scold someone in the presence of others.”¹⁹¹

His enduring concerns about this delicate matter are less surprising when one remembers that during the General Chapter in 1883 he intervenes with the following consideration, “Some want to punish etc. etc. The rector may

however that “most of the priests did not hear confessions” (E III, 561/Lettera 2026). The question may be asked whether this concerned only diocesan priests. Cf SCHEPENS, J., *Pénitence et eucharistie ...II*, 388-389. G. Barzaghi concludes that “there was no problem: all the priests in the institutes were also confessors” (BARZAGHI, G., *Alle radici del sistema preventivo di don Bosco*, Milano, L.E.S., 1989, 159/6). However, that conclusion is a typical *latius hoc* reasoning.

189.

190. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco Educatore ...*, 290-291/art. 9.

191. *Ibid.*, 402/78.

admonish, but never publicly, never in the presence of other boys. In private (“a tu per tu”) one easily obtains compliance with the will of the superior and conformity with the preventive system.”¹⁹² And this contribution during the Chapter may have been influenced by the fact that several confreres were drafting a document under the title “Punishments to be administered in Salesian houses” – a document that was not published until 1935. This proves once more how difficult it is to reconcile real punishments with the preventive system as Don Bosco promoted it and wanted it to be applied. In this draft document Don Francesca also wrote, “And so I ask all rectors to admonish our dear boys first in a fatherly way and in private, or as we usually say *in camera caritatis*..”¹⁹³ This norm conforms fully to Don Bosco’s directives.

However, Don Bosco knows that the psychological approach and the humane behaviour of the educator are not sufficient to preserve good relations. The positive attitude and well-intentioned behaviour of the boys are equally important. Therefore, the educator – according to the draft of the circular in 1883 in a literal quotation from P.A. Monfat – must give time to the boy “to reflect, to return to his senses, to become aware of his wrong and of the justice and need of punishment.”¹⁹⁴ Indeed, he also appeals to the active collaboration of the boys, “Be convinced that your superiors feel intensely their heavy responsibility to do their best to ensure your welfare.” In that case they realize the superiors “are only concerned for your good when they warn, insist and admonish.” Hence the instruction, “Gratefully listen to their admonitions, accept the punishment for your faults with simplicity and without showing aversion or disapproval.” Doubtless they will attain this attitude only if they are disposed to lay a foundation of trust. That is why Don Bosco also gives them the very positive order, “Freely open your hearts to them with the knowledge that they are fathers who most ardently wish to see you all happy.”¹⁹⁵

These are three articles from the *Regulations for the Houses*. As we already know, extracts from these regulations are regularly read and commented on in the houses, which shows the real desire to touch and influence every boy

192. Ibid., 426/footnote with lines 638-640.

193. Ibid., 309/1; 327/48-50. The same solicitude again in the same writing 337/271 and 340/345. Cf EMB XVI, 369/4; 374/2 and 375/5.

194. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore...*, 331/126-128 EMB XVI, 371/2.

195. OE XXIX, 171, art. 3. 172, art. 8 and 7. The analogy between a family and an educational community that is intimated here is characteristic of Don Bosco’s vision. Cf BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo ...*, 83/392. *Constitutions...*, 247.

personally. However, it seems practically impossible that every boy would have had a copy. Therefore, the specific use of the regulations lies somewhere in the link between personal and common or collective guidance and assistance.

Collective guidance through “short goodnight talks”

In the field of collective guiding assistance of the boys, especially in boarding schools, there is a pre-eminent means of collective guidance: that is, the “good night talk.” It is so important that even in his treatise on the preventive system Don Bosco devotes a whole paragraph to it. Through this short address the responsible educator must “in public give a directive or a short piece of advice concerning the things that the boarders and those Salesians present, must ‘do or omit’ in order to have a happy life personally and as a group. As a conclusion, he calls that short address “the key to good behaviour, to the smooth running of affairs and to success in education.”¹⁹⁶ Not every educator, however, could make a direct use of this means. In the day-to-day practice in fact that key-moment was the privilege of Don Bosco or his immediate substitute, among whom there was first of all the local Rector. The fellow-educators and the youngsters thus often received the same instructions to make efforts personally and together “to become really good Christians and honest citizens.”¹⁹⁷

Don Bosco’s own ‘good nights’ in 1877 show how for this short talk one can start from an approaching feast, the beginning of a week of retreat, the imminent holiday period, or the example of a boy who gives back a coin he has just found. A good opportunity may also be found in arriving home after a journey, a change of personnel, the expulsion of a boy, the beginning of a new school year, the announcement of the *strenna* for the year, the departure of a group of missionaries. The subjects he can broach on such occasions are: devotion to Mary Help of Christians, guidance for the holidays, morals and confession, always being prepared for death. His style is entertaining, at once exhilarating and serious, and often very direct.

In the case of a lost object, he knows how to provide some light entertainment, “What have we here? A banknote? No, it’s a five cent gold piece. (*Laughter*). Since you’re not allowed to keep money, no one will

196. See footnote 126. Cf OE XXIX, 429, art. 20; 430, 1. A little more than a month after his return from Rome in 1884, he says during a meeting, “The short goodnight talk is the master key of the house. A great deal, if not everything hinges on it (MB XVII 190/6; EMB XVI, 166.)

197. See for instance concerning the catechist of the technical students OE XXIX, 125-126. Even when he is away Don Bosco still tries to be present by giving the rectors subjects for goodnights (MB XV, 469-470; EMB XV, 392.

come to claim it, and so (*putting the coin in his pocket*) we'll use it to pay the Oratory's debts (*laughter*) and to keep you all happy on the feast of Mary, Help of Christians."¹⁹⁸ The latter is certainly an allusion to the expected little extra at table on that day. But at the same time he has prepared the ground for his subject.

In one particular circumstance he boldly declares, "The reasons for my displeasure are: ill conduct, foul talk, reading and passing around bad books." All these are diametrically opposed to the objectives he and "all the other superiors" have in mind. By saying this, he identifies himself with his co-workers, placing them on a par with himself, which is of no little importance. He continues, "Also there are a few – very few – who are chronic gripers, stirring discontent among the student body with their moaning....How thoughtless they are!"¹⁹⁹ It is clear enough for those concerned. At the same time, they can all hear that Don Bosco is not naïve, not blind, not deaf. He is well informed but he does not hurt by denouncing boys by name. The most important thing is to give them all insight in his objectives, to invite them to make a good retreat and to make some of them immediately aware of the need for conversion.

These goodnight talks doubtless gain strength and impact when he relates "dreams," often full of imagery. Occasionally they were announced in advance, and sometimes spread over several evenings. In both cases the suspense was inevitably heightened.²⁰⁰ This is certainly not the ideal place to dwell on Don Bosco's dreams in general, but it doesn't seem inappropriate to quote some of his own words on them. "It has been said that we are to pay no heed to dreams, and I assure you that most of the time I, too, agree. Nevertheless, though dreams may not reveal future events to us, they can at times help us to see our way through intricate problems and to act wisely in different matters. Therefore we may accept what they have to offer us that is good."²⁰¹

198. MB XIII, 409/2; EMB XIII, 320/2. Also see the somewhat lengthy introduction on 10 April 1877 in MB XIII, 124; EMB, XIII, 94 and for the prayer to St. Bernard in MB XIII, 411/4; EMB, 322/2.

199. MB XIII, 420-421; EMB XIII, 329-330. Literally: «When Don Bosco – and by Don Bosco I mean all superiors – enrolls a lad...» (MB XIII, 420/6; EMB XIII, 330/2). Cf MB XIII, 753/5; EMB XIII, 578/4. Cf footnotes 92 and 101.

200. MB XII, 582/2; EMB XII, 428/4. E. Ceria excellently evokes the atmosphere (MB XIII, 585 and 450/3; EMB XIII, 431 and 324-325; and also MB XII, 48/3; EMB XII, 35/3). Also see BIESMANS, R., *Doelstellingen van opvoeding en opleiding...*, 106-107.

201. MB XII, 463; EMB XII, 335/2. Cf MB XIII, 761/5; EMB XIII, 585/1 and MB XII, 41/6; EMB XII, 29.

However, he does not always relate his dreams in such a non-committal, neutral way. More than once “heavenly” personages enter on the scene with some important message. That is how these stories claim supernatural force from time to time. In other cases he himself suggests or formulates concrete applications that are valuable for all

Influence on the whole community by means of a “bouquet”

This can be a short idea, a kind of motto intended as a guide for the boys’ religious and moral behaviour the next day. A goodnight during the Christmas novena concludes as follows, “For tomorrow’s nosegay tell the Infant Jesus from your hearts, I promise to love You and serve You with all my heart by striving for purity in my glances and my speech.”²⁰² He often deliberately uses spiritual bouquets, especially on the occasion of great feasts.²⁰³ In order to make them more efficacious Lazzero prescribed “to post them up in a little frame at the church door for the whole day,”²⁰⁴ to catch the eye and recall to mind at regular intervals.

Strennas

With his yearly-mottoes or *strennas* he is practically on the same wavelength. He sends them to all the houses in this period. Even when he stays in Rome in 1877 and is faced with unpleasant problems, he remembers to ask Don Rua for 1878 “Greet them all for me. Here are the family practices for the coming year: 1. Break up the habit of smoking and grumbling. 2. Exactness in the duties of one’s state of life from Father Rua to Julius. 3. Holy Communion and prayers for those houses recently opened and others that are being set up in mission territories, where God has prepared a wonderful harvest for us.”²⁰⁵ Such topics also show that nothing human was alien to the

202. For a sermon too he sometimes uses a “dream.” “Now rather than give you a sermon I will tell you a story. Call it what you will: fable, dream, tale and give it any importance you wish. In any case we can always learn something.” (MB XIII, 302/2; EMB XIII, 225/4 and *ibidem* 303, respectively 226).

202 MB XII, 585/6; EMB XII, 431. For the notion “little flower” or “nosegay” see MB VI, 319/1; EMB VI, 170/2.

203. MB XIV, 382-383; EMB XIV, 292. This concerns the preparation for Christmas 1879. For the feast of Mary Immaculate nosegays are given, meant for all the houses. See MB XV, 469-470; EMB XV, 392..

204. PRELLEZO, J.-M., *Valdocco nell’Ottocento ...*, 108-109.

205. MB XIII, 392; EMB XIII, 304. E III, 254. Julius was one of the janitors at Valdocco. Don Bosco consequently intended this point for all, youngsters and adults,

Salesian communities. They show at the same time that Don Bosco continues to directly stimulate and invite everyone, the youngsters and the adults.

For the year 1879, he is brief, “Unity,” i.e. “unity of the boys among themselves; similarly, unity among the superiors and unity of the boys with the assistants and the superiors.” This also means searching for means “to achieve this unity” and “shunning whatever might disrupt it, such as quarrelling, backbiting, intimate friendships and the like.”²⁰⁶ Thus, everyone in the house is set to work and all receive a task that will benefit the whole community.

With 1880 in view he specifies still more.

To the rectors: The patience of Job.

To the superiors: The kindness of St. Francis de Sales in dealing with others.

To All pupils: use your time well: *nullum temporis pretium* (time is priceless).

To All Salesians: Strict observance of our rules.

To all without distinction: Give good example in word and deed. Be on guard against forming habits in unnecessary things even when they are neither good nor bad.

In addition, most pedagogically he adds, “*Superiors are asked to read and explain the above repeatedly if needed.*”²⁰⁷ They may not remain just words or a wish list that would be replaced at New Year. No, one must utilize them in a positive, preventive sense, so that they become valuable for formation, for a better and stronger development of the man and the Christian in all of them. It is a pity that further information is missing about recalling or confirming the *strenna* in the course of the year, because without this, it could simply go unnoticed by the students. As far as the topic of the good use of one’s time is concerned, there is no problem at all. He repeats it in any case.²⁰⁸

religious and lay people.

206. MB XIII, 766-767; EMB XIII, 589/3.

207. MB XIV, 383; EMB XIV, 293. “*Nullum temporis pretium*” we understand as “Time is priceless,” so costly is it. Cf the comment for 1883 in MB XV, 683; EMB XV, 572-573. The *strenna* for 1884 might perhaps indicate the necessity to combat a few abuses, “Do not steal the possessions, time, innocence, or soul of anyone *by word or deed*” (MB XVI, 316; EMB XVI, 248-249). For “deeds” and “examples” also see footnotes 140; 149.

208. See for example MB XII, 556; EMB XII, 406; MB XIII, 430/3; EMB XIII, 338/3. Also see in the biography of Fr. Besucco (OE XV 336).

Items of attention concerning formation and smooth administration

On another occasion a relevant *strenna* is used to address a burning issue. In October 1876, Don Bosco judges that his boys should concentrate on the study of Italian from the very beginning of the new school year. And he tackles the problem like this, “Then, if during this novena (of All Saints’ Day), you would like a practice or suitable nosegay which can serve for the entire month or even for the whole year, I suggest this one, “Don’t say a single word in Piedmontese dialect. You may think that this is a seemingly useless suggestion, but it will help you greatly in learning to speak proper Italian. So away with dialect, and not a word of Piedmontese! Talk, play, work, eat, drink and sleep – but all in Italian. (*General laughter*). And if anyone starts to snore tonight, then let him snore in Italian (*more laughter*). This nosegay does not call for any painful penance or sacrifice. All it requires is self-control.”²⁰⁹

Formation through sermons

In order to guide boys as a group, Don Bosco doesn’t only make use of goodnights, bouquets and yearly-mottoes but also of sermons, talks during retreats and all sorts of addresses, as for instance at the end of academic sessions, theatrical performances and meetings of past pupils. They are opportunities every confrere can make regular use of.²¹⁰

Influence through the spread of good books

A very important extra means to give the boys guidance and assistance, according to Don Bosco, is the promotion of good books. Just as he put a lot of energy into combating bad books through protective assistance, he also recommended with no less energy the reading of good books. In both his regulations, he impressed on the teachers the need “to mention and recommend authors who can be read and remembered without endangering religion or morals.”²¹¹ The goodnight on 24 August 1877 was very typical; the holidays are drawing near and he says, “I wish I were your age! If I just had tiny fractions of the time which I spent, I won’t say uselessly, but which I could have spent better! I’d read loads of good (useful) books and put my hand to many tasks. I had time once, but not any longer, and I won’t ever have it. So I tell you: Use your time well now while you have it!...Remember, to learn you must read. Read useful books, something you cannot often do

209. MB XII, 556/4; EMB XII, 406-407.

210. OE XXIX, 430, art. 1. Here again it is about a decision of the first General Chapter.

211. OE XXIX, 83, art. 11 and 131, art. 11. Also see *ibid.*, 397, Chapter IV and OE XXXIII, 83, Chapter V.

during the school year.”²¹² Mind, he speaks about “useful books” (*libri utili*): here he manifests a profound conviction about the influence of reading and a high esteem for good, useful books.

Even in the stories he writes for the young, he draws their attention to the existence of other biographies and their good influence on the reader.²¹³ In Don Bosco’s opinion it is not only the physical presence of the educator that has value, but also his moral and psychological influence.

Convinced that Don Bosco was right in this matter, G. Barberis consequently taught his audience that the “overwhelming spread of printed matter in our days obliges us to insist on good reading matter and the avoidance of what is harmful.”²¹⁴ Thereby he places the positive, constructive aspect quite rightly to the fore.

Education through membership of youth movements

The educator could find a mixture of collective and personal guidance and a stimulant in the “*compagnie*” – youth associations, or sodalities. In the spirit of former declarations and of Don Bosco’s practice, the following was decided in the first General Chapter, “By religious usage we mean: practices of piety not prescribed by the Church, but which...powerfully contribute to the pupils’ piety and the protection of good moral standards. Practices of that sort are: the goodnights,...reading at table, triduums, novenas and retreats, the solemn feasts, associations of altar servers, of St. Aloysius, of the Blessed Sacrament, of St. Joseph and the like. These practices must be warmly recommended.”²¹⁵ This last sentence means that all must believe in them, speak approvingly of them, even though the direct responsibility has been entrusted to a few confreres only – first to the “catechists,” both for the dayboys and for the students and artisans, then, also to their young helpers.

212. MB XIII, 430/4 and 3; EMB XIII, 338/4 and 3.

213. F. Besucco does not only read the booklets about M. Magone and D. Savio. He also imitates both youngsters, though sometimes not judiciously. (OE XV, 338, chapter 2. 390, chapter 3). Don Bosco encouraged this reading and earnestly wished his boys to imitate D. Savio, M. Magone, F. Besucco and other youngsters (MB XII, 557; 572; 574-575; 586-595; EMB XII, 407/3;419; 422; 432-441; MB XIII, 417/3; EMB XIII, 326-327).

214. BARBERIS, G., *Appunti ...*, 217/1. Also see footnotes 91; 92.

215. OE XXIX, 429-430. Thus, the General Chapter confirmed a circular of January 1876 (E III, 69).

The latter were absolutely necessary, for especially from 1875 onwards the various youth associations flourished greatly.²¹⁶

Through their presence and their guidance of these associations, Don Bosco and his co-workers did not only want to intensify the boys' spiritual life. They also aimed at strengthening them in their youthful endeavour to behave dutifully and to devote themselves lovingly and in solidarity to the welfare of others. This can be gathered from the writings about the principal members of the St. Aloysius group, to which indeed many boys belonged. "The objective that the members try to attain" Don Bosco writes, "consists in the imitation of the youthful saint's virtues that suit their own life and the assurance of his protection in this life and at the hour of death."²¹⁷ Therefore, it is obvious that the members are asked to be assiduous in their religious practice. But along with this they must be very diligent at their work and the accomplishment of their duties." And "when a member falls ill," everyone must not only pray for him but also help him in temporal affairs in a way according to his own ability."²¹⁸ The last phrase is a hint at the association for mutual assistance ("mutuo soccorso").²¹⁹

Even in a group where one might expect that only religious matters be aimed at, as in that of "Mary Immaculate", similar non-religious "practices" are to be found. "The accomplishment of their duties (of state) must be the primary and special care for the members." A basic expectation is "to use one's time to the full" and furthermore, that "reciprocal charity will unite our spirits and make us love our brothers without exception. We will admonish them gently when a word of warning seems appropriate."²²⁰

In this way the core groups are for those boys who wish to join. They are a training ground towards personal, responsible decisions and action that directly prepare for their future lives and little by little render the presence and direct assistance of teachers/educators superfluous in the years of formation. Therefore, Don Bosco urges the rectors to recommend and promote "the

216. Ibidem, 38, art. 6; 123, art. 11; 126, art. 7. About their flourishing see MB XI, 225/2; EMB XI, 206/4.

217. OE XXIX, 75, art. 1. The regulations of this sodality were published in 1878: BOSCO, G., *Le sei domeniche e la novena di S. Luigi Gonzaga colle regole della compagnia in onore del medesimo santo e con alcune lode sacre*, S. Pier d'Arena, 1878.

218. STELLA, P., *Don Bosco nella storia ...II*, 348.

219. Cf BIESMANS, R., *Doelstellingen van opvoeding en opleiding ...*, 1997, 155.

220. OE XI, 227, art. 3; 229, N. 2 and N. 3. For the association of St. Joseph see BRAIDO, P., *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco*, Zürich, PAS-Verlag, 1964, 384/4.

altar servers, the core-groups of St. Aloysius, the Blessed Sacrament and Mary Immaculate.” Moreover, he asks them to demonstrate “benevolence and satisfaction towards those who are enrolled. But,” he continues, “you will only be a promoter, and not their director. Consider those groups as the responsibility of the boys. They are entrusted to the catechist to run.”²²¹ P. Stella has correctly summarized the place of these groups, “The *compagnie* play an integrating role in the educational system. They make up for any lack of personnel, necessary assistance and subtle penetration of (pedagogical and pastoral) influence. But this does not exhaust their function. They also contribute to the strengthening of religious values on the collective and intimately personal level of those who are active members of them.”²²² Of course, the activity of the group gives the adults directly involved with them the opportunity to get to know the boys better and give them personal guidance.

Reciprocal supplementing of collective and personal formation

Collective support or assistance is indeed important, nay indispensable. In the final analysis, however, it remains subordinate to *individual guidance*. It is a supplement and sometimes a preparation for individual personal formation. Hence, in Don Bosco’s own talks the invitation to go and see him in his room is frequently found. When in April 1877 after his return from France he addresses his boys again for the first time, he expresses his desire in this way, “On my part, I wish to speak privately with each of you either during the retreat or before or after. I’ll do all I can to help you. I enjoy talking with you, and you seem to feel the same way, especially when your spiritual well-being is at stake.”²²³ The word “especially” calls up a preference for a topic but does not exclude at all other subjects of discussion, provided the little talk benefits a boy’s “temporal and/or eternal well-being.”

Assistance through on-going formation

In such cases, the personal interview may be the confirmation or individualisation of what he has said in public. Thus at the beginning of the vacation period in 1877, “The next two days are the last days you will be with

221. BRAIDO, P., *Don Bosco Educatore ...*, 163-164. In his letters Don Bosco further insists. See E III, 135/L. 1541; 164/L. 1578; 466/L. 1920. Also see *ibid.*, 324/L. 1748.

222. STELLA, P., *Don Bosco nella storia ... II*, 351-352. Also see *ibid.*, 356/3.

223. XIII, 125/5-6; EMB XIII, 95/2. Cf MB XI, 224/1; EMB XI, 205-206.

us, and I'd like all of you to come and see me because I have something to say to each one."²²⁴

One of the available channels to pursue this guidance personally and certainly collectively is that of the *past pupils' assemblies*. He speaks with great satisfaction about them, "Everyone speaks of these meetings of ours because it is the best way to recall to mind the advice and council I gave you when you were boys."²²⁵ In an address to priest past pupils in 1880 he goes back to their youthful experiences and explicitly confirms for them, as they are now educators themselves, the basic underlying principle in education, "In order to succeed with youngsters, take great pains to be kind to them; win their love, not their fear." This demands a particular way of intervening, "Be patient and gentle in correcting them, and, do not strike them. In a word, act in such a way that once they see you, they will run over to you rather than dash off, as so often happens." Just like Don Bosco they should not lose heart if all does not run as smoothly as they would wish it, for "your good advice, welcome or unwelcome at the moment, and your kindness will leave an impression on their minds and hearts. The time will come when the good seed will sprout, bloom and bear fruit."²²⁶ This sounds like his positive assistance programme in a nutshell.

It must have happened more than once that a past pupil could not exactly put into words the good done to him in his youthful years. However, others could. One such past pupil wrote, "There is something special about the Oratory, a totally unique system of educating young people not to be found anywhere but in Don Bosco's schools."²²⁷ In order to give weight to his words during the past pupils assembly, Don Bosco relates an incident. One day a military man who long ago had not exactly been a little angel at the Oratory, came to see him. For thirty years, he had not come back to Don Bosco or Valdocco, so he had a lot to tell. At the end, he wanted to make his confession, after which Don Bosco asked him how he had come to that decision. Then the captain answered, "Seeing you again reminded me of all the tricks you used to keep me on the right path: the words you used to whisper in my ear

224. Ibid., 433/5; 341/5.

225. MB XVII, 173/2; EMB XVII, 148/3. This concerns a speech on July 13 1884.

226. MB XIV, 513/2. EMB XIV, 403/2. For the principle "Fatti amare, non temere" (Make yourself loved, not feared) see BIESMANS, R., *Fatti amare ... Zorg ervoor dat ze van je houden*, Sint-Pieters-Woluwe, 1994. ID., *Studia di fatti amare*, Quaderni di spiritualità 8, Rome, UPS, 1996.

227. MB XIV, 139/2; EMB XIV, 103/2 and footnote 18 there.

and your exhortations to go to confession. These things prompted me to do it.”²²⁸ Central are the words in the ear and the exhortations. Both are aspects of constructive, formative assistance.

Such positive experiences must underlie the following paragraph in his little treatise, “The pupil will always remain friendly towards his educators and will ever remember with pleasure the guidance he received. He will continue to consider his teachers and other superiors as fathers and brothers.” We find this conviction again in the same text, “The preventive system makes the pupils so affectionate that the educator can always speak to them in the language of the heart, not only during the time of their education but even afterwards.”²²⁹

In the same month of July 1880 the lay past pupils came together as well. Don Bosco sent them home with the order, “My dear sons, one thing I recommend to you above all else: wherever you may be, always conduct yourselves as good Christians and upright citizens. Love, respect and practise our holy faith, in which I have brought you up and shielded you from the dangers and corruption of the world: the faith which aids us in our earthly afflictions, comforts us at the point of death and opens us the gates of everlasting happiness.”²³⁰ Thus, he links up with the past and bridges the gap because he can still speak to them as a father.

Three years later, in an address to the representatives of the past pupils, both laymen and priests, he tries to explain why he keeps out of politics and which policy he does champion. And he concludes, “Religion and wise counsel teach us: Live as good Christians, busy yourself with the moral training of your children, instruct the pupils of your schools or your parishes in their catechism – that is everything.”²³¹

He does not miss a single chance to confirm and corroborate the good of the past. But he sometimes wants to draw his past pupils’ attention to what is new and really good in society. He even wants to encourage them to integrate those new aspects, “Just now I am all taken up with a project which I would like to see started this year: being of mutual assistance to each

228. Ibidem., 514 respectively 404/3. Cf an episode from 1880 in MB XIV, 424/2; EMB XIV, 327-328.

229. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo ...*, 90/I and 84/IV; *Constitutions...*, 251 and .248.

230. MB XIV, 511/2; EMB XIV, 401/2.

231. MB XVI, 291/3; EMB XVI, 227-228. Concerning Don Bosco and party politics see BIESMANS, R., *Doelstellingen van opvoeding en opleiding ...*, 234-237.

other. People talk about credit unions and mutual aid societies nowadays. We have to set one up for ourselves. So far this is just an idea, a project I have not yet investigated in detail, but I think it is a very feasible idea. All of you manage to set some savings aside, some more, some less, so that you can face emergencies like illness or unemployment. I suggest that you don't benefit yourselves alone but reach out in emergencies to some fine students who graduate from the Oratory or to you former schoolmates, to everyone here present. ...Such an organisation set up by you could be most helpful."²³² In this way, he is still guiding and stimulating them – to use his own words – after their period of education and training.

Final reflections

Anyone who looks at all these elements of *protective* and constructive, *promotional* assistance side by side cannot help wondering about a conclusion of Don Bosco in his short treatise. In his words, this entire endeavour, all these efforts of the teachers/educators result in “the impossibility of pupils committing faults.”²³³ It is indeed a negative way of expressing pedagogical aims. It is, however, not untypical of Don Bosco. In 1883 he still describes the purpose of his activities in this way, “The goal of our work is the secular instruction and moral education of youngsters, either abandoned or at risk, to safeguard them from idleness, from disgrace and perhaps even prison.”²³⁴ There too, *negatively formulated purposes* predominate. This is the more remarkable in the period 1876-1884 because the latter is characterized by the frequent mentioning of the pre-eminence of the motto: educating and bringing up youngsters “to be good Christians and upright citizens.”²³⁵ *This certainly comprises and opens up a very positive programme.*

Initially some co-workers must not entirely have agreed in this respect with that very strong statement in the treatise itself. The first French translations of the little treatise, tries to formulate it in another unequivocal way. The one that is published together with the first Italian version re-formulates it with, “(all this) is properly speaking the true means to prevent children from committing mistakes easily.” “Easily” is far less absolute. The second

232. MB XIII, 758-759; EMB XIII, 582/3-5. Also see BIESMANS, R., *Doelstellingen van opvoeding en opleiding ...*, 215-216.

233. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo ...*, 83/393-394; *Constitutions...*, 247aa . We could also translate it, “to make it impossible for pupils to make mistakes

234. MB XVI, 290/3; EMB XVI, 227/1.

235. For this see BIESMANS, R., *Doelstellingen van opvoeding en opleiding ...*, 73-96.

version writes in a relativizing way, “That means to place children in a sort of impossibility to commit faults.”²³⁶ It has become “only” a sort of impossibility. However, it isn’t long before the French editions are aligned with the others. It then becomes even in the French texts “placed in the impossibility” *tout court*.²³⁷

Yet a man like G. B. Lemoyne will write later that Don Bosco wanted his assistants to be constantly vigilant with the boys, “so as to make it just about impossible for them to do wrong.”²³⁸ By using the word “just about” (“quasi”) he expresses that “to make it impossible” *tout court*, is asking too much. Still more surprising is that he attributes this statement to Don Bosco himself.

With the best intentions in the world and with the greatest efforts one cannot prevent all that is negative or not talk every boy into choosing and doing what is good. Don Bosco and his co-workers had to experience this more than once, for in education, many factors play a part. Don Bosco must have realized this. In an interview with a reporter of the *Pèlerin* in France he declares, “Infractions of discipline mostly take place because of lack of supervision.”²³⁹ “Mostly” of course leaves room for other causes. The latter exist though Don Bosco himself cannot always exactly name them. “The novena of All Saints is in progress,” he says to his youngsters in the evening of October 27 1876, shortly after the lessons had started again, “But I still fail to see that you have become especially good. Not that there hasn’t been any improvement at all, but I see no miracles happening....What has caused this change? Could it be that this poor Don Bosco no longer talks to his boys or can no longer make himself understood as in the past? Could it be that you do not understand him or no longer want to understand him, as the boys of old did? I do not wish to know where the fault lies.”²⁴⁰ In a further study about rationality in pedagogical contact, we hope to take a closer look at this

236. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo ...*, 122/441-442 (also see OE XXVIII, 427/1; 104/428-429. respectively “ce qui est à proprement dire le véritable moyen d’éloigner des enfants la facilité de commettre des fautes.» and «c’est-à-dire mettre les enfants dans une sorte d’impossibilité de commettre des fautes.»

237. See from 1880 onward in BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo ...*, 147; 153/1.

238. MB VI, 390/3; EMB VI, 216/2.

239. MB XVI, 168; EMB XVI, 131.

240. MB XII, 557/2; EMB XII, 407/3. A bit of the pedagogical richness of the original text got lost. Indeed, the original continues, “whether it is caused by this or the other side or perhaps a little by both sides.” Don Bosco held this goodnight about the time Don Lazzero succeeded Don Rua.

statement that contains more than rhetorical questions.

Less than half a year later, he confronted the boys with shortcomings that hurt him a lot, “Also, there are a few among you – very few – who are chronic grippers, stirring discontent among the student body by moaning: ‘We can’t read the books we want without having someone dash up and snatch them away. Everyplace we go, the superiors have their eye on us!’”²⁴¹ That evening he takes the part of the superiors who do their duty of assistance, and overlooks the fact that the boys are actually complaining about a lack of freedom. In his short treatise a year later again, he clearly shows that he is well aware that a punctual and firmly protective assistance is not sufficient in itself to attain the educational goal he had formulated.

Educators may be present among the boys with the best intentions, give them advice, encourage reward and warn them, give them all sorts of aid, personally and collectively, and still not succeed completely, or even at all; what matters is the *manner of assistance*. Don Bosco writes that the preventive system is entirely based on reason, religion, and above all on ‘amorevolezza’ (hearty affection, friendly and kind contact, and kindness).²⁴² This means that the contacts of educators with youth must be characterized by reasonableness, a religious environment, and gentleness. These characteristics are so essential that the preventive educational system of Don Bosco has often been and still is identified with this triad. Thereby the proper content or the quintessence of assistance is greatly ignored and is sometimes reduced to a more or less interested presence in the playground. On close examination however, the triad draws attention to three indispensable conditions the educators must fulfil to make the whole assistance system a true success. It may be more accurate still to state that it concerns three qualities that must be found both in the educators and in the boys themselves.

241. MB XIII, 421/2; EMB XIII, 330/3. Cf footnote 199.

242. BOSCO, G., *Il sistema preventivo ...*, 83/395-396; *Constitutions...*, . Amorevolezza may certainly be understood as “kindly, friendly contact.”