

Lesson 17 – The Preventive System (Session 1)

Objectives

1. To understand how Christian charity is the basis for the Preventive System.
2. To understand the techniques used by Don Bosco in the Preventive System.
3. To recognize how the Preventive System (Salesian spirituality) is the basis for a relationship with God.
4. To understand how Jesus the Good Shepherd in Don Bosco's first dream relates to the Preventive System.

Reference: Reason, Religion and Kindness: The Educational Method of St. John Bosco – Paul Avallone, SDB, 3rd ed. (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1979), pp. 61-64.

Vision of 1824

It will be profitable to prelude this chapter with a brief narration of a vision (Don Bosco called it a dream) that occurred when the Saint was nine years of age. His future work was prefigured in the vision, as well as the spirit that was to permeate the atmosphere of his apostolate. At the command of Pius IX Don Bosco gave us the following account:

“At the age of about nine years I had a dream which remained deeply impressed upon my mind for the rest of my life. In the dream I seemed to be near a house in a large courtyard, where a crowd of boys was gathered together. Some were laughing, others playing, and many among them blaspheming. On hearing these blasphemies, I immediately rushed into their midst, raising my voice and using my fists to make them keep quiet.

“At that moment a dignified looking man, nobly clad, who seemed to be in the prime of life appeared on the scene. A white mantle covered the whole of his person, but his face was so radiant that I was unable to look at it for long. He called me by name, and directed me to place myself at the head of these boys, concluding with these words: ‘You must win the hearts of these friends of yours, not with your fists, but with sweetness and charity. Set to work at once to instruct them on the wickedness of sin and on the excellence of virtue.’”

The vision continued. The grand personage was our Lord. Later our Lady appeared on the scene, and it was she who was to make possible what John was now seeing. Our Lady spoke thus: “This is your field of labor. This is where you must work. Make yourself humble, determined and strong. You must do for my sons what you will now see happening to these animals.”

“I looked again, and to my surprise, instead of fierce animals, I now saw gentle lambs, all frisking about and bleating merrily, as if to do honor to the man and the lady.

“At this point of the dream I commenced to cry and begged the lady to speak clearly because I did not know what all these things meant. She then put her hand on my head and said: ‘In good time, my son, you will understand everything.’”

The condition for conquering the hearts of the young was to be sweetness and charity, as the vision pointedly indicated. This spirit was to reign in all Salesian schools if the work of education was to be successful. Don Bosco's spirit of kindness, amiability and understanding stemmed from this vision. This explains why Don Bosco reluctantly touches upon the subject of punishments. In treating this subject he begins thus: “If possible, never make use of punishments.” Charity must be the mainspring of action; Don Bosco never tired of repeating this.

Preventive Techniques

The ancient adage, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” finds its application with Don Bosco's system of education. In this system, prevention of wrongdoing is of paramount importance if punishment is to be ruled out. Some of these *preventive techniques* presented by Don Bosco will be briefly indicated:

1. *Make known the rules and regulations of the school:* These are to be few and precise. The rules and regulations are to be read to all the pupils at the beginning of the year. Once a week some few articles are to be explained in detail by a member of the faculty. This procedure also forms part of the general guidance program.
2. *Supervise the students constantly:* Supervision is the key word of the system. This is no question of a police-like vigilance, but of a brotherly and fatherly watchfulness. "Care should be taken that the pupils never remain alone. As far as possible, the assistants ought to go beforehand to the place where the boys are to gather together; they should remain with them until others come to relieve them, and the pupils should never be left unoccupied."
3. *Strive to be loved by the pupils:* The teacher must endeavor to have the pupils realize they are loved. "The educator must strive to make himself loved by his pupils if he wishes to make himself feared by them. Every Salesian must make himself loved if he wishes to be feared. He will attain this end if he makes it clear by his words, and still more by his actions, that all his care and solicitude are directed towards the spiritual and temporal welfare of his pupils."
4. *Withdraw affection and attention:* This negative or psychological punishment is very effective when one has gained the love and esteem of his pupils. "... the omission of some token of kindness is a punishment which rekindles emulation, revives courage and never degrades."
5. *Correct patiently:* Three points are especially recommended by Don Bosco. An educator should correct: a) with the patience of a father; b) as far as possible in private—only in cases of preventing or remedying serious scandal would the Saint permit public correction; c) at the right moment, that is, give the pupil time to reflect, to enter himself; he will realize he is in the wrong.
6. *Be master of yourself:* Don Bosco says: "First of all, master your own character, and then you will succeed in mastering those of your pupils. Show them that uncontrolled emotion plays no part in your actions; they will respect you for that and their respect will prompt their obedience.
7. *Make use of a third party:* One's efforts may be unavailing and unsuccessful. There may be a teacher in the school who has gained the confidence of the lad. This teacher should be invited to attempt to win over the lad [so that he is] brought to see his error.

Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter 2, Article 9

The Task of Christian Education

1. Salesian Cooperators, like Don Bosco, bring the task of educating and evangelizing everywhere, in order to form "honest citizens, good Christians, and blessed inhabitants of Heaven," who know that they are always on the journey to a greater human and Christian maturity.
2. They share with the young their enthusiasm for living with authenticity the values of truth, freedom, justice, the sense of the common good, and of service.
3. They educate the young to encounter the Risen Christ – in our Faith and in the sacraments – so they may find in Him the meaning of their life so as to grow as "new men and new women."
4. They are committed to helping the young develop a life plan which will give witness to their Christian and Salesian presence in the Church and in society.

