

DON BOSCO'S HUMANISTIC APPROACH IN EDUCATION

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I have already written elsewhere¹ that, in my opinion, the part played by schools in Don Bosco's work has not been studied in any depth. I shall not pretend that I am going to do so in this paper but when added to other contributions in this Congress, or to recent publications, it hopefully may open up a few lines of research. Useful material on the subject is not, however, easily come by, even in the Central Salesian Archives. We may partially console ourselves with the saying that «history is written with documents, but documents do not constitute history».²

The subject could be approached in various ways, but work so far done can be divided into two fundamental categories: that concerned chiefly with *teaching methods* and that concerned with the *history of education*. For example, we may locate amongst the former the copious writings of Don Pietro Ricaldone, the fourth successor of Don Bosco, whose main preoccupation was to ensure that the work of the Salesian Congregation was done along the right lines,³ while amongst the latter we may place the work of Pietro Braido and Pietro Stella, whose approach I myself would wish to follow. The approach of Braido is more pedagogical, that of Stella is more historical.⁴ Compared with work done on other topics little space has been devoted to the problem of schools in the time of Don Bosco and of the first Salesians,

¹ B. BELLERATE, *Don Bosco e la scuola educativa salesiana*, in «Salesianum» 50 (1988) 75.

² One may consult various writings on historical methodology, especially H.I. MARROU, *De la connaissance historique*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil 1954 (see chapters 3 and 5 and the *Conclusion*).

³ Cf. P. RICARDONE, *Don Bosco educatore*, Colle Don Bosco (Asti), Libreria Dottrina Cristiana, vol. 1, 504-609; vol. 2, 109-188.

⁴ Their publications on this topic are numerous, but the following concerning schools may be singled out: P. BRAIDO, *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco*, 2nd edition, Zürich, PAS-Verlag (now Roma, LAS) 1964, 360-376; ID., *L'esperienza pedagogica preventiva nel sec. XIX - Don Bosco*, in: P. BRAIDO (edit.), *Esperienze di pedagogia cristiana nella storia*, vol. II: *Sec. XVII-XIX*, Roma, LAS 1981, especially 389-399; P. STELLA, *Don Bosco I* 121-127; ID., *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1870)*, Roma, LAS 1980, especially 123-157, 231-243, 278-284.

because it does not seem to represent a particularly significant element in his activities or even of his thinking.

If one singles out the question of the humanities in the upper secondary schools, examining mainly the content and methods involved, it seems to me that new questions and fresh difficulties are encountered: these are caused by the scarcity of material (which is more abundant for the legal and institutional aspects of these schools) and by the problem of identifying underlying ideas which can be attributed to Don Bosco himself.

1. The historical context

I should like, first of all, to remind you of something that seems significant, whilst not the decisive factor, namely the *saint's personal history*, focusing upon his conviction that he had a divine call to the priesthood, with all the conditions and requirements that this implied, as well as upon the economic difficulties which, generally speaking, could have prevented him from realising his «dream». With the help of benefactors «Giovannino» became Don Bosco and, along the way, had to devote himself to the humanities and the classics. He enjoyed these so much that Don Rua, his first successor, wrote later: «Don Bosco did not undervalue the profane classics; he had studied them, knew long passages off by heart and could comment on them in a masterly fashion. When conversing with learned professors he often showed such erudition that they were amazed and exclaimed that none would have imagined him to be the possessor of such a profound knowledge of Latin literature».⁵ It was an experience that he never forgot and which, in due time, he knew how to make use of, when he began his secondary boarding-school, first of all at the middle-school level (1855-56) with classes in Latin grammar, and later at the senior level (1859-60).

Equally significant was *the situation in the schools of Piedmont* prior to the Casati law. Two points merit our particular attention.

There was, *first of all*, a firm recognition that schools which encouraged the knowledge and practice of religion also fostered human values, while, in conformity with the laws of the period based on the alliance between Church and State, there was also insistence on submission to constituted authority. Such had been the legislation of Savoy in the 18th century and it was still in force, with a few modifications made by P. Taparelli d'Azeglio in 1822, during the rule of Carlo Felice. These made no change in the basic orientation, which was conditioned by the monarchic absolutism of the era and by a moralistic and pietistic form of spirituality that was almost inquisitorial; any

⁵ *Lettere Circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani*, Torino, Tip. S.A.I.D. «Buona Stampa» 1910, 37 (letter n° 4 of 27 December, 1889).

changes related merely to detailed rules which, while preserving the above notion of a school, accentuated the monopoly, or at least the centralised dual control, that was shared between the State and the clergy.⁶

