



SALESIAN SPIRIT

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PREVENTIVE SYSTEM: SUCCESS STORIES

This series of articles will present how Don Bosco practised the preventive system of education, its essential elements, the success stories, etc. as narrated in the Biographical memoirs. The aim is to appreciate our system of education and its capacity to give life to individuals and the society, so that we can practise it with zest in spite of the great sacrifices it entails on the educators.

A BOY NAMED JOHN

A boy named John studied in a fashionable boarding school reputed for academic excellence. But it had a poor religious formation: there was no time for prayer; no daily Mass; no reception of sacraments. The boy was clever, gentle and docile. In the boarding school, he joined bad companions and began to read immoral books. Soon he was fed up with studies and religion! He failed in the examinations!

The father noticed the changes in his behaviour when he came home for summer holidays. The obedient boy was now unruly, insolent, irresponsible and irreligious. His father's punishments and reprimands did him no good. The state of affairs was such that his father even contemplated placing him in a correction home! He repented for having placed him in that secular boarding school. He looked for another school and tried to get the boy agree to it.

He coaxed the boy saying that his mother's dying wish was that he attend the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales. And the boy was ready to do anything for the love of the mother. The father seized the occasion and took him immediately to Don Bosco and enrolled him in the Oratory. At



first sight, everything about the Oratory appealed to him except the fact that Don Bosco was a priest!

John entered the Oratory in 1852. He began to enjoy good friends, competition in studies, music, recitations and dramatics. Away from bad companions and unwholesome reading, he soon forgot about the dissipated life he had led the previous year. He gradually resumed the practices of piety. But he hesitated to go for confession! After two months and on the day prior to his mother's death anniversary, Don Bosco spoke to him telling him to make the day special by going to Holy Communion and offering it for her soul. "I will do it willingly but before that I have to go for confession. And it would greatly please my mother." And Don Bosco heard his confession.

One day John handed over to Don Bosco the immoral books he had accumulated and told him, "Please burn these, I do not want to go to hell because of them." He pleaded with his father to get rid of them and his father did so. He was also able to get his father to observe the precepts of the Church, by his word and example, and by pleading with him. A year at the school of Don Bosco, was able to bring about such marvelous change in the boy. The preventive system of education was able to change the boy completely. He became good, better and best. What a consolation to the parent! What a contribution to society!

PRISONERS ON A PICNIC

There was a state reformatory for boys in the city of Turin called La Generala. The boys who were interred there came from difficult families: some had both the parents in jail; many were orphans who were at loggerheads with the police. During the day they were made to work in the fields or at some crafts under guard and at night they were locked up in separate cells. Vandalism, quarrels, brawls, stabbings and immoral behaviour were a routine in that reformatory.

When the authorities were little friendly, Don Bosco managed to visit those boys. He taught them catechism, heard their confession and conversed with them freely as he did with the boys of his Oratory. And those boys responded to his kindness with love and respect. In 1855 after Easter, Don Bosco preached a spiritual retreat for them. His gentle ways won over those difficult youngsters. All but one of them received the sacraments! Having heard their confession, he was touched by their sincere conversion. He wanted to reward them. He knew that they would love a picnic in the open countryside. He planned to take them to Stupinigi, a hunting haven of the kings.

Don Bosco made his request to the Superintendent of the City Prisons, who leaped up in astonishment as he heard the proposal. But because of the good work done by the priest, he agreed to take the matter to the Minister of the Interior. Don Bosco made the request to the Prefect of the Province, who flatly refused. The Minister of the Interior, Urbano Ratazzi, having been appraised by the Superintendent, called

Don Bosco. The Minister consented to the plan and with great concern promised to send some policemen in plain clothes. Don Bosco pleaded, "Your Excellency, I am more than grateful for your permission, but I will not take the boys out unless you allow me to be alone with them and give me your word of honour that you will not send guards tagging after me. I take complete responsibility. Should anything go wrong, I'm willing to go to jail." The Minister was surprised, astonished as well as apprehensive. At the end he gave his consent. Probably, he was confident to get them back even if they escaped!

Don Bosco broke the news to the boys and they went crazy for joy. He told them that no policemen were coming to guard them and that he had given his word to the Minister that all of them would be back in the evening. They assured him that they would behave well and that none of them would run away. One boy, speaking for all, said, "Father, you'll be our general. On behalf of all of us, I assure you that no general will have more disciplined troops."

On that great day, full of joy, all of them left the cells of the prison and walked to Stupinigi. There the Parish Priest and Fr. Alasonati were waiting for them. They rested. They went to the church for Mass. They had lunch. They played games. They roamed about the shady groves and enjoyed themselves to their heart's content. In the evening all of them trooped back to the prison, none missing! It surprised everyone. After bidding them good-bye, Don Bosco immediately reported back to the Minister, who was truly astonished! He could not believe his ears. And he thanked Don Bosco for all he has done for the young prisoners.

It is indeed a great achievement of the preventive system. The difficult boys were won over and they turned a new leaf!

CONCLUSION

These are but samples of the countless stories of youngsters who have been transformed by Don Bosco's preventive system of education. It leads us to appreciate our patrimony better [BM IV, 350].

