




SALESIAN SPIRIT
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LOVING KINDNESS



Another characteristic feature of the Salesian spirit is kindness, loving kindness, which is an inner attitude that shapes all our relationships and approach to young people. We believe that it is God who sends us the young people. And this God is love personified! And God, in entrusting young people to us, wants us to take His place in bestowing His love on the young people. This love is to be manifested in kindness and gentleness. Hence, we need to be kind and gentle, imitating God Himself. The underlying reason is that if the youngster does not experience love at that stage of his life, his growth will be compromised. Hence, young people should be loved and they should also know that they are loved. It is also the basis of the preventive system of education.

The word Don Bosco used for loving kindness is 'amorevolezza'. It can also be rendered as loving concern, affection, kindness, patience, being loving, love of parents for children; affectionately benevolent. It is identified with attitudes or behaviours shown by gestures, help, gifts, amiability. It is the kind of affection shown by a parent.

Why is loving kindness so important in dealing with young people? Don Bosco said, "The heart, says St. Gregory, is an impregnable castle, and no one can force his way into it; it can be taken only by love and gentleness. Be firm in pursuing good



and averting evil, but always with gentleness and prudence. Be perseverant and lovable, and you will see that God will give you mastery over even the least docile hearts." Hence, our target is the heart. And the heart can be reached only through kindness and gentleness.

Let us see how to practise loving kindness.

BE APPROACHABLE

(i) A Salesian should have a welcoming attitude towards youngsters, making them feel accepted and respected. He should be cordial in his relationship, being open to the way young people are or behave. Contrarily, the Salesian should not be very reserved or withdrawn or aloof. He should be easily approachable and easy to relate with. He should be able to strike up friendships.

Don Bosco demanded this from his Salesians. Don Bosco told an assistant, "If you wish to be loved, be amiable." In the confidential directives to Directors, he exhorted them, "Try to make yourself loved sooner than feared". Don Bosco told cleric Vacchina 'if you want to be obeyed and respected, make yourself loved.' And the last words spoken by Don Bosco to Don Rua were "make yourself loved". This is what Don Bosco and generations of Salesians have practised. Once Count Collengo visited

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the Oratory. He asked Don Bosco, "How do you keep order and discipline among so many boys? Don Bosco answered him, "Reason and charity. One must be kind, patient and forbearing. Hence kindness prevails over punishments; in fact, kindness reigns supreme."

(ii) The Salesian should take the first step to go towards and meet the young, especially the ones who are shy and timid, making himself little with the little ones, going down to their level. On the other hand, when the youngsters themselves make the first approach, the salesian should welcome them, listen to them and share their interests.

Don Bosco exhorted all Salesians to be kind and forbearing. To those who were brusque, he would say, 'I want you to win your pupil's goodwill by your manner of dealing with them. If you must talk to them, season your words with kindness.' To another he would say, 'you can't catch flies with Vinegar.' In his letter from Rome, Don Bosco retold what the dream-personage told him: "The superiors should be always ready to listen to any doubts or complaints with all eyes to supervise their behaviour and all heart to look for the temporal and spiritual good of those entrusted to him by Divine Providence."

(iii) The Salesian should welcome the youngsters with unfailing kindness, respect and patience. Kindness is seeking the good of the youngster. Respect is recognising the personal dignity of the young person (in spite of his defects). Patience is being constant and persevering in love.

Don Bosco spoke of patience in the concluding talk of the spiritual retreat in 1876: "Be truly zealous and strive to do good in every way, but always with kindness and patience ... Do you think that it is easy for me to keep calm when, after entrusting an important or urgent task to someone, I find that task not done or badly botched? Believe me, sometimes my blood boils and I am about to burst!" Patience is to control our anger and to tolerate. As Don Bosco has vouched, patience does cost us.

BE AFFECTIONATE

The boys should be treated well, with kindness. In his annual conference of 1876 Don Bosco exhorted the Salesians, "Show a lot of loving kindness to our boys. Let this loving kindness be a trait of all superiors without exception. ... How responsive a boy becomes when he is well treated! He entrusts his very heart to his superiors."

(i) The Salesian should have a true, warm and heartfelt affection for the youngsters. Let us listen to what Don Berruti says with regard to the type of affection that Salesian should have towards boys: "Heartfelt love is characteristic of Salesian charity. Don Bosco was not satisfied with the austere kind of charity born of will and of grace which forms part and parcel of the educational system of other Orders." For example, when a boy was seriously sick, Don Bosco spent hours at his bedside,

during the day and, if necessary, at night as well. This is a warm heartfelt affection.

(ii) The Salesian is expected to combine in himself the love of a father, brother and friend. The Salesian should create a family atmosphere of freedom. He should not remain closed up in his role or function but mix freely with youngsters especially at recreation and games. He should not create fear in the exercise of his authority, but carry it out in family spirit. Don Bosco leads us by his example. He was "always kind, soft-spoken and paternal in his efforts to attract boys to the practice of virtue. He never saw him treat any of them with lack of courtesy or threaten them with punishment, not even the most thoughtless or unruly."

(iii) The Salesian should not only love but also make the boys love in return. Because one who knows he is loved, loves in return, and one who loves can obtain anything especially from the young. Don Bosco was told in the dream which he recounted in his letter from Rome (1884) that the Salesian makes them know that they are loved by joining them in their recreation, games, by a 'word in the ear', by his familiarity, and by his impartiality.

KINDNESS DEMANDS SACRIFICE

In his dream of a woman cooking candies for the Salesians, Don Bosco was told that the sticky sugar icing on the candies signified the sweetness of St. Francis de Sales and its resemblance to freshly fallen drops of dew meant that "much effort and sacrifice are needed to maintain such gentleness and that sometimes it can be preserved only by the shedding of one's blood." Kindness and gentleness demands a lot of sacrifice from us, the Salesians: a life of chastity and a well-balanced attitude.

Don Bosco tells us how to practise chastity to be able to be kind and loving: should show great detachment in showing affection; should avoid any sentimental attachment or friendship; should avoid words and gestures which could be badly interpreted; and should avoid any intimacy which prevents one from being open to all. Biographer says, "Don Bosco was very familiar and loving with regard to his boys and people in general. But he was always very careful so that it may not become excessive. He never uttered a word that could be considered less than becoming. He took extreme care not to offend modesty, even in the slightest way. Some even watched him through keyholes, yet they never observed any unbecoming word, or gesture or attitude." Fr. Felix Reviglio said about the atmosphere in the Oratory, "One could swear to the fact that at the Oratory there was an air of purity that was indeed extraordinary. In this matter Don Bosco fashioned his young clerics after himself, admonishing them if he ever detected undue familiarity between them and the boys. He never permitted them to

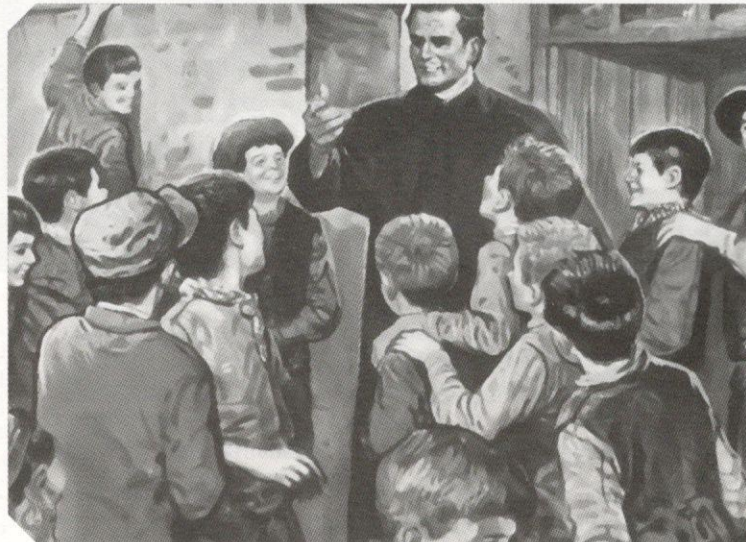
hold the boys' hands, bring them into their cells, or linger near their beds unless it was strictly necessary. He insisted that all dealings with the boys take place in the open, and under no pretext at all in a secluded spot."

The balance expected of the Salesian: a spontaneous but delicate heart; a tender but not weak heart; and a real affection but under self-control.

TRIUMPH OF KINDNESS

Don Bosco has assured us that boys react favourably to this approach, gladly open their hearts, begin at once to do well, become friends with the superior, and are completely won over because they trust him. In Don Bosco's experience, very few did not respond to this approach.

Kindness wins over even stubborn hearts. Don Bosco said: "I have often come across some youngsters so stubbornly opposed to the very notion of being good that they have made me lose any hope for their improvement,



forcing me to take severe measures with them, and only kindness won them over. We sometimes think that this type of boy is not profiting from our correction, while actually his heart is strongly prompting him to follow our lead." We may not see immediate results but it will ultimately triumph!

CONCLUSION

Kindness is being amiable, approachable and easy to relate with. It is being affectionate. It is correcting them gently. It is having patience with them. Let us be kind, imitating our Father, Don Bosco!