In 1848 the Ministry of Education was set up and its first incumbent, Carlo Boncompagni, issued a new law which split up the traditional dual control in favour of the State, as was to be expected in view of the revolutionary temper of the time. This action understandably provoked a violent reaction from the Church. Concern was felt not about the content of the instruction to be given, which still emphasised the importance of religion, but about the organization and inspection of the schools. Certain privileges were revoked, as, for example, the Church's special sphere of action and its ability to intervene; amongst other things the law reduced the possibility of opening new schools, unless one had state authorization and teachers with the requisite state qualifications. This applied even to the teaching of religious subjects. Recognition of the studies done in the seminaries was limited to those who were preparing for the priesthood. Secondary courses were reorganised into three stages of «grammar» (which corresponded to the previous «Lower Latinity»), two stages of «rhetoric» and two of «philosophy» (as hitherto). An experimental division into schools and technical institutes was also introduced.⁷

Another significant change was introduced in the law subsequently passed by the minister Lanza, 22 June 1857 (article 7), and in the law of Casati, 13 November 1859 (articles 246 and 247). The state monopoly of education was broken and there was a total revision of the whole content of the courses in school. The rights of the family and of the local authorities were recognised and more scope was given for private initiatives.⁸ As a result of this complete revision classical and humanistic studies were spread over a five-year course in the secondary school (*ginnasio*) and over a further three-year course from the sixth form on (*liceo*). An extra year was added with regard to the law of Boncompagni. In addition precise provision was also made for technical instruction.

⁶ Cf. V. SINISTRERO, *La legge Boncompagni del 4 ottobre 1848 e la libertà della scuola*, «Biblioteca del "Salesianum"» 3, Torino, SEI 1948, 6-7, and A. GAMBARO, *La pedagogia del Risorgimento*, in: *Nuove questioni di Storia della pedagogia*, vol. II: *Da Comenio al Risorgimento italiano*, Brescia, La Scuola 1977, 590-591.

⁷ Cf. the essay already quoted of V. SINISTRERO, *La legge Boncompagni*, in which one can find the main objections, especially of the Catholics, to the document together with the text of the law, and the contribution of Gambaro (pp. 599-603) emphasising the institutional changes involved.

⁸ Writings about or based on the Casati law are plentiful. Worthy of note is G. CANESTRI - G. RICUPERATI, *La scuola in Italia dalla legge Casati a oggi*, «Documenti della storia» 18, Torino, Loescher 1976, where other publications are listed, in addition to the well known essay of A. GAMBARO, *La pedagogia* 608-612, and of G. TALAMO, *La scuola dalla legge Casati alla inchiesta del 1864*, Milano, Giuffrè 1960, as well as the interesting booklet of G. ALLIEVO, *La legge Casati e l'insegnamento privato secondario*, Torino, Tip. Salesiana 1879.

This new situation, with the growing demands for instruction that it created, favoured an *increase in the number of scholastic institutions*, whether lay, in accordance with the preference of the regional authorities in their desire for increased prestige, or religious, as the number of male and female congregations devoted to education increased.⁹ Conditions, however, changed considerably for the worse, particularly after the advent of a left-wing government in 1877. The situation is reflected in the discussions and deliberations of the Second General Chapter of the Salesians in 1880.

Such were the conditions and the environment when Don Bosco was striving to open schools that cultivated the humanities.

2. Motives and general principles

Don Bosco's first and most typical work was the Oratory, alongside which he later provided boarding facilities (1847), in response to the needs of boys engaged in looking for employment or actually working in the city. After 1848, especially after the closure of the seminaries of Turin and Chieri in 1849, moved by the desire to provide a base for the diocesan clerics, and aware of the need to provide himself with collaborators in his catechetical and educational work, he opened his house for students as well, though these continued to attend private schools outside Valdocco.¹⁰ In a letter to the Minister of Education, dated 7 April, 1880, the chief education officer for Turin acknowledged that Valdocco was the «seeding ground from which the priest Bosco, the founder of a religious order, is drawing his followers». He adds that «at least two thirds of the pupils [...] enter the society».¹¹ An important declaration of Don Rua also refers to those years: «Don Bosco was extremely keen right from the beginning of the Oratory that the Christian classics should be studied». A little further on he confirms that «for many years, after 1850, Don Bosco himself used to explain to us during the holidays extracts from Church writers, particularly the letters of St. Jerome, and he showed a keen desire that these works should be studied».¹²

A few years later, as the saint recorded long afterwards, he noticed that «this involved a major difficulty. Since our pupils did not have facilities in the institute they went into Turin for their schooling or for training in their trades, and at considerable moral risk, because the companions that they encountered, the conversations they heard and the things they saw nullified what was said to them and done for them in the Oratory [...]. These sad

⁹ Cf. P. BRAIDO, *Esperienze di pedagogia cristiana nella storia*, vol. II.