Suggested Reading

In the Footsteps of Don Bosco; pages 143-145.

Lesson 17: The Preventive System (Session 1) – Questions for Reflection

1. How can you better practice the style of action of the Salesian Preventive System in your daily life?
2. How does the Preventive System inform and direct your relationship with God?
3. How do you think the techniques of the Preventive System show God's love to the young? Explain
4. In what ways do you show the Christian love of God to others when faced with adversity?

Prayer Experience

Pray and ask Jesus, Mary Help of Christians, and St. John Bosco to help you implement the Preventive System in your life.

Time is Running Out

In the school of Don Bosco, and in all Salesian schools, a monthly Exercise for a Good Death was held. Pius IX had enriched the practice with indulgences. Dominic always carried it out with great devotion. At the end of the prayers an Our Father and Hail Mary were recited “for the one among us who shall be the first to die.” One time Dominic playfully remarked, “Don’t say ‘for the one among us.’ Just say for Dominic Savio, who will be the first among us to die.”

At the end of April 1856, Dominic went to Don Bosco and asked how he should spend the month of May in honor of our Lady.

“Do your duties carefully,” said Don Bosco. “Speak of Mary to your companions every day, and behave so well that you can receive Communion every day.”

“I will, Father – very carefully. Now, what favor shall I ask for?”

“Ask our Lady for health and the favor of becoming a saint.”

“Yes, to become a saint and to die a happy death and have her help in my last moments and be taken by her to Heaven!”

Dominic showed great fervor that month. He wrote about Mary, he spoke of her, everything he did was for her—studying, singing, going to school. Every day he made sure he had some little incident about our Lady to tell his friends.

One day a boy asked him, “What are you going to do next year if you do all this now?”

“Let me worry about that,” Dominic answered. “I’ll do all I can now. Next year, if I’m alive, I’ll tell you what I’ll do.”

Since Dominic began showing signs of failing health, Don Bosco called in several doctors. All admired his lightheartedness, bright wit, and quick responses. Doctor Vallauri examined him and remarked to Don Bosco, “What a fine treasure you have in this boy!”

“But what is causing him to fail so quickly day by day?” asked Don Bosco.

“His bodily frame is weak, and his mind is developed beyond his age. He is under constant spiritual pressure. All this just eats away his strength.”

“What remedy can we use?”

“The best thing would be to let him go to Heaven because he seems so well-prepared. But the only remedy that can prolong his life is to relieve him of his studies completely for some time and just give him little odd jobs that will not tire him.”

Last Days at the Oratory

Dominic’s weakness was not such as to keep him always in bed. Some days he went to school or to the study hall, or he would do some little chores. Though his health kept becoming worse, Dominic did not want to go home, because it meant breaking off his studies and regular practices of piety.

Some months before, Don Bosco had sent him home, but he returned to the Oratory after a few days. Don Bosco admitted that he was just as sorry as Dominic that he had to go home. But the doctors had advised that he go home, and Don Bosco was determined to obey them, all the more because he noticed of late that Dominic had contracted a persistent cough.

The boy’s father was notified, and it was arranged that Dominic should leave the Oratory on March 1, 1857.

Dominic bowed to the decision, but only as a sacrifice.

“Why are you so sorry to go home?” asked Don Bosco. “You should be glad to be with your parents again.”

“I want to end my days at the Oratory,” he replied.

“You will go home for a while, and when you are better, you can come back.”

“No, Father, no! I’ll go, but I’ll never come back!”

The night before he left, he refused to budge from Don Bosco’s side, looking for all sorts of questions to ask. “What can a sick boy do to gain merit before God?”

“Offer God your sufferings.”

“Will I be able to see my parents and friends from Heaven?”

“Yes, you will be able to see everything at the Oratory and your parents. You will know everything that concerns them, and so many other wonderful things besides.”

“Can I visit them sometimes?”

“If such visits are for God’s glory, yes.”

Dominic kept asking many, many other questions like these. On the morning of his departure from the Oratory, Dominic made the Exercise for a Good Death with his companions. With great devotion he went to confession and Communion.

He spent the rest of the morning packing and said goodbye to his friends, to one of whom he paid back two cents he owed the boy, saying, “Let’s get this fixed, so I won’t have to worry about it when I present my accounts to God.” He spoke to the boys of the Immaculate Conception Sodality, insisting that they be faithful to their promises to Mary and place the utmost confidence in her.

Before leaving, he told Don Bosco, “Since you don’t want this poor body of mine, I’ll have to take it back to Mondonio. But it would have burdened you only a few days, and all would soon be over. But God’s will be done! If you go to Rome remember what I asked you to tell the Pope about England. Pray that I may die well. Good-bye till we meet in Heaven.”

As they approached the gate to the main road, Dominic was holding onto Don Bosco’s hand. He turned to his companions. “Good-bye. Pray for me. We’ll see each other where we will always be with God.”

Upon reaching the gate, Dominic turned back and asked Don Bosco, “Will you give me a present to remember you?”

“How about a book?”

“No, I want something better.”

“Do you want money for your trip?”

“Yes, that’s it – money for my trip to eternity. You told me once that the Pope had granted you plenary indulgences for the hour of death. Put my name among those who can gain that indulgence.”

“Gladly, my boy. You can consider yourself in that number now. I’ll put your name on the list right away.”

Dominic then walked out of the Oratory. It was two o’clock in the afternoon of March 1. He had lived there almost three years to his great joy, and to the edification of both schoolmates and superiors. He was never to return.