



CARLO DE AMBROGIO

# EDUCATING LIKE DON BOSCO

*A Handbook  
for Parents and Educators*

Cover detail by Nino Musio

These pages are a response to the insistent requests of many Salesian Cooperators to the editors of "*Bolletino Salesiano*" to compile into a volume the articles published under the section "*Educhiamo Come Don Bosco*," and so they have offered this precious guide to parents and educators.

The translator fondly dedicates this work to:  
**Fr. Thomas Braganza, SDB**  
who gifted me this book and  
strove to live it everyday.

Translated by Ian Doulton sdb,  
Shrine of Don Bosco's Madonna, Matunga,  
Mumbai 19,  
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## *Index of themes*

- 5 "Don Bosco's Secret"
- I - EDUCATION, NOT A PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED  
BUT AN ACT OF LOVE
- 9 1 - Do We Really Love Our Youngsters?  
12 2 - Educating Youngsters: Easy or Difficult?  
16 3 - Teaching Them The Great Principle of the Echo  
19 4 - Assist Them All the Time  
22 5 - Understanding Youngsters  
25 6 - Show Him That You Love Him  
28 7 - How to Befriend Youngsters  
31 8 - Helping Him At This Critical Stage  
35 9 - How To Talk to Youngsters  
38 10 - How To Punish How To Forgive  
41 11 - Punishing Reasonably  
44 12 - Courtesy Captures the Heart  
47 13 - Greet Them By Name  
50 14 - The Youngsters Are Watching  
53 15 - A Word In The Ear
- II - ABOVE EVERYTHING
- 59 16 - Education to Joy  
63 17 - Teach Them to Listen  
66 18 - Educate Him to be True to Himself  
69 19 - Teach Him How to Praise  
73 20 - Teach Him To Pray  
76 21 - Teach Them To Pray the Rosary  
80 22 - Teach Them To Pray for the Dead  
84 23 - Teach Them To Love the Pope  
87 24 - Show Them How to Live with Enthusiasm  
90 25 - Teach Them the Meaning of Fealty  
93 26 - Invite them to be Attentive  
96 27 - A Secret to Teach Youngsters  
98 28 - Do You Pray for your Boys?  
100 29 - Don't Miss the Occasion  
103 30 - Teach them to Participate in the Mass
- III - BECAUSE THE WORLD IS NOT A LONELY PLANET
- 109 31 - Save Them From Gangs  
113 32 - How To Handle Bad Companions  
116 33 - Handling Rebellion

119	34 - Tell It Like It Is
123	35 - Tell Him: "We Can't Afford it."
126	36 - Teach Them to be Present With Them
128	37 - Teach Them Humility
131	38 - Teach Them to Forgive
135	39 - Teach Them Gratitude
138	40 - Teach Them Concern for Others
141	41 - Teach Him To Be Neighbourly
144	42 - Teach Them To Be Understanding
147	43 - Praise: A Welcome Reward
150	44 - With Boys Who Steal?
154	45 - Boys Who Lie

IV - THE LAWS OF PROGRESS AND WORK

159	46 - Teach Them A Spirit of Sacrifice
162	47 - Combatting Depression
165	48 - Using Your Free Time
168	49 - Don't Forbid Them From Playing
171	50 - TV Discipline
174	51 - Facing Difficulties
177	52 - Cultivating Good Habits
180	53 - Outwitting Four Ruffians
183	54 - To Read or Not To Read
186	55 - When Youngsters Start Working
190	56 - Beware of Scholastic Crises
193	57 - Nine Secrets to Succeed in School
196	58 - Teach Them To Love Purity
200	The Lanzo Dream: An Educative Reality

## "Don Bosco's Secret"

“Do you know what ‘education’ means? Etymologically but also in the real sense, it means “to draw out,” “to lead out.” It also means to “extract from” – *ex-ducere* (from the Latin that means *to lead out of*). That was Don Bosco and that’s why he is a Master. What a master he was at drawing out what a youngster had in his soul without him even knowing it! There were some wonderful virtues, dormant strengths and hidden talents that were buried deep in that soul. Within that soul there were seeds that turned to blossoms, bore fruit, grew into trees and eventually into fully formed lives.

*Don Bosco drew out of his boys the man.* He drew out of the worker, the new young worker, the professional, the student, the complete new youngster equipped with natural virtues that were vibrant, lively, virile and determined but not just someone to be admired, but from deep down, beyond profane education, he drew out a man, but not just a man who sought only a secular education without knowing the deep secrets of the human soul, but an ‘educated’ person - I would say – *like Jesus was*, a multifaceted person. You might say someone who had two faces or better two natures. Don Bosco drew out of the youngster the man and the Christian, human and divine, the man of earth and the man of heaven, the complete man.

*This was Don Bosco's secret and this art thrilled his youngsters passionately so much so that they were capable of causing them to make any sacrifice for this *great and unequalled task* which enabled him to carve out of these little men perfect images and creatures that God had envisaged them to be: children of earth and of heaven."*

**Card. GIOVANNI MONTINI,  
now Blessed PAUL VI**

*To the students  
of the Salesian Institute of St. Ambrose  
at Milan on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1961*

**I  
Education:  
not a problem  
to be solved  
but an act of love**





# 1. Do We Really Love Our Youngsters?

*At the beginning of August 1866 six young orphans whose parents had died of cholera in Ancona came to the Oratory in Turin. They were street boys and Don Bosco was out of town. He returned to the Oratory the next day and when he saw the youngsters he even doffed his biretta and with a friendly smile he approached them and asked:*

*- Did you have a good journey? How are you?*

*- We're not happy.*

*- And why are you not happy?*

*- Because we have nothing to eat here. What you give us is rubbish...*

*- Still, the soup you've eaten is the same as what your companions eat, the same that your superiors eat and I eat it too.*

*- If you want to eat this, big shot, you may do so!*

*Don Bosco was hurt by that reply and he was disappointed but he did not lose his calm. He turned and quietly began talking to the other youngsters who were milling around him.*

*The six urchins having made that crude reply just shrugged their shoulders in defiance, looked around provocatively and then retired to a corner of the playground.*

*The chronicler tells us how Don Bosco managed to convince them: "More than once I saw scenes of violent*

*indiscipline, but beneath the guise of a blaspheming beast, he gradually formed a docile lamb and he discovered beneath everything the goodness that lay in the heart of every boy. Don Bosco did not confront nor put down the youngster but calmed him with kindness while discovering and highlighting the best in every youngster so as to be able to lead him to God.” Don Bosco did that with the six boys, talking to them separately so that with his kind words he even gained their confidence and made them feel they were loved. He then gently took them to church and had them make their confessions. Those youngsters changed.*

\* \* \*

This is an examination of conscience. It is true that there is a parental instinct that binds us to our children, but true love is something more than an instinct. Let’s ask ourselves:

- *Do we love our children like dolls or toys? Do we hug and cuddle them for the pleasure we get out of it? That would be a selfish love. Every youngster is a child of God; it was for this youngster that the Lord gave his life on the cross.*
- *Do we love them because they have skills, because they are handsome, well educated and intelligent? That would be a very human love guided by very human preferences.*

- *Do we love them because they are ours so we can form them the way we want?* What a disappointment we will have when they reach an age of independence and shrug off our influence!
- *Do we love them because we have educated them in order to please ourselves?* Even this would be a purely human love. “Parents,” Cardinal Mercier said, “do not take the place of God.”