¹⁰ Cf. especially MO 199 et ss., and the fuller account in MB II-IV, as well as *Annali* I 11 and ss.

¹¹ This is also quoted in MB XIV 756.

¹² *Lettere circolari* 36-37.

consequences were the same for both the artisans and the students [...]. The schools they went to were excellent but the journey to school and home again was full of dangers. During 1856 school lessons and workshops were finally set up in the Oratory house, and this was a great improvement» (MO 205-206). This marked a new stage in his work and completed the range of educational initiatives he had undertaken in Italy. We obviously do not include here subsequent developments in other countries.

There is not much documentary evidence of the reasons for his decision to open up his house to students and, later, to create his own schools. The few pertinent references, like that mentioned above,¹³ can leave one somewhat bewildered, especially if one considers the way Salesian boarding schools began to multiply after the eighteen-sixties in response to quite different needs.

If we seek the reasons which led Don Bosco to devote himself more and more to students, with an accompanying diminution in the scale of work on behalf of artisans (though this work was later given fresh impetus),¹⁴ those reasons can be found in the *saint's own personality and in the conditions of the time*.

As a person he was highly sensitive to the «needs of the day», and the demands of his environment as they affected young people. He was particularly conscious of the need for a higher standard of education, which he saw as the key to a better life in the future.

He was endowed with boundless energy and drive, coupled with confident submission to the designs of providence, and everything was directed towards the salvation of souls. Whilst he perceived the need for some order of priorities in meeting the various needs, the one thing he could not do was stand idly by as new institutions were created around him. As he himself often stated, the fact that many intellectually gifted boys were being denied opportunity to achieve their real potential gave him no rest.¹⁵

In addition, higher educational expectations were being entertained by families and by society, as industrialization became more widespread. As I have already hinted, there were increasing opportunities for contributing to education by running private schools; the bishops needed help in reorganizing their seminaries, while the local authorities were often short of the personnel needed to manage schools.

¹³ Cf., amongst other things, E I 377 ss.; III 471 486.

¹⁴ In the minutes of the 8th session of the Second General Chapter of 7 September, 1880, one reads: «A statement that had often been repeated in other circumstances was here reiterated, namely that the special scope of our work must be boarding schools or hostels for artisans, festive oratories and, as far as schools are concerned, only [this word is then crossed out] those for the working class or for poor, destitute boys» (ASC 046 *Capitolo Generale II 1880* [micr. 1.858 B 101]).

¹⁵ See the texts quoted in note 12, as well as *Regolamento per le Case della Società di San Francesco di Sales*, part II, chapter 2, article 7; also the E I 248.

Don Bosco seized both opportunities: he opened junior seminaries, such as those in the boarding school at Valdocco, at Giaveno (1860), at Mirabello (1863); he also opened colleges at places like Lanzo (1864), Alassio and Cherasco (1869).

This «emphasis upon colleges» could appear to be part of the general re-valuation of boarding schools throughout Europe that followed the Restoration; actually it was probably due more to the political situation in Italy, as Catholics strove to establish their independence of the State and their freedom, within the limits of the law, to provide education.¹⁶ Don Bosco jealously defended his own educational approach and made use of every opening that the situation afforded. When he met opposition in running his senior schools (1879), he fought with all his strength to preserve them.

Scholastic activity was seen by Don Bosco as one more efficacious means of furthering education, which for him was linked with *Christianization*. Initially, moreover, his schools were affected by his need to provide himself with helpers, and so we see that from about 1860 onwards he devoted great attention to fostering vocations, both for the bishops and for his own Salesians.¹⁷

It is against this background that we have to consider the importance that he attached to humanism in education; any such humanism was governed by the basic principles of education within what was to be a «Christian school», as P. Braido has already pointed out.¹⁸ In such a school religious instruction and moral formation naturally had a privileged place; but it also instilled a healthy fear of God, together with fidelity to one's duty, and therefore to «work» as part of one's contribution to the good of society. Don Bosco constantly proclaimed his desire to produce «honest citizens» as well as «good Christians». These principles are given prominence in the «Regulations for the houses of the Society of St. Francis de Sales», which went through several stages of revision from the eighteen-fifties onwards.

Students of Don Bosco's educational approach are now generally agreed that his *preventive system*, which was born more of practice than of reading or theorising and passed on as a *specific style of education*, had to be considerably modified following the spread of Salesian boarding-schools,¹⁹ since these

¹⁶ Cf. the richly informative pages of P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 121-127, which refer to the probable influence of the tendency throughout Europe.

¹⁷ See in particular the passage already quoted from the E I 248; also chapter I, article 5 of the *Costituzioni della Pia Società di S. Francesco di Sales*; the short chapter on «Mezzi per coltivare le vocazioni allo Stato Ecclesiastico» inserted in the *Deliberazioni del secondo Capitolo Generale della Pia Società Salesiana*, held at Lanzo Torinese in the September of 1880, Torino, Tip. Salesiana 1882, Distinz. III, chapter 4, 56-59; also MB XII 27; XVII 616.

¹⁸ P. BRAIDO, *Il sistema preventivo* 360-366; also ID., *Il progetto operativo di Don Bosco e l'utopia della società cristiana*, in: «Quaderni di "Salesianum"» 6, Rome, LAS 1982, p. 36.

¹⁹ Cf. P. BRAIDO, *Il progetto operativo* 5 and 15-21; also P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* II 462-466.

latter required very different structures and relationships from those which had obtained in the Oratory of Valdocco.

This fact is gleaned not so much from the booklet on the preventive system, published only in 1877, as from an analysis of Don Bosco's work and teachings. Certain typical features of his «system», however, can be discerned in the general practice and orientation of his schools. At the methodological level the most significant features are the *central importance* attached to the *environment*, where everything is aimed at creating a family atmosphere likely to facilitate the inculcation of a genuine moral and religious sense;²⁰ *coresponsibility*, which takes into account differences in age and character and effectively involves the boys in the educational process; and, finally, great attention to the *needs of the individual, singling them out* at the teaching level.

One should, perhaps, point out here the way Don Bosco increasingly emphasized the need to concentrate on those boys who were in any kind of difficulty, without ever neglecting the others: «Teachers generally tend to derive satisfaction from those pupils who stand out for their ability and work, directing their teaching principally towards them [...]. I personally take the opposite view: I think a teacher should concentrate on the weakest in his class, asking them questions, stopping to explain things to them, and repeating and repeating until they have understood. The exercises and lessons ought to be adapted to their ability; otherwise the teacher is teaching not all the pupils but only a few. One should keep the more able pupils busy by setting them extra exercises, rewarding them with marks for diligence. Rather than neglect the slower pupils one should dispense with any trimmings and adapt the fundamental material to their needs».²¹

Similar statements, which Don Bosco frequently repeated, could be found in the writings of the more enlightened pedagogists of the period, including some in Italy. It is, however, difficult to establish precisely how far Don Bosco was indebted to them, given the fact that he himself had plenty of personal experience of boys with learning problems.²²

²⁰ Cf. B. BELLERATE, *Don Bosco e la scuola* 88-93. One should not overlook the fact that already in 1880 Don Bosco had noted that schools could be wanting in «charity and gentleness», especially with the less able. In the second conference of the Second General Chapter he said: «One thing that we must together seek to promote is the charity and gentleness of St. Francis de Sales. It is beginning to diminish in our houses and, from what I have seen, especially in our schools. Some boys are not looked upon kindly by their teachers and are not well treated; others are left floundering in class without any attention being paid to them; they are not questioned in class and their work is left unmarked, etc. Others are sent out of the class [...]» (ASC 04 *Capitolo Generale II 1880* [micr. 1.867 C 91]).

²¹ MB XI 218. There were at Valdocco official "coachs"; Don C. Durando noted their names in a diary (ASC 272, *Durando*).

²² Cf., for example, MO 51, 78, 94, 101. As for educationalists, J.F. Herbart had already made similar suggestions. One could probably also find like exhortations in «L'educatore primario», which was known to Don Bosco.

3. Specific scholastic problems

Given the fundamental aims that Don Bosco wanted his schools to achieve and given the limits which defined educational possibilities, he never contemplated the idea of schools as «neutral» institutions: he wanted them to be essentially directed towards a type of formation that was fully human. A *Christian school* was, in his eyes, the only remedy for what was really causing the aberrations that spread as schooling became compulsory, namely the «pagan education that was usually imparted in schools».²³

As we saw, there were various motives behind Don Bosco's *initial introduction* of boarding schools and it was only later that the above conviction gradually began to determine the direction of his efforts. Inevitably he was faced with a *series of bureaucratic and other complications*: these ranged from the permits that had to be obtained, dependent upon the legal status of the teachers and the suitability of the premises, to his entire educational approach, which was to occasion something of a crisis even in the Oratory between 1882 and 1884.²⁴ Other problems were connected with the boys he accepted, who became more and more diverse in their needs, and with teaching resources, which could not be said to be morally neutral.

Right from the start the biggest *problem* was the provision of *teachers*. In 1855-56 he made a start with 17-year-old G.B. Francesca who had been a boarder at the Oratory and to whom he had granted the clerical habit. Further helpers were G. Ramello and F. Blanch, who was a qualified teacher and offered to help free of charge. Others also gave a hand, though they mostly lacked the requisite teaching qualifications. As a result the saint was involved in great trouble and endless correspondence with the authorities from December, 1862, in order to obtain the necessary permits. This state of affairs continued throughout the decade and started all over again after the closure of the secondary school at Valdocco. The tone and emphases of his negotiations and the assurances he gave reveal his astuteness and wisdom: even when he knew that things were not in his favour he used every manoeuvre possible to gain his objective, quite undeterred by the difficulties, threats and insolence that he had to face. One need only recall the frequent and at times odious inspections to which the school at the Oratory was subjected.²⁵

Faced with the urgency of the situation, Don Bosco did not hesitate to

²³ Cf. F. CERRUTI, *Le idee di Don Bosco sull'educazione e sull'insegnamento e la missione attuale della scuola*. Lettere due, San Benigno Canavese, Tip. e Libreria Salesiana, 1886, p. 88, which records a conversation between the saint and the lawyer Michel.

²⁴ Cf. J.M. PRELLEZO, *Studio e riflessione pedagogica nella Congregazione Salesiana (1874-1941)*. Note per la storia, in RSS 7 (1988) 36-47.

²⁵ See in particular E I, especially from letter 219-685 *passim*; also MB V-VII and XIV. Likewise CERIA, *Annali I passim*.

send his clerics to the University, first as visiting students and then later, with the approval of the education authorities, as registered students. In this way he was able to provide himself, however tardily, with the qualified teachers that he needed. His problems, nevertheless, persisted as requests came in for fresh foundations. One of the reasons that he once again began to concentrate on schools of arts and trades was the fact that, in Don Bosco's words, «they can be kept going with less personnel and, what is more, the personnel do not as yet have to be officially qualified. At present we lack people with diplomas and degrees». He also added: «In these hostels we can gradually with the artisans set up schools and there will be less danger that the authorities will want to come and see what we are doing and whether teachers are qualified or not».²⁶

On the other hand he had never, from the start, made any difficulties over accepting the teaching programmes prescribed by the state, though he never hesitated to introduce features of his own, such as the study of the classical Christian writers, to whom he wanted to devote one lesson a week.²⁷ Subsequently, while continuing to accept government programmes and governmental authority, he reserved university study to his priests or «at least» to those who had already entered the clerical state.²⁸

Initially Don Bosco accepted as boarders any boys who showed some sign of a priestly or Salesian vocation. Previously he had sent such boys to Canon Anfossi at the nearby house of Cottolengo; soon, however, it was he who welcomed into Valdocco the Canon's youthful aspirants. It was only later that his school was opened to other externs, though he always gave preference to possible candidates for the priesthood.

In his other institutions, however, the saint adopted less strict criteria, and all sorts of boys were accepted in an attempt to save as many souls as possible. His boarding school thus caused him to welcome not only the «poor and abandoned» but «persons of every class», even though the «congregation [...] prefers to work for those of the *middle and poorer classes*,

²⁶ *Verbali* of the Second General Chapter (micr. 1.858 B 11). This stance probably reflects the juridical discussion that took place over obtaining the annulment of the decree for the closure of the secondary school at Valdocco.

²⁷ Cf. *Regolamento per le Case*, part I, chapter VI, article 14. It is odd that in the only specimens of the *Programmi d'insegnamento per le scuole elementari, ginnasiali e liceali*, which I have been able to discover (ASC 35) for the «Anno scolastico 1888-1889» (Torino, Tip. Salesiana 1888), that class does not appear; the only reference is to St. Jerome's *De viribus illustribus* for the third form of the secondary school.

²⁸ Cf. the *Verbali* of the First General Chapter of 1877 for the 4th conference, given on page 128 of the critical edition (by M. VERHULST for his doctoral thesis in the faculty of theology, *I verbali del I° Capitolo Generale Salesiano 1877*, Università Pontificia Salesiana, 1980), and pages 292 et ss. for the programmes of the public authorities. See also article 7 on «Studi tra i confratelli Salesiani» of the same General Chapter (*Verbali*, pp. 99 and 109-110 of the critical edition).

since these are in most need of assistance».²⁹ The College at Valsalice was a special case (1872); it was opened for the scions of the «aristocratic and wealthy families» of Turin under a certain amount of pressure from the Curia and the archbishop. It also accepted «some poor boys», though they were few in number.

The opening up of his schools to middle-class pupils, as well as a drop in the number of priestly vocations, led Don Bosco to insist, from the Sixties onwards, that special care should be taken of those who gave signs of having a vocation and he codified this exhortation in the Constitutions of the «Pious Salesian Society».³⁰ Naturally amongst those who gave promise of a vocation a privileged place was assigned to those who might become Salesians. In the early stages at Valdocco these boys were not kept apart from the others in the secondary school; the older candidates went out to the seminary for their studies and philosophy, while also helping with supervision and teaching in the Oratory. It was only much later, in the last years of his life, that Don Bosco thought of transferring them to a special house, after the novitiate, at San Benigno Canavese. Later, as was laid down in the Second General Chapter,³¹ they were provided for in special «studentates».

One should not forget that specific educational provision was made for the Salesians, in addition to their ecclesiastical formation, to ensure that they were adequately prepared for their work as educators. These requirements were insisted upon in the Regulations and in the General Chapters.³²

4. Coordinating the educational components

Although the saint's thoughts and activities were always directed towards a spiritual goal, there were other significant elements in the scenario for his particular style of education: the use of *models* which would be valid, in his view, for every kind of educational work; educational *dialogue*; the prepara-

²⁹ *Ibid.*, chapter I.

³⁰ Cf. P. BRAIDO, *Il sistema preventivo* 353-359. Also RICILDONE, *Don Bosco educatore* II 452-493, making due allowance for this author's different concern and approach. See also the *Costituzioni*, chapter 1, article 5, and the pages already referred to of *Deliberazioni del secondo Capitolo*.

³¹ Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 150-160, as well as the volumes of the *Annali* already referred to and, above all, the MB. Cf., in addition, *Deliberazioni del secondo Capitolo* 69-71. Keep in mind that the main reason for the closure of the secondary school at Valdocco was that it was using teachers who were unqualified, in place of those whose names had been given to the civil authorities.

³² Cf. in particular J.M. PRELLEZO, *Studio e riflessione pedagogica*, on the pages I have referred to already. It is also important to recall the advice given to Don Bertello, who was teaching philosophy, in reply to his complaints that the clerics were not taking their studies seriously enough. The advice repeats what Don Bosco said to all his teachers: E II 471.

tion of suitable *texts* and *manuals* for teaching the humanities. Something also needs to be said about *Latin*.

The use of models has been for centuries a characteristic of Christian education, both in the importance assigned to *example* and in the presentation of *ideals* towards which to strive. (It is in this sense that I use the word here, and not in its more technical sense as a schematic structuring of the educational process). Such models were constantly presented by Don Bosco in his writings and in the practical norms he laid down. He desired that the feasts of the Church should be marked by special celebrations (the feasts of the Immaculate Conception, St. Joseph, St. Aloysius etc.) and made the subject of short talks in schools; he also presented to his boys, with sound psychological insight, the example of their own companions who had recently died, like Dominic Savio (now a canonized saint), Francis Besucco and Michael Magone.³³

By the phrase «educational dialogue» I here refer to a double requirement in the method of teaching which Don Bosco advocated. In the first place, he insisted upon explanation, which should be sufficiently clear and simple for the less able pupils to understand. A teacher is not there in order to show how clever he is; he is supposed, as in all human dialogue, to be intelligible to his pupils and to involve them in the exchange. This involves a second requirement, that he question them to verify the accuracy of their understanding. «I believe that one should question, constantly question, if possible not letting a day go by without questioning each pupil. This method has immense advantages. There is, on the other hand, the teacher who goes into class, questions one or two boys, and then launches into a fresh exposition. I would not favour such a method, even at university level. Question, question, over and over again: the more the pupils are made to contribute, the more they benefit».³⁴

Such questioning is not meant to be inquisitorial but should be a component of the kindness that was a characteristic of Don Bosco's system. Kindness helps us to be «small amongst the small», so that, as he wrote from Rome in 1884, the boys, seeing «that they are loved in the things which they themselves like, because their youthful interests are shared, will learn to see that they are loved in matters which, naturally speaking, are not very pleasing to them, such as study, discipline and self-denial: in this way they will learn to do these things with love».³⁵

Further details concerning didactic method and on the objectives to be

³³ See the various biographies that he himself wrote. Also MB VI 244-245 and 390; *Regolamento per le Case*, part I, chapter VI, article 13.

³⁴ MB XI 218. Cf. also *Regolamento per le Case*, part I, chapter VI, article 5. The same points are insisted upon in the conferences to the Salesians of Valdocco (e.g. in the 4th conference of 8 February, 1881: ASC 38).

³⁵ G. BOSCO, *Scritti pedagogici* 294. See also MB V 917; VI 320-321; VIII 750; IX 69-70.

attained can be found in two letters written by Don Cerruti to Don Rua and entitled: «The ideas of Don Bosco on education and teaching». The letters are valuable, because they were written while the saint was still alive and he may even have been told about them. Moreover Don Rua explicitly acknowledged them³⁶ and made use of them in a circular amongst other suggestions relating to teaching. Their author, one should remember, had been both a pupil and a teacher in the Valdocco Oratory. The main insistence in these letters is upon the Christian quality of schools and upon the choice of Christian Latin authors who contribute to that quality.

Finally, speaking of *textbooks*, which he wanted to be selected with discretion, Don Bosco recommended respect for the texts used: «I want your exposition to be linked to the actual text, explaining the words clearly. If you soar off into the heights you are merely beating the air [...]. And do not be critical of the books you are using: it is so easy to discredit them in the eyes of the pupils, and if they lose confidence in them they will no longer study them. If something is lacking, then put it in, dictating it; but do not belittle the textbook».³⁷

The problem of textbooks persisted, however, and detailed norms were set out in the first two General Chapters, with some updating in the second:

«1. As a general rule textbooks should be written or revised by our members or by other persons of proven moral and religious standing.

2. Whenever the education authorities prescribe some book, it may certainly be introduced into our schools. If, however, there is material in the book that offends religion or morality, the book should not be put into the hands of the pupils. In this case, one should either dictate the material in class or run off copies of the book, omitting or rectifying those sentences or expressions which are considered dangerous or unsuitable. This falls within the competence of the Prefect General of Studies of the Superior Chapter».³⁸

Today, doubtless, such precautions sound excessive, but in those days they were less so. It was common practice, at least amongst religious, to expurgate the classics, as St. Charles Borromeo used to do for his seminarists;³⁹ they were also simpler times and the corrupting influence of certain authors seemed more shocking. One might add that the high cost of texts meant that not many copies could be afforded. Such was the climate in

³⁶ *Lettere circolari* 38: «In it you will find Don Bosco's precise ideas on this matter. I recently wanted to read it again very carefully and I discovered that it set out faithfully the very things that I have often heard our father personally inculcate». See other advice about teaching on page 43.

³⁷ MB XI 218. He gave similar advice about teaching catechism: MB XIV 838.

³⁸ *Deliberazioni del secondo Capitolo*, chapter IV 73. Cf. *Deliberazioni del Capitolo Generale della Pia Società Salesiana*, held in Lanzo Torinese in September, 1877, Torino, Tip. e Libr. Salesiana 1878, chapter III, p. 18.

³⁹ Don Cerruti made this statement in his booklet, p. 9.

which Don Bosco grew up and which he had promoted through his own publications and other activities. One can, therefore, understand an outburst towards the end of his life in a talk with the lawyer Michel of Marseille in 1885: «I have fought all my life against this perverse kind of [pagan] education, which does harm to the minds and hearts of the young in what is the loveliest period of their lives. That is why I published, revised and expurgated editions of the profane Latin writers most commonly used in schools and undertook the publication of Christian Latin classics. These latter, with their sacred teachings and the examples they present, which are made more attractive by the strength and elegance of their style, provide what is lacking in pagan writings which are merely the product of reason. I wished, if possible, to neutralise the destructive effects of pagan naturalism and to restore due respect for antiquity as well as for the great literary achievements of Christianity. That, in a word, has been my objective in all the educational and didactic advice I have given, whether in conversation or in writing, to the rectors, teachers and assistants of the Pious Salesian Society. And now, old and failing, I approach death with resignation, but with a great sadness, the sadness of not having been sufficiently understood, of not seeing fully operative the reform of education and teaching to which I have devoted all my energies and without which, I repeat, we can never have young students who are totally committed Catholics».⁴⁰

This long but important quotation, which may, from a strictly historical point of view, give rise to some perplexity, leaves us in no doubt about Don Bosco's intentions and preoccupations concerning the human approach to education, in which he would tolerate nothing that was prejudicial to sound Christian formation. Don Cerruti devoted considerable space to the matter, recalling the past and contemporary sources that presumably influenced the saint, with particular reference to the fierce polemics in France between Dupanloup and Gaume, concluded with the firm pronouncement of Pius IX in his encyclical *Inter Mirificas* of 21 March, 1853. The Pope defended the use of the Christian classics alongside the pagan classics «a quavis labe purgati». Leo XIII adopted the same stance, and that would have been quite enough to determine Don Bosco's attitude and choice.⁴¹

All this helps us to understand why he excluded the works of many Italian writers like Ariosto, Machiavelli, Metastasio, Giusti, D'Azeglio and even Manzoni (and «since books that could harm our boys could also harm others, we should not stock them in our bookshops»). Any books «that contained amorous passages» were likewise excluded.⁴²

⁴⁰ F. CERRUTI, *Le idee di Don Bosco* 89.

⁴¹ Cf. IDEM, *Le idee di Don Bosco* 11-14. The reasons for preferring Christian authors are explained (p. 15) and a significant exclamation of Don Bosco is quoted: «Alas! How many promising boys have been ruined by pagan mythology!» (p. 40).

⁴² Cf. *Verbali* of the second General Chapter (micr. 1.857 D 7).

Don Bosco nevertheless «studied the Italian classics and in the last years of his life he still remembered and used to recite entire cantos from Dante as well as the poems of other writers. He felt the need to study them in order to learn his own language the better and to improve his style. He also promoted their study. But he realised that there could be dangers for young people in studying these works, all the more so as many of them were forbidden either by the Church or by the natural law».

There is, however, another comment by Don Cerruti that should not be overlooked, since it has some didactic importance: «Dear Don Rua, I remember with emotion those wonderful years when our beloved father, Don Bosco, used to tell us with all his characteristic skill how he had striven so ardently as a young student to acquire a flowery style of speech, with ample periods, elegant diction and the like; and what effort he had later expended, how he struggled with himself, in order to break free from that style and adopt instead that clear, simple, yet always correct style which made his words and his writing so pleasing». Rhetoric is thus seen as something undesirable, especially in scholastic exercises.⁴³

Finally a comment on *Latin*. As we have seen, the saint studied it assiduously and championed it, first among the clerics who helped him, and, later, amongst his students, even staging with success classical comedies in the original text.⁴⁴ His attitude was partly rooted in the ancient scholastic tradition of Piedmont, but he was also motivated by the fact that Latin was the language of the Church and of the fathers, for whom he had great respect even from a purely literary point of view. He also realised the practical importance of Latin if he was to promote ecclesiastical vocations. As the Congregation expanded into the «new world», however, Latin was mentioned only as a requirement for clerics and not for all the boys in the colleges. This is made clear in the *Deliberations of the Second General Chapter*.

5. Concluding reflections

At the end of this panoramic view of Don Bosco's maturity and old age I should like to set out a few positive and perhaps personal considerations. I believe they are stimulating (and not only for the Salesians), even though they are schematic and, hopefully, not moralising. They will serve to clarify Don Bosco's motives and decisions in taking on the arduous task of promoting humanistic education.

⁴³ Cf. F. CERRUTI, *Le idee di Don Bosco* 44-45 and 46-47.

⁴⁴ Cf. MB VI 884 and 958; VII 666; VIII 419 and 782-783. His admiration and defence of the Latin of the Fathers is mentioned in passages I have quoted, as also in MB IV 634-636.

Let us first consider the *function of a school*. Today, of course, a school tends to be seen as an institution whose almost exclusive aim is instruction and preparation for a profession. One must not, therefore, lose sight of the fact that Don Bosco was concerned with education as something that contributed to the formation of the entire human person, as well as, in many cases, preparing individuals for a future profession. This demands that personnel should be well qualified in their own disciplines as well as armed with sound educational principles. This was something that Don Bosco insisted on with his own religious, though one needs to take into account the developments that have taken place since then in the science of education.

It seems to me that these requirements in no way conflict with the saint's demand that a spell of direct, supervised practical experience should go hand-in-hand with study and instruction. I refer to the *tirocinio*, or years of practical training. Don Bosco, driven perhaps by necessity, may have tended to exaggerate the importance of practical experience, even though he clearly valued study and theory. Today the opposite danger seems more likely, that theory, academic or otherwise, is seen as all-sufficient.

Let me make a further point. Even after opening his schools to more middle-class pupils, the saint insisted that boys who had learning difficulties should not be neglected. One could say that he favoured non-selective schools, requiring his teachers to make greater efforts in order to target those boys with special needs. This is the thesis which is today proclaimed at least in theory (both by those favouring concentration on the needs of the individual and those advocating «mastery learning») but which is rarely achieved in practice, where there is often discrimination against the less able.

The principle of shared responsibility and of *educational dialogue*, as I have called it, invites us to rethink the value we attach to the human person who is to be educated and the respect which is due to him. In seeking to involve his pupils Don Bosco was, of course, moved more by spiritual and theological than anthropological or psychological considerations; but the idea of providing opportunities for individual growth, together with the support needed to utilise these opportunities (as demanded by Salesian kindness and familial spirit) is both educationally and psychologically liberating. We tend to view little children from a lofty adult vantage point: J. Korczak has much to say in this regard and I have advocated a broader concept of *co-education* as a means of promoting human development through a continual, reciprocal, often unconscious sharing of experience.

Don Bosco's willingness to accept officially prescribed programmes of education, while preserving certain inalienable freedoms, shows his great *adaptability*. We cannot attribute to him a pluralism that would have been unthinkable in those days, but he certainly possessed a great ability in the intelligent management of human relationships: he could separate the essential from the peripheral, the substantial from the accidental. His aim in edu-

cation was unquestionably the development and growth of the person; the means and the stages along the road could vary or even fail. In Christian education one must not confuse the unchanging realities that are guaranteed by faith with what is merely recommended by other human beings.

I have tried to offer a few points to stimulate reflection, perhaps even a revision of our thinking, while striving to remain faithful to Don Bosco's own insights and options. There is clear evidence that those insights, even after one has allowed for our changing times and situations, are still relevant to our contemporary world.