True love leads to God. The best definition of God is the one that St. John precisely gives: “*God is love.*” The secret of Don Bosco’s education was just that, “*Calm their souls with kindness. Discover and enhance the goodness in each person and lead them to God.*”

“Youngsters must not only be loved but they must know that they are loved... Superiors should love what pleases youngsters and youngsters will love what pleases the Superiors. And this will make their difficult work easy... Those who wish to be loved should be seen as loving. The one who knows to be amiable achieves everything especially from youngsters. This confidence is like an electric current running between youngsters and their Superiors. Hearts open and shortcomings are revealed and this love endures hardships, ingratitude, troubles, wrong and the thoughtlessness of the boys.”  
*(Don Bosco)*

## 2. Educating Youngsters: Easy or Difficult?

*One day Don Bosco entered a barber's shop in Turin for a shave. He found a boy there who was an apprentice.*

*- What's your name? – Don Bosco immediately asked him.*

*- I am Charles Gastini.*

*- Do you still have your parents?*

*- Only my mother.*

*- How old are you?*

*- Eleven.*

*- Have you received your First Communion yet?*

*- Not yet.*

*- Do you go for Catechism class?*

*- When I can, I always go.*

*- That's good. Now you can give me a shave.*

*- For goodness sake – screamed the owner – don't risk yourself, father. This boy has hardly been here and he's just learning.*

*He has barely been here a short time and he's only learning. He can barely shave the beard of a dog.*

*- That's no problem – Don Bosco replied calmly – if the boy doesn't begin to try he will never learn.*

*- But excuse me, father: a trial, if necessary he could shave someone else but not a priest.*

*“That’s curious! But is my beard more precious? Don’t be afraid, sir. (Here Don Bosco disclosed his name even joking with his surname): My beard is a beard of wood (d’bosch - in Piedmontese bosch means wood). It’s enough that you don’t cut off my nose.*

*The young apprentice got down to work. Don Bosco sat through the ordeal unperturbed. In the end he said: “Not bad, in a short time you’ll become a famous barber.” He joked a little longer with Gastini and invited him to the Oratory on the following Sunday.*

*Gastini promised he would come. Don Bosco paid the owner and left. As he walked along he stroked his face and it smarted.*

*But he was glad he had won the boy over. Charles kept his word and turned up punctually at the Oratory on the following Sunday. Don Bosco told him how glad he was and sent him off to play with the other boys. Once the religious services were over he whispered one of his famous words in the lad’s ear and then took him to the sacristy helping him to prepare himself well for Confession. Then he heard his Confession. Charles was so moved that he began to cry. There were tears even in Don Bosco’s eyes. From that day on, the Oratory became Charles Gastini’s second home.*

\* \* \*

*That was how Don Bosco conquered youngsters: he knew how to gain their confidence and draw them to him in order to teach them and lead them to God. This was how one psychologist humourously put it:*

*“Educating children is easy if you have the patience of a Carthusian, the nerves of an astronaut and little need for sleep.” It would be better to say: “Educating children is easy for those who can gain their*

confidence and truly love them to the point of sacrificing themselves for their charges.”

- *What is the main obstacle to building good rapport between educators and youngsters?*

Ordinarily, the obstacle is the inability to love youngsters to the point of sacrifice. Parents often think their love consists in buying their youngsters whatever they like while they themselves look for something else. They must find in their parents friends in whom they can confide their problems, secure guides when encountering difficulties that they face as they grow up. But the first step should always be taken by the parents. It is unlikely that children are able to do so first. The same can be said of educators. It is not enough, for example, be a good teacher to educate the boy, you have to love him and convincingly let him see your affection for him.

- *Adolescents seem to demonstrate a kind of disinterestedness or even irreverence in matters of religion. What should one do?*

Some of this is due to their age and a bit of it comes from the society in which they live. Some of it is also the fault of their teachers who rarely know how to present to their charges a Gospel-based religion. Youngsters instinctively reject a religion based only on laws, prohibitions and threats. That is not the religion of Jesus Christ.

- *What goals should parents and educators point out to youngsters?* First, we need to help them become mature and responsible adults. Then, to believe that

without God and without faith life becomes a puzzle inextricable and unsustainable. It is good to guide them to do and discover things by themselves. For example, since people talk so much about “love,” invite them to discover where true love can be found and where it is not found. From the results of their investigation they will discover a divine confirmation of the gospel, and they will begin to appreciate it.

### 3. Teach Them The Great Echo Principle

*“I hurriedly came downstairs one morning” recalls Fr. Matthew Rigoni, an elderly Salesian priest who died at the Ospedaletto Euganeo, near Este during the Second World War. “I encountered Don Bosco and he blocked my way. ‘You can’t escape me again’ he said with a smile. Then he took my hand and held it tightly in his, as if to show me that he would never quit on me. ‘You’ll always be with Don Bosco, won’t you?’ he went on. He said this with such love that I could not resist. ‘Yes, Don Bosco, I promised him,’ and then he let go of my hand. But with his eyes he continued to caress my heart. Then Don Bosco began climbing the stairs with some difficulty and I ran off to play. I later witnessed the miraculous multiplication of the peanuts, and he took me to Rome to sing as a soprano for the consecration of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. But I could never forget the love that he showed me that morning on the stairs of the Oratory. It was that classic lightning strike that tied me to Don Bosco for life. Since then I have never regretted, even for a moment, that I became Salesian.”*

\* \* \*

Here’s how to conquer the heart of a youngster: show him that you sincerely love him. Don Bosco said: *“Don’t you just love the boys. They need to understand and feel that they are loved.”*



Any youngster needs to be loved. He needs to know that mom and dad love him. Nothing can replace this wonderful experience. Children deprived of affection and understanding from their family or their teachers never become good Christians or good citizens. They develop a “complex” that will inevitably last them a lifetime. St. Paul wrote to Bishop Titus: “teach young mothers to love their children” (*Titus 2, 4*).

- *You should keep in mind the great principle of the echo.* A well-known Japanese banker recounted that when he was a child, his father took him to the edge of a cliff to face a hard rock face so that he could hear an echo. Then he told him: “You see, my boy, every word you say will bounce back amplified. Keep an eye the great principle of the echo.” What a great principle - the echo! It is truly universal. To receive love and gratitude you must first give it. “The amount you measure out is the measure you will receive” Jesus reiterated. The more love that parents or educators show their children the more recognition will they receive in the years to come. The children of today will be amplified echoes of our love and concern for them tomorrow, in life.

- *Tell the students to open their eyes to what is beautiful and good around them. Teach him to see the love of the Heavenly Father for each of them in all the events of life, even in the most painful.* “When I was a scout,” a boy wrote in his journal, “I had a leader who was passionate about the natural sciences. He would lead us into the woods and we would go. Then he would invite us to share what we had seen. Invariably we had only seen a quarter of

what he had seen. “The Lord is all around you,” he repeated, raising his hands and drawing a circle with his arms. But you keep away. Don’t be people who are closed. Open your eyes and see. You don’t wear a raincoat when you take a shower.” This is a piece of advice, a suggestion we should never forget. The youngster should take off his raincoat of instinctive selfishness. You must let yourself be doused and drenched from the shower of love with which God bathes you everyday, from morning until evening.

## 4. Assist Them All The Time

*Three boys had distanced themselves from their group. They had found a lonely place and were sitting there on a large beam. Far from the eyes of Don Bosco they were indulging in a conversation that was not very edifying. However, Don Bosco had guessed their strategy and so he suddenly appeared, almost surprising them and affectionately said to them: “Why don’t you play with the others? Three individual excellent youngsters when they come together become rascals.” Those boys blushed, then smiled at Don Bosco’s affectionate gaze and scampered off to play.*

\* \* \*

Here’s Don Bosco’s lesson to educators: *youngsters easily become victims and can easily fall into immorality, so they need a lot of care and correction.* Parents can avoid several heartaches if they simply recognize that their youngster is only a youngster especially during adolescence and that very easily be made to understand this.

- “The personality of the boy” wrote a celebrated psychologist: “is the product of a slow and gradual growth. A child sits before it begins to stand, stutters before it begins to speak, he says ‘no’ before he says ‘yes,’ he is selfish before he becomes selfless,

dependent on others before he becomes independent. All his abilities are subject to the law of growth." This is more pronounced during adolescence.

*After lunch, on January 31, 1862, Don Bosco was walking beneath the porticoes surrounded by some boys. He suddenly stopped, waved out and called to the deacon Cagliero (later Cardinal). Then he moved away from the boys and said softly to him:*

*"I hear the sound of money. I do not know where they're gambling. Go and look for these three youngsters (and told him the names), you will find that they are gambling."*

*Cagliero started searching everywhere but could not find them. Where were these boys hiding? Suddenly he came across one of them and asked:*

*"Where have you been hiding? I've been looking for you for a long time."*

*"I was there and so and so."*

*"And what were you doing?"*

*"I was playing."*

*"With who?"*

*"With two friends."*

*"You were gambling, were you not?" The boy blushed like a fire, he tried to deny it but then confessed that he had been gambling.*

*Cagliero went to the spot indicated and found the other two boys there. They saw him approaching and so they hid but he met them later. The two boys confessed that they had been gambling. When Cagliero reported the result of his research, Don Bosco confided to him that the previous night he had seen the three lads in a dream, gambling.*

\* \* \*

This is another of Don Bosco's lessons to educators: *boys always need to be guided and assisted.*

- Years ago educators were convinced that children come across to their parents as blank slates ready to be 'scribbled' on. Nothing could be further from the truth. Today we are beginning to understand that the youngster rather resembles a musical instrument already gifted to them from their childhood on which both he and his parents can only play the music written especially written for him.

- From birth, children differ from one another not only in weight, height, skin colour and hair, but also for the way they react to the environment and the world around them. Some are active, others are passive, some scream desperately while others hardly make a sound and there is nothing that the best father and mother can do to help it. Or rather, they can do something important and wonderful: they can follow them, try to understand them, love them and entrust them to the Lord in prayer.

A wise educator once said: *"A child is sometimes a good child who would be better with other parents."*

## 5. Understanding Youngsters

*It was a quiet evening in April. While Don Bosco was walking with some of his boys he recounted a dream: "I saw" he said softly, "a boy of the Oratory lying on the ground in the middle of the large room; around him were blunt knives, guns, rifles and human limbs torn apart. He seemed to be in agony. I asked him: "How is it that you are in such a miserable state?" "Don't you see all the weapons around me?" he said. I've become a murderer and in a few hours I'll be sentenced to death." Don Bosco's young audience were shocked at his words. Don Bosco went on: "I know that boy. I'll be careful to correct his defects and instill into him sentiments of piety and gentleness but I'm afraid he's so violent that he will have a bad end.*

*Don Bosco foresaw the future. That boy became an adult and enlisted in the army and because of his bad character he was shot for killing a fellow officer. Fortunately he died a good Christian asking to make his Confession and receive Holy Communion.*

*Don Bosco looked into the future and could foresee some early signs of malice sprouting in the souls of the youngsters forestalling how they would sprout. In a word, he understood what his boys were and what they could become.*

\* \* \*

This is what is required of parents and educators: *they should know how to look after their children, how to understand them, how to predict their inclinations.* Adolescence is an awakening, an impulse, an effort being free. The only thing that a youngster needs is a loving guide who can help him without hurting him.

These are some of the attitudes that parents and educators should absolutely avoid.

- *The first is to pretend that the defects, vices and bad habits in their child are fleeting things or mere trifles.* They say: “The crisis is only temporary. It’s just a bad time and it will pass.” Note that in this statement there is no effort on the part of the parent to do anything except to accept the youngster. This is not right. It is not helpful. It is foolish because the youngster will only be formed through the help and the advice of his/her parents.

- *The second attitude is even worse.* It consists in intervening time and again very cruelly and screaming angrily. Trying to change and forcefully direct the evolution of the youngster (who has a tendency to be independent and secretive) is to miss the experience. The teenager protects himself by shutting himself into a zone of make-belief and subterfuge.

- *What is really needed is to try and understand the youngster, the whole youngster.* After all, understanding the youngster only means reflecting on what we ourselves were once upon a time. We must restrain our anger, spite and bad temper. Does

your son or daughter disobey you in public? Punish him, but in a calm and measured manner. Serenity allows you to proportionately punish the offense.

*But that is not enough. There are many parents who love their children deeply but then they are unable to understand them.* This is no excuse for not looking at every action even the guilty ones for something good in them. The teenager is by definition a being in search of his balance and more than any other being is subject to making mistakes. How many extenuating circumstances there are for the major part of his shortcomings! Even when he must be punished and punished severely in some cases, he should always be guided and understood with kindness. The teenager basically wants to be understood in this way. If he finds in his parents persons who are genuinely sympathetic, he is deeply grateful.

“One needs to educate the will of the youngster by adjusting and strengthening it through the repeated performance of little acts of virtue, and through sincere encouragement, easily eliciting the youngster’s affection.”

“Under the pretext of trying to tame a rebellious nature, some educators are bent on bending the will. (*Don Bosco*)”



## 6. Show Him That You Love Him

*One day, in Rome, Don Bosco found his path blocked by a by a group of boys who wanted to jump on the back of the priest. They did not know that this priest was Don Bosco. They created a barrier and blocked his way with mocking giggles.*

*Don Bosco quietly walked up to them and then with a sudden gesture of courtesy took off his hat and with a smile he very gently said: "Would you please allow me to pass?"*

*The boys were suddenly silent and fascinated by his mild and smiling face.*

*"Of course, father, go ahead!" They understood that Don Bosco loved them. Pascal said: "The first effect of love is to inspire much respect."*

\* \* \*

Educating youngsters is, without a doubt, a most challenging and complicated task. What should one do in order to become a good educator? The necessary and most important requisite is love. Don Bosco wrote in the preface to his little prayer book entitled *The Companion of Youth* addressed to youth: "My dear youngsters, I love you with all my heart; it is enough that you are young for me to love you very much."

The kind of love that a youngster needs could be summed up in the following sentence: *My dear boy, I love you not for what you do or what you do not do, but because of who you are.*” That is unconditional love. It is a kind of love that makes you want to act without fear of the consequences of any possible error.

Here are some tips to help you put this kind of love into practice:

- *Disapproving of the actions of a youngster when he deserves it but never disapproving who he is.* There is no contradiction in a father who scolds his son because he misbehaves and then hugs him, telling him that he loves him. Criticizing only because you like to criticize is a concept that youngsters struggle to clearly understand.

- *Praise a boy more for who he is than for what he does.* Usually an educator praises a youngster when he does something praiseworthy. In reality, the youngster should be praised more because, in spite of his effort and good will, he fails or does something wrong unintentionally, despite his efforts to do well.

- *Show youngsters that you love them.* Loving them is not enough, you have to make sure that he is aware and convinced of this.

- Here is a principle that Don Bosco repeated on and off. Show them how much you love them, sometimes just smile. You can achieve this by countless little signs and gestures. For example, show that you are visibly proud of him even when there would be no reason to do so. This is a practical way

to encourage him and make him feel that you love him. Perhaps the best way to communicate your love is by praising the youngster when he does something good. This is how Don Bosco expressed his love: *“My dear boys, it is enough that you are young for me to love you very much.”* He said this and repeated it and no one tired of hearing this.

## 7. How to Befriend Youngsters

*The faces of the boys lit up with happy smiles. Don Bosco was entertaining them with a funny story.*

*He said: While Ganduja was on stage he was questioned about his opinion on the best wine. He remained silent.*

*- Do you like the Barbera d'Asti best of all?*

*Ganduja grimaced and said 'no.'*

*- Is it Moscato di Strevi?*

*- No.*

*- Is it Syracusea?*

*- No.*

*They went on to enumerate a number of excellent vines: Malvasia, Bordeaux, Tokai, Marsala, Champagne, Malaga, Nebbiolo, Vin Santo, Caluso, etc. And Ganduja always said no with a grin and a ridiculous gesture.*

*What then is your best wine?*

*The wine I like best is what I have in my glass. That's what I am drinking. What does it matter to me if you list me many qualities of wine, all of them excellent but if I cannot have them I cannot drink them. What a fool you are!*

\* \* \*

This is one of the means that Don Bosco used to make friends.

- Youngsters have a lot more insight than adults usually give them credit for, and they too like jokes and comic stories. Don Bosco knew the secret of sustaining a conversation and *maintaining a dialogue with youngsters at their level of interest* but without philosophizing or coaxing them. So he told them stories to keep them happy; easy and uncomplicated stories and jokes which were not coarse or cheap.

- Another secret that Don Bosco used to instantly win over the hearts of his boys *was not to embarrass them*. Youngsters are like little wild animals who come to you more easily when they know they are not being observed. Never put a youngster at the centre of a group of adults who are silently listening to him. Instead, tell him something like a story not to embarrass him with your intimidating attention: a story makes him laugh and immediately puts him at ease.

- *If you want to be inexorably detested try making fun of the youngster you've just met*. Nothing is more humiliating for him, because the youngster knows he's not intellectually able to respond in kind, and he also knows that he would be scolded by everyone for his impertinence should he try to do so.

- *When a youngster blunders or comes out with a slip-of-the-tongue*, good breeding demands only one mode of behaviour: keeping one's face totally

expressionless. Let him become aware of the mistake he himself has made because rebuking him would be like slapping him in the face and knocking him down in a shower of irritation making him feel helpless.

Don Bosco teaches us that the best attitude to adopt with youngsters is being natural, simple and spontaneous. You must consider that a youngster is uncomfortable in the presence of strangers in whose presence he must perform but with an old friend it becomes easy to strike up a friendship promptly.

## 8. Helping Him At This Critical Age

*One evening a crowd of boys were intent on having fun and playing in a meadow in Turin. Don Bosco, a young priest then, had recently launched his new apostolate: the Oratory. Suddenly, near the boundary hedge he saw a 15 year old boy who seemed to want to cross the hedge and join the other boys but he did not dare to do so but stood there watching them with a sad and dark face. Don Bosco saw him and approached him and asked him several questions: the boy said nothing. Don Bosco seriously doubted that he was dumb, and he thought of signing the alphabet so he could understand but before that he tried one last test: he put his hand affectionately on his head and asked:*

*-What's the matter, my friend? Are you sick?*

*The boy, with a weak voice answered, for the first time...*

*-I'm hungry.*

*Don Bosco immediately sent for bread and something else. When the boy was fed, Don Bosco went on questioning him. He learned that the boy was a migrant, a saddler who had been fired by his boss because he had made a scene. The previous night he had slept on the pavement outside the largest church in Turin. For several hours he felt violently tempted to steal to eat.*

He was about to do something incriminating that would send him straight to prison but he met Don Bosco. He did not need material bread only but also some genuine understanding and Don Bosco had understood that and came to his rescue.

\* \* \*

- *Fifteen years is a critical age.* From twelve to fifteen years a boy goes through a stormy period. His face, till then has fine features but now it grows large and he begins to develop heavy and disproportionate features.

- *The harmony of childhood is followed by the awkwardness of adolescence.* Adults more easily forgive the rudeness in the charm of a child who is a disheveled boy. “Don’t you dare to order me around like this!” he violently screams at his mother. There are often insults and the slamming of doors. His mother is puzzled and thinks: “This is the thanks I get for doing all this for him. He insults me!” Not even an hour goes by when she is busy cleaning the house and as she places her hands over her eyes, her two hands full of tenderness. She hears her son’s voice asking: “Mummy is there anything to eat? I’m hungry, so hungry.” His mother barely responds. The boy begins to scream accusing himself: “I know, I’m horrid, Mom!” Half an hour later his mother refuses him something else and the boy explodes once more. “I’m going away from this wretched house.” And there’s more slamming of the door. It is definitely a sickness. He seems to like breaking all the rules and revolting against his parents. Parents and educators know this



only too well: he is as stubborn as a three year old child or a mule, but more devious. He has said goodbye to the paradise of his childhood but is not yet prepared to enter the adult world. He feels immensely insecure. “Everyone is someone and I’m a nobody,” said a 14 year old boy in the throes of a deep depression.

- *It is a period of his life when the boy breaks down all his previous idols; he enjoys destroying the social order.* Some parents resign themselves before their children at that critical age and leave everything to go haywire. The youngster feels he is drifting away from his parents and this doesn’t happen without causing pain to both parties. Most mothers usually don’t understand that this is the time when the youngster distances himself from his mother only to be able to love her later in a completely different way. “My son has insulted me,” she says desperately.

- *These are three difficult years to endure. At school the boy falls back; at home he becomes a stranger to his own family.* He seems to look haughty and overbearing but towards evening this proud youngster is afraid and feels weak. He is unable to master even his own impulses or words. When his mother tries to hug him in public he screams: “Let me go! I don’t want to listen to you!” He hates himself for being so angry and impulsive. He needs a father or an educator like Don Bosco to speak to him with extreme understanding and respect. He needs a father who can come and sit by his side and say to him: “My boy, I understand what you’re going through. I tried this myself when I was your age.” He

needs a father who will give him confidence without putting him down, someone who knows how to keep quiet when he is in no mood to talk and who knows how to respond to that silence.

- *Girls also have their critical and terrible years.* Parents should have nerves of steel in the face of such mood swings of their teens, their stupid laughter or their hysterical tears. Teenage girls have a meticulous mania for harbouring “secrets” or dubious friendships. They become lazy, dreamy and talkative but their hearts are full of fear and sadness. They have such foolish attitudes that they are deceived by their own fears. In fact, they have a great need for understanding too.

\* \* \*

One evening Don Bosco lovingly placed his hand on the head of a 15 year old boy and asked: “What is it, my friend? Are you sick?” That boy came out of his silence and said “I’m hungry.” Fifteen years: a critical age. Boys are hungry for understanding. “They’re most in need of love who least deserve it.”

“Give the youngster ample freedom to jump, run, cackle at will. Gymnastics, music, declamation, the theatre and walks are very effective in getting them to obey, to grow in morality and integrity. Only be careful that the matter you use for this purpose or the persons involved or the conversations held are not dubious or questionable in content.”  
*(Don Bosco)*

## 9. How To Talk To Youngsters

*One evening in the autumn of 1860 Don Bosco entered the café Consolata and took a private room where he wouldn't be disturbed and where he could conveniently read the voluminous correspondence which he had brought with him. In the café there was a bright and energetic youngster who was serving the customers. His name was Cotella Giampaolo, 13 years old and a native of Cavour in the province of Turin. A few months earlier he had run away from home exasperated by the endless nagging of her parents.*

*The owner of the bar sent for him.*

*- Go and take a cup of coffee to that priest in the room upstairs.*

*-You want me to take coffee to a priest? The boy went on: I heard priests always gossip.*

*The owner insisted: Go!*

*And the boy went up very skeptical.*

*Don Bosco looked at him as he brought him the coffee and the boy became self-defensive:*

*-What do you want with me, you priest? – he asked Don Bosco very rudely.*

*Don Bosco looked steadily at him and then gently replied:*

*My good boy, when you brought me a coffee I wanted to make a deal with you.*

*What's that?*

*I want you to bring me yourself too.*

*The boy immediately lowered his gaze. He put the coffee down but was unable to drag himself away from Don Bosco who began gently to inquire about his village, his age and why he had run away from home.*

*-Will you come with me? – concluded Don Bosco.*

*-Where?*

*-To the Oratory. This place is not meant for you.*

*-And when I am there?*

*-If you like you can study.*

*-But what if you stopped being kind to me?*

*-Oh, just imagine, there you can play, you'll be happy and have lots of fun...*

*-See you tomorrow then?*

*-No, tonight itself!*

*-It was a foggy night as he took the lad to Valdocco. The boy liked the place immensely and stayed there for a long time.*

\* \* \*

Here's a technique that Don Bosco used when approaching youngsters: it was *a technique of attentiveness and affection*. In this regard it's easy to deduce some general rules.

● Remember that a youngster is not a toy or an object: *you must address him as person.*

*Never try to ignore the presence of a youngster. The boy is very sensitive to the slightest hint of concern for him.*

- *Don't forget that his parents or some legal guardian are responsible for him and they are responsible for his behaviour and his actions. It is a mistake to subject the boy to a conflict of authority, saying for example: "Don't worry about what your mother says. You're here in my house and you can do what you want." These words destroy harmony.*
- *Talk to a youngster about things that interest him in terms he understands. In particular, if you make any comments on his work, for example on his handwriting, his ability to concentrate, make them on what he is doing not on what he has done. A job done with goodwill is always valuable and needs to be sincerely appreciated; and to comment on the work itself allows the youngster to join in the conversation, instead of forcing him to keep a timid silence.*
- *If a youngster is engrossed in his games, don't try to speak about him, not even in a foreign language, thinking that he won't be aware that he is the subject of the conversation. He understands, and how well! Worse, he may not fully understand what you are saying about him but then he will fill in the gaps with details supplied by his fertile imagination. Ideas understood by means of words have been misunderstood by several youngsters and have been a source of much anxiety.*
- *It is important to listen to him. Boys want to learn to live in the world of adults. They expect to be assisted by adults to achieve this end. One 15 year old wrote in his diary: "Man, how wonderful it is to be divinized!"*

That's why every youngster deeply and devoutly wants to be loved.

## 10. How to Punish and How to Forgive

*Louis Lasagna was a 12 year old boy, restless as a drop of mercury. When he lived with Don Bosco during the early days of the Oratory in Turin, he gave his superiors a hard time because he was as feisty as a foal and it was impossible to keep him quiet. Till then he had lived free and wild and repelled any kind of constraint or discipline. Don Bosco kept a close eye on him, watching him with extreme patience.*

*One day, overcome by homesickness, Louis waited for twilight to set in and then he ran away from Turin. He walked all night and returned to the town of Montemagno. His parents were surprised and they immediately brought him back to Turin. Don Bosco accepted him back smiling and he said nothing about his escape. He admired his courage and rewarded him with a piece of cake. The sullen face of the boy brightened with a smile, his first smile. That was how Don Bosco was able to tame him because he had seen in the boy some rare qualities. He was quick, generous, possessing an extraordinary willpower, a very affectionate heart, ingenuity and a spectacular memory. And one day in the fall of 1862, Don Bosco, who was with a group of youngsters among who was Louis, he lifted his index finger and pointed to him and said these exact words: "One of you will be a bishop." The prophecy was directed at Louis Lasagna,*

*that untamed and feisty colt, actually became a bishop!*

\* \* \*

Punishing and pardoning are thorny issues. How then should you punish?

• Don Bosco used to say: *“Do not abuse punishment. To boys a punishment should not feel like a punishment: for example, sometimes a look is sufficient for a youngster to burst into tears when he feels he is no longer loved by his parents.”* Therefore it is necessary to punish when it is needed, that is when a boy deliberately violates a given order or when he commits something really bad which requires reparation. There is no need to use force because then the real effect of the punishment is compromised.

Here, for example, is a disastrous dialogue between a father and his son:

- Do this...

And boy, headstrong says: No!

I'm ordering you...

-No!

-I want you to do it.

-No!

-You have to do it.

-No!

The enraged father slaps him. What has this served? The boy now nurtures a terrible resentment for his father.

- Don Bosco said: *“You must be calm when you scold or punish. There is no need to scream.”* Therefore it is necessary to punish a youngster not because he has made us suffer, not because we were angry, not because he has resisted us but because he has done something wrong. The boy should not sense that the correction or the punishment as an act of anger or revenge by those above him.

- Don Bosco said: *“Don’t humiliate the boy.”* Sometimes it is simpler to affectionately accept the youngster as Don Bosco did when Louis Lasagna’s parents brought him back to Turin after he had escaped. It is better to wait till the first emotions cool down and then begin the clarification or the heart to heart dialogue, perhaps suggesting a walk, a task, a game that somehow has the spirit of reconciliation rolled into it.

This is how Christian parents demonstrate and reveal to their children the infinite love of God that he offers each of us in his constant mercy.

“Being present at the mistake of a youngster serves as a punishment. Gazing with a look that withholds affection serves the same effect as a slap. Praising when something is done well and blaming when things are wrong is enough reward or punish. Except in very rare cases corrections and punishments should not be given publicly, but privately and far from his companions; using extreme caution and patience to make the youngster understand his mistake with reason and religion.” (Don Bosco)



## 11. Punishing Reasonably

*In 1884, four years before his death, Don Bosco was at Lanzo. During that time, some of the school boys, during a walk, discovered a brood of blackbirds. Daring as they were, they took the birds home and hid them in their dormitory. Unfortunately, one after another, those little birds died. When the last one died the boys decided to bury it during their recreation period. They carried it ceremoniously mimicking a church funeral accompanied with dirges, hymns and finally a funeral eulogy.*

*Don Bosco watched all this from his window. When they had finished their prank and withdrawn to the study hall he sent for the boy who led the prank and in a very serious manner made him realize the wrong he had done; it was a real desecration that was not to be repeated again. The boy was brought to tears. Don Bosco then changed his tone of voice and said that he had forgiven him and his companions. And before the boy left, Don Bosco surprised him by handing him a packet of sweets saying: "take it and share it with your companions."*

\* \* \*

*"Unfortunately punishments," Don Bosco said, "sometimes need to be given but they should be deferred as much as possible. Make your punishments reasonable. That needs to be admitted to the youngster, so you need to speak to his heart.*

*More importantly don't ever humiliate a boy, this may result in some awful consequences... no anger, not even righteous anger. There should be no harsh words or expressions. Just tell the youngster: "I'm not pleased with you." Nine out of ten times that is enough."*

- *Modern pedagogy aligns itself to Don Bosco's position: who insists that *the greater the respect and love the youngster has for you, the greater will a simple disapproval, a withdrawal of trust, familiarity or friendship become a dreaded punishment and which is therefore effective.**

- *An educative punishment is intended to improve the one who has erred not as an excuse to vent one's anger and resentment. Therefore it should be understood and accepted by the youngster and not intended to humiliate or hurt him/her.*

- *Today, inflicting corporal punishment is debated. There are some who absolutely reject it. An educator, who is a stranger to the family, has no right to use it because using such punishment would hurt the offender and would cause more harm.*

- *Neither parents nor relatives should strike a youngster in an offensive or severely painful manner. A boy will accept a rap on the wrist. It is a kind of moral absolution. Especially when the youngster sees that his/her parents have to inflict such a punishment in order not to inflict something more severe for a flimsy reason. The simple fact that a*

father or a mother is compelled to resort to this, means that there is already sufficient reason for the youngster to regret his action. The youngster, of course, deserves more respect.

## 12. *Courtesy Captures the Heart*

*“Through courtesy you will capture hearts” Don Bosco used to say and he added: “Courtesy is the flower of Christian charity.”*

*To document these expressions of his, one evening he told the boys about his encounter with a certain Chevalier Provera of San Salvatore in Monferrato.*

*Don Bosco was going through the town accompanied by some gentlemen including the parish priest and they were commenting on how good the people were and how much respect they had for Don Bosco. All of a sudden one of them said: “There is someone who is hostile to Don Bosco and he is the richest man in these parts who, for many years, has not set foot in a church. He is the chevalier Provera.” They had just finished saying these words when along the same road came the chevalier who winked and said: “That is the priest-eater.”*

*Don Bosco waited till the chevalier drew nearer and as he dismounted Don Bosco politely doffed his hat. The chevalier reciprocated the greeting a bit surprised and a bit annoyed and he stopped. Don Bosco then reached out his hand to take the hand of the chevalier. The knight responded. Don Bosco took advantage of the opportunity to break the ice:*

*- I am told that you are the chevalier Provera - he began with charming amiability.*

- *Exactly.*

- *And you bear one of the most respected and honoured names in Turin because it reminds me of a holy priest who came from Provera di Mirabello.*

- *Even my grandfather came from Provera di Mirabello*  
- *replied the chevalier, very flattered.*

*Fascinated by such kindness, so exquisite and so sincere, the chevalier invited Don Bosco to his house for a snack. Don Bosco accepted it immediately, although he had other pressing engagements, he entertained the chevalier with a lively conversation peppered with anecdotes. He was about to say goodbye when he commented:*

- *Look, chevalier, I intend to place myself under your protection. You have been extremely kind to me. There is just one favour I wish to ask: I have come to San Salvatore to see if I could find a home in order to open a school and I would need some help.*

- *Really?* - *Interjected the chevalier enthusiastically.*  
- *I would be very happy. In fact I could make you an offer immediately. Visit me at my home. If you can I can offer you a gift.*

*Don Bosco had won over a friend. "You see?" He told his boys. "Courtesy conquers every heart."*

\* \* \*

Every youngster should be educated to deal courteously with others. He is instinctively very self-centred, even selfish and so he needs to be assiduously trained to live in society.

● The psychologist Peck emphasizes three major trends in adolescents: *growth in his personal identity*

with all the characteristics of a rational personality, integrated and emotionally mature; *the development of his own conscience*: his moral principles get stronger as he internalizes them. The youngster becomes capable of modifying his own behaviour; *and an increased capacity to love*: at this point that he needs to be guided and gently inserted into adult society. He should be brought up to love, i.e., to respect others, to self-sacrifice and to courtesy.

Don Bosco used to say that in order to educate youngsters three things are needed: “*Loving kindness, Reason and Religion*.” Psychologists note that it is the mother who has the greatest influence on the character and the personality of the youngster. The father instead, is irreplaceable when it comes to educating the youngster to develop a healthy character and to curb excessive emotionalism. The youngster learns courtesy instinctively from his parents and later from his teachers and educators. Youngsters do what their parents do, not what they say.

“*It is courtesy,*” said Don Bosco, “*that makes one grateful for all that is been received.*”

## 13. Greet Them By Name

*Sig. Natale Menzio, a former student of the Salesian institute of Pinerolo who was well over ninety years of age told us on January 30, 1961: "I spoke face to face with Don Bosco only twice but it was wonderful."*

*One morning in May, as I was climbing the stairs to go to the second floor and I met Don Bosco. It was the first time I came face to face with him. I stared into his eyes. He asked me my name and then he greeted me with much affection.*

*A few months later, he went to Rome. When he returned to Valdocco there was a great feast. Don Bosco was forced to climb up to the second floor balcony to greet everyone by throwing hands full of sweets. That day I was sick in the infirmary.*

*I saw him again the following day. He had just entered the large infirmary and recognized me immediately: "You? Menzio? In the infirmary?" he said. Then he greeted me very warmly.*

*The next day I was already well again but I had a big question in my mind. Don Bosco had seen me just once and he recognized me. At Valdocco there were more than 600 youngsters in those days and during his travels the Saint met thousands of boys.*

*That morning I waited for Don Bosco at the bottom of the stairs. I had to find out at any cost. I approached the Saint while he was coming down for Mass*

accompanied by Don Rua. "Don Bosco, how did you recognize me yesterday?" The Saint smiled. Then putting his hand on my head, he added: "I know my boys anywhere."

\* \* \*

This is charity with finesse: *the greeting*, especially when you can add a name. Dale Carnegie wrote in *How to win friends and influence people*: "Remember that the name of a person is, for him, the most pleasing and most important word in the vocabulary."

- *There is a mysterious identification between a person and his name.* A name reveals a person and makes him somehow present with his most intimate self. That's why a name requires the same respect that is given to a person. When a boy realizes that one or other of his teachers has not learned his name or has forgotten it, he gets the impression that he is being forgotten. So, if a name is distorted the person experiences irritation especially if it is repeated again and again.

- *What about the mania of attaching nicknames?* Often this craze reveals an intention to diminish and humiliate others. It must be noted that a nickname is almost always used as a weapon by the weak so as to have an unfair advantage over the ones they are aimed at. In any case, it is always a sign of a vulgar mind. The further one goes down the social ladder the more frequently he uses nicknames.

- *What sadness for the one who feels deprived of his own name and is reduced to nothing but a number.*



“One day,” wrote a young worker, “I went to visit a friend in a hospital ward. To my surprise I heard that he had been there for three months in the same room and was called by a number. A number is demeaning and has not personality.”

- *Remembering the names of his employees earns an executive, a manager or a teacher extraordinary respect.* Napoleon was able to boost the morale of his soldiers and urge them to make great sacrifices thanks to the astuteness with which he used to mention the names of those he wanted to congratulate or to reward for some major feat. He had made a list in order to learn the names of each of his innumerable soldiers.

- *A boy is pleased when he hears his name being called.* For him, his name is the most beautiful sound he hears. Don't ever distort a name. Do you want to conquer him? Do what Don Bosco did: greet him by name.

“The first joy of any youngster is the awareness that he is loved. Youngsters are God's delight.”

(Don Bosco)

## 14. *The Youngsters Are Watching*

*A student of Don Bosco used to say that he remembered that Don Bosco was the soul of the entire recreation. He was seen in all the corners of the playground multiplying his presence as was necessary. If he saw that a game was degenerating into a quarrel Don Bosco approached the group with good grace: "Look," he would say, "go and play with that group down there, they need a player. I'll take your place here." And he would take the ball and begin bowling and running among the boys. If somewhere in the courtyard he discovered a boy with a closed circle of friends who seemed to glance about with suspicious and insincere looks he would come along and say: "Come here for a bit, and take my place." Then he would cheerfully shout: "I'll take your place here," and the exchange would take place as if it were the most natural thing in the world.*

*"What a joy!" said an old boy, "what a joy it was to have Don Bosco in our midst! He did not care how old we were, how we dressed, nor about our characters or our manners. He belonged to all of us. However, his preference was for those with the worst dressed because that was the clearest sign that they were very poor and he loved the little ones because he had the heart of a mother."*

*The boys saw in Don Bosco a father. Very few loved us the way he did. "Do you want to be loved?" He*

would say, "Then love!" How did he look at his boys? Like this: He looked at his boys with kindness and concern, always alert, always aware of their weakness and ignorance; always indulgent, knowing when to close his eyes and not to always punish but to easily forgive. He was continually concerned about the boy whose health was indifferent, about his parents, his needs, his faults, his progress and his joys. He watched over them with maternal watchfulness, knowing how to protect his boys from scandal and the vagaries of the weather; always seeking out ways and means to cheer them, teach them and educate them to grow up well. He did this with kindness and without raising his voice; always smiling in the face of the most difficult problems. He knew how to punish with a simple hurt look; all summarized in that often-overused yet divine word: love. The boys looked at him and felt his gaze.

\* \* \*

Here then is a legitimate inference about Don Bosco's behaviour: the adult life of a boy will depend on the "demeanour" of his parents and educators: their behaviour, the way they love the youngster and accept him in every way even with all that is unpleasant and irritating.

- *Several studies have shown that the image of the father influences the idea of God in the boy. The boy who has never experienced forgiveness finds it difficult to see God as a father, full of forgiveness and love. "It's impossible for God to forgive me for all I've done and I have proof: my father never forgets*

anything,” confided a 14-year-old boy to a priest who spoke of God’s mercy. The boy who saw in his father an image of power and authoritarianism had no difficulty in understanding the transcendence of God, but he could not understand his immanence.

- *It is important for parents and educators to be able to foresee the psychological reactions of their children.* The children of many Christians parents grow up sometimes with a more accentuated aversion towards the faith. Why? They see that the religion of their parents leads them to absent themselves from home a couple of nights a week attending meetings or going to help a neighbour. Apostolic charity and service are the commitment of every Christian but they should not be exercised to the detriment of family responsibilities.

- *It is not so much what parents and educators say in an organized or systematic manner but their very “being.”* Their behaviour (their demeanour) should be open, coherent and unambiguously directed towards a good education. This plays a key role in becoming the starting point for the external life of the youngster. It is also a privileged place of refuge for him. The boy's entry into adult life should be prepared for at all levels, but most especially by his being able to identify the leadership role of his father or mother.

It was with good reason that Don Bosco warned: *“Our children are watching us.”*

## 15. A Word In The Ear

*One evening, in the refectory, in the middle of supper, Don Bosco suddenly became serious. He turned to Don Ruffino who was next to him and whispered softly:*

*- At this moment, near the water spout in the courtyard, there are two boys who need to be watched. Send someone at once to bring them back to recreation with the others.*

*Don Ruffino sent a cleric who came back and said:*

*- There was no one at the water spout but I saw two boys (and he named them) moving away at that moment. When I asked them where they came from they said:*

*- They went to drink some water.*

*After evening prayers Don Ruffino called the two boys:*

*- What were the two of you doing this evening?*

*- Nothing – they replied.*

*- Now come with me. Don Bosco is waiting to see you. He has something to tell you.*

*And he led them to Don Bosco. The Saint stared at them for a moment with his deep set eyes; than he whispered a little word into their ears. Their faces turned red like fire. They asked forgiveness because of the evil they had done and promised Don Bosco*

*that they would do no such thing again and behave better.*

\* \* \*

Here is Don Bosco's lesson: *It is absolutely necessary for parents and educators to watch over and supervise youngsters. All pedagogy is founded on this.*

- *Parents should first of all admit that their teenage youngster is growing up. They must realize that he will change and that he is changing before their very eyes.*
- *But, whatever you do, the youngster will demonstrate a guarded reaction which is a kind of self-defence. The more stubborn he is, the less you will need to confront him; you have to catch him without him noticing. Still better: you should act on him only after you have been able to earn his trust. Here we notice a problem of dialogue between parents and children. Don Bosco was able to conquer his boys in a wonderful way. His secret? "It is not enough to love the boys. They need to feel they are loved."*
- *A good or bad action of a boy should never go unnoticed. This is one of the most basic duties of an educator who, in passing judgment affixes exact justice, praise, blame, recompense or penalties. Only in this way, will any comment, praise or reprimand have a decisive effect, affecting the soul of the youngster and urging him to make an effort at an improvement or a change of heart.*

- Recently an elderly person in Milan recounted how struck she was by a quote of the great conductor Arturo Toscanini. He was with a group of friends and acquaintances. After talking about his parents and his family Toscanini suddenly asked those present:
  - And you, if you give your child a gift, what would it be?
  - Some said one thing, some another. Toscanini surprised everyone by saying:
    - *I would give him enthusiasm and every day a little word in the ear.*





**II**  
**Beyond**  
**everything**



## 16. Education To Joy

*One evening little Johnny Bosco and his brother Joseph were standing and gazing at the sunset; the sun had lit up the horizon and painted the clouds in gold.*

*- Mother, how beautiful! – They exclaimed together.*

*- Isn't it wonderful! It is God who made all this. Murmured, Mamma Margaret.*

*It had turned dark and the little boys stood there a long time gazing up at the stars.*

*- Mother, how beautiful this is!*

*- It is God who has strewn around so many stars. If our sky is so beautiful how much more beautiful will Paradise be!*

*With this little instruction – to be able to see God in nature - little Johnny Bosco spent his years in peace and joy.*

*As a teenager in Chieri, he founded the unique “Cheerful Club.” This club obliged its members to live cheerfully. The club had just one rule composed of two very clear articles.*

*The first: “Every member of the Cheerful Club must avoid every unchristian conversation or action.”*

*The second: “The exact observance of one’s scholastic and religious duties.”*

*Much later, when he had become a priest he would often call some youngster to him and say:*

*- Do you want to be a friend of Don Bosco?*

*-Oh yes!*

*-Alright, then you must be  $a + b - c$ . Do you know what that  $a + b - c$  means?*

*-No.*

*-I will tell you. You must be happy ( $a = allegro$ ); add to that goodness ( $b = buono$ ) and now subtract being bad. ( $c = cattivo$ )*

\* \* \*

Don Bosco wanted his boys to always be good and a climate of joy was most conducive for the souls of his youngsters to flourish. They were like tender saplings.

- *Youngsters should be taught to love and admire nature.* For example get them to notice the light of the stars reflected in the snow or the lake, or the unexpected sight of a meadow strewn with wild flowers. Joy is “rapture, gladness, and so much more than just happiness.” Youngsters enter into an atmosphere of joy with a kind of disbelief, a sense of mystery and humble gratitude. Suddenly they become aware of so many living things: a leaf, a flower, a cloud, a gnat buzzing on the pond, the garrulous swallow flying by.

- *Youngsters should accustom themselves to enjoying family life.* Appreciating the love of loved ones, youngsters imperceptibly notice that their hearts swell with joy at certain times like Christmas, Easter or at other times like their birthdays, for instance.

This is when their joy becomes more intense than their usual feeling of happiness. “If there’s no joy everything is lost” wrote the novelist R. L. Stevenson. Moments of joy are plows furrowing dry and arid fields.

- *To cherish joy, youngsters should be always accustomed to keeping themselves in the grace of God.* Don Bosco wanted them to be “more good and less bad.” Only then can boys sustain the freshness of their sense of discovery. The presence of the Lord in their souls opens their hearts to joy even if they have to bear some physical pain. The English naturalist Jefferies was poor and very ill but he was rich in God and exclaimed from his invalid’s chair: “Every blade of grass is mine, as if I had planted it; all the herbs belong to me and I love them. Each hawk that passes high in the sky is mine; there is nothing more beautiful than the arc described by its flight against the blue? Oh! happy, happy days!”

- *Youngsters should be habituated to bond with one another.* This joy of loving one another is the so-called joy of the “Communion of Saints” which is the joy of being brothers and sisters in the Lord. The Holy Spirit establishes this communion among all of us as a kind of solidarity. We must make it clear to youngsters that each of them is worth much more if they come together and not strive to isolate themselves. Boys need to get on well with their peers in order to truly be themselves. They need to live in brotherly love to be truly children of God. Christians never live isolated lives. The real yeast of joy is fraternal love and love of self.

Don Bosco whispered into the ear of some youngster:  
“Strive to be “a + b – c” Do you know what that means?  
*Be happy plus be Good and less bad.*

## 17. Teach Them to Listen

*As the novena of the Immaculate drew near Dominic Savio came to Don Bosco and this was the conversation that transpired between the two saints:*

*- I know that the Madonna grants great graces to those who make her novenas well.*

*-And what do you want to get out of this novena?*

*- I want to do a lot of things: First of all I want to make a general Confession of my life, then I want carry out as perfectly as possible the “nosegay” proposed every day; I would like to receive Holy Communion so that it will help me throughout the day.*

*St. Dominic Savio was silent at this point, but noticed that Don Bosco wanted him to continue the conversation he had begun. Then he encouraged him to continue:*

*- Do you want nothing else?*

*- Yes, there’s still something else.*

*- What’s that?*

*- I want to wage a bitter battle against mortal sin.*

*- And what else?*

*- I shall pray fervently to the Blessed Virgin Mary to let me die rather than let me commit a single venial sin against modesty.*

*Don Bosco commented: "that dialogue took place very long ago." The Saint had the art of listening. That was the most remarkable feature of Don Bosco the educator: he had a wonderful ability to listen to everyone especially to youngsters. He did this by example and through the directives he gave to educators. In the "Preventive System" he says: "Let the students feel free to express their thoughts ... When the superior speaks a lot they will speak little."*

\* \* \*

Listening is a rare art. It cannot be improvised, it has to be worked out and practiced. The youngster is taught this from an early age. Some serious investigations have shown through data that verbal communication loses 75 percent of its content, when it is addressed to a group of listeners. That is to say that our ability to listen is just 25 percent. It also means that we usually listen with only half an ear. Zeno an old Greek philosopher said that humans are given two ears and only one tongue so that they understand the primacy of the ear over the tongue. It is a fact of life that in our relationships with others we are forced to spend 40 percent of our time listening and 30 percent talking.

- You often scold a boy for not listening. Teach them first of all to listen. *Teach him by your example: listen, listen often; always listen to him.* The boy, almost always feels that he has to listen and considers this an unbearable tension that is exhausting, a nuisance, and a kind of obligation imposed from the outside, especially in school. The teacher calls him back



because he does not listen, and the mother and the father blame him because he does not listen to them.

- *It is necessary to teach youngsters to face those who speak to them (teacher, educator, a parent or a superior) with an active not a passive or indifferent attitude.* The youngster should not behave like a wall that just reflects sound or light. The permeability of a sponge is already something better because it absorbs water as soon it is submerged, but nothing more. Several youngsters are like this when they hear someone. The ideal would be that a youngster learns to become like a large concert hall or a hi-fidelity disc in which all the sounds are amplified and acoustically enriched.

- *The youngster must learn to listen with interest, with an ever renewed enthusiasm and an open mind.* A youngster who is distracted or simply disinterested puts himself in a situation where he will not listen at all or at least will listen erratically.

\* \* \*

There were those who wrote of Don Bosco: “I’ve never met someone one who, like Don Bosco showed so much concern to those who spoke with him. He listened patiently and very selflessly with kindness and a constant vigilant concern.”

By contrast, here is the sad statement of the wife of a European Car manufacturer: My husband spends his time talking without listening.”

## 18. Educate Him to Be True to Himself

*Little Johnny Bosco was a lad like quicksilver. One day he was alone in the house, his mother was out. He took a fancy to grasp at something on the top of a very high cabinet. He realised he could not reach there so what did he do? Clever, he drew up a chair and climbed on top of it. He then stretched out his arm and in doing so his elbow touched a jug of oil and it came crashing to the floor. There were pieces all over and the oil all spilt. What would his mother say? It would be better to hide it all. He got down from the chair and with a broom in hand it tried to get rid of all traces of his disaster. It was impossible, the stains were everywhere. What next? There surfaced a dilemma in his conscience: to tell or not to tell. Should he be honest with himself and his mother or not?*

*Little Johnny made up his mind: he took a knife, came out of the house, walked through the yard up to the hedge and cut off a supple branch came back to a corner of the kitchen where he curled up and trimmed it and adorned it with designed incisions.*

*His mother returned. Little Johnny ran out to meet her:*

- *Ciao, mamma, did you have a good trip?*
- *Yes, Johnny, and you? Have you been good?*
- *Oh, mamma, look, - so saying he gave her the decorated cane.*

- *What have you done?* asked his mother.

And Johnny said frankly and with sincerity:

- *I knocked over the jug of oil. Here take the cane; you won't have to go looking for one.*

*Johnny kept his head down. How could you punish a child who was so sincere? Mamma Margaret forgave him.*

\* \* \*

Little Johnny Bosco was sincere with his mother because he was sincere with himself. *Honesty with oneself is not easy.* How do you determine if you are honest and frank with yourself? A psychologist recommended: "Examine your ability to laugh at yourself. Can you laugh at yourself, really and sincerely laugh at yourself? Then you will probably be honest with yourself and hide nothing."

- *Sincerity with oneself helps a youngster to approach life decisively, helping him to work hard.* Another psychologist offers this piece of advice: "Ask yourself: what was the last significant event in your life? Was it an illness? Was it the death of a parent?" Then ask yourself: "Did I ever stop to think about it? Did I ever think that it meant something to me?" If the answer is no, it is certain that you are living life without reflecting and spending your day with your head in a sack. You are not completely honest with yourself. Are you afraid to reflect on yourself?"

- *Be honest with yourself. It is the best formula for success. It should become a way of life.* Honesty with yourself is also defined with a wonderful expression: "An open ego." There is a danger, however, that you

could get discouraged and depressed with what you see. Honesty with oneself is not to be confused with depression. Genuine sincerity includes an assessment of good and bad qualities that flourish within us. You must recognize your faults, but you also need to recognize your capabilities and the possibilities for improvement.

- *Honesty with oneself helps you to accept yourself as you are, with your limitations and weaknesses, and more importantly, it helps you to accept others as they are.* A meek and timid teacher was given charge of a class of unruly and incorrigible boys. One especially, named Joseph a fourteen year old lad enjoyed causing confusion in the school. One afternoon the teacher detained him after school and asked him why he caused such confusion in the classroom. For a moment the boy sulked and then said: "Because it is so easy to do it." "I know that is so," said the teacher with a sigh. "I was always afraid of boys like you and yet I'd like to help you. Don't you want someone to help you and to love you?" With a look of surprise the boy broke down and came out with his own intimate story of suffering, poverty and loneliness.

Don Bosco used to say: *"It is a snare of the devil not being truthful and honest with yourself and with God."*

## 19 Teach Him How to Praise

*He was a very talented boy who had attended the public schools of the city of Turin but was rather sluggish. He showed no interest in his studies. His father was very worried and spoke to some friends: How was he to deal with the boy? Where was he to put him to take him away from his companions? A friend offered him a solution:*

*- I know a priest who has recently opened a school at Valdocco.*

*- What's his name?*

*- Don Bosco.*

*- Ah, Don Bosco, oh yes, but he has a school for poor boys it would be too humiliating for someone from our social status. My son would certainly not fit in there.*

*- Why not, daddy? Interjected the boy who was present at the conversation... send me there and you'll see what happens.*

*That night the boy had a dream. He seemed to be in a courtyard with a sheaf of papers in his hands and he saw a crowd of boys cheering a priest who was standing on the balcony of a house, and he? He was running up the stairs going to kiss the hand of that priest. What a good priest he is! The praise he received was even more wonderful: You're a good boy, are you not?*

*A few months later the boy came to the Oratory of Don Bosco. The dream had almost been forgotten. In the beginning he had a tough time settling into the life of the institution. Don Bosco was out of Turin. One day his teacher gave him a sheaf of papers to give to another member of the staff. As he came down the stairs he heard a burst of prolonged applause. What's happening? Running into the playground he was dragged along by all the clapping and the shouting: "hurray!" Everyone was looking up to Don Bosco who had just returned after a long absence and was standing in the balcony and acknowledging the applause. The boy recalled the dream: the playground, the crowd of youngsters, the house, the priest and he with a sheaf of papers in his hand. He shivered with emotion. He walked up the stairs, ran to the balcony and kissed Don Bosco's hand and was praised by him with this wonderful compliment: "You're a good boy, are you not?" He could not forget this for the rest of his life.*

\* \* \*

● *To the heart of a youngster praise is like a ray of sunshine: if he does not receive it he will not be able to grow and flourish. Teach your boys to give it to others especially to their peers. Unfortunately instead of the warmth of praise they pass out the chill of criticism all too readily. I wonder why youngsters are stingy with praise! Maybe it is because they have come to realise that there are so few who know how to accept compliments gracefully. They note that usually those who receive praise seem embarrassed and get defensive and yet they enjoy it so much.*

- *Teach them to address praise indirectly.* Praises are appreciated more when they come in by the back door: through a letter or reported by a third person. Bitter observations come very quickly to the ears of a person and why is it that pleasant and flattering observations don't come with the same rapidity?

- *Insist that youngsters praise and especially appreciate those who do monotonous and inconspicuous work like gas station attendants, bus drivers, bartenders, house servants.* Teach them to praise, not so much those activities which are in themselves relatively easy and pleasant, but those jobs that are tiring and dirty, for example sweeping and swabbing floors. Praise is often the only reward that a self-sacrificing mother of a family receives.

- *Mothers instinctively know that when it comes to their children a bit of praise is worth more than heaps of scolding.* One day, a mother, in her impatience screamed at her children who were fighting among themselves: "Have you finished? Can you not play a bit quietly?" One of her daughters – the bright-spark among the children immediately quipped in reply: "Oh yes mom! But when we do that you will not even notice us." She then realized how exciting praise was for her children. Scholars note that a child tends to happily repeat an action that has been praised.

- *A word of praise costs very little, almost nothing, just a bit of reflection and a little act of charity:* maybe just a phone call to compliment someone or five minutes to write a kind letter with a few words of

praise. A great man of culture once said: “I feel I can go on for two whole months on just a word of praise or a compliment that I received.”

- *Teach youngsters to see goodness in the little things around them and to appreciate them.* Many people who are praised rejoice and store up large reserves of joy in their hearts.



## 20. Teach Him To Pray

*At the beginning of 1858 Don Bosco had to pay off a huge debt but he didn't have a penny in his pocket. The creditors were waiting and it was already the 20<sup>th</sup> of the month and they definitely had to be paid. In those straitened circumstances Don Bosco called some of his boys to him:*

*"I need a special grace today," he told them, "I am going out into the city and during the entire time that I am there, you should stay in the chapel and pray." The boys promised they would. Don Bosco went into the city. He had reached the church of the Mission Priests on Archbishop's street and a stranger walked up to him and after politely introducing himself handed him an envelope containing several thousand lire, a very large sum in those days. Don Bosco was amazed at the gift and hesitated to accept it:*

- Who is it that is offering me this money?*
- Take it, you will need it for your boys, insisted the unknown benefactor. He left without revealing the name of the donor.*

*That was always the case: whenever he needed something Don Bosco usually resorted to prayer and received all he needed. He told his boys: "The one who prays is like someone who approaches the king."*

What is prayer? It is defined as “a conversation with the Son of God, Jesus who lives in us; with the Father who is in heaven under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”

- *Make it clear to the youngsters that prayer is a deep yearning of the soul towards God.* It is something like the solicitude that a mother has for her sick child. She visits him frequently, she takes his temperature, then she comes down to the kitchen to wash up the dishes but all the time her mind is never detached from the bedside of her child.

- *In order to teach the boys to pray you must introduce them to Jesus Christ.* He is not someone who is dead, he is a living person. He is the Living One *par excellence*. To know Jesus one needs to read the Gospels. “This is eternal life, to know Jesus Christ,” said Jesus at the Last Supper. One of the greatest Russian writers had these words inscribed on his work table: “*It scares me to distance myself even for a few days from the Gospels.*” Fr. L. Grandmaison urged: “Study tirelessly, research and scrutinize for yourself and for others, the unsearchable riches of Jesus in the Gospels. Hold on to them stubbornly until you know them by heart. Better still absorb them till they become part of you.”

- *You should teach youngsters to find the right time to pray everyday.* Someone said, “But I don’t have time to pray.” How is it you don’t have time? The 24 hours of the day can be divided into 96 quarters of an hour. Between 32 and 36 quarters are spent in

sleep, 36 to 40 quarters are spent in work, 4 or 5 quarters go in doing other chores, 6 or 8 quarters go in having your meals. Just one quarter of an hour given to God in prayer to would fill your life with joy and sunshine throughout the day.

- *Make youngsters realise that what happens in prayer is exactly like what happens during a race.* The one who makes a great start runs well. The first moments, at the beginning of the day, the early morning hours, are the most valuable. You should give it a try. Don't let your worries and the thoughts that dampen your spirits cast a shadow on all your other duties.

- *Don Bosco explained to his boys that God was within them.* It is there that he gives us an appointment and he awaits us during the day just as he does in church. God within us is not a silent God: he speaks to us. But you have to be silent in order to listen. Prayer consists in thinking of God, in talking gently, in surrendering to him, so that we may be a blessing to all those we meet in the course of the day.

Don Bosco told his teachers: *“The one who is ashamed to encourage youngsters to be pious is unworthy of being a teacher.”* And again: *“When youngsters begin to love prayer, we educators have fulfilled one of our most important obligations. The time we spend teaching youngsters to pray is time well spent, because we spend so much time teaching and entertaining them.”*

## 21. Teach Them To Pray The Rosary

*After evening prayers on August 20, 1862 Don Bosco addressed his boys at the 'goodnight,' "I had a dream," and the boys immediately strained their ears to listen to him.*

*"I dreamt that I was at my brother's home at Castelnuovo d'Asti with all my boys. While they were at play, a total stranger came up to me and asked me to go with him. He took me to a meadow alongside the playground and pointed to a huge, ugly snake. It was coiled in the grass. Frightened, I wanted to run off, but the stranger held me back. "Get closer and take a good look" he said.*

*"What?" I gasped. "Don't you realise that the monster could spring on me and gobble me up in no time?"*

*"Don't be afraid! Nothing of the sort will happen. Just come with me."*

*And he went to fetch a rope. "Take this end," he said on his return, "and grip it tightly with both hands. I'll hold the other, and we'll let it dangle over the snake. Then we'll snap it across its back."*

*He went around to the other side of the monster. We stretched the rope and then snapped it across the snake's back. The monster immediately sprang up and struck at the rope, but, as it did so, it ensnared itself as in a noose. "Hold on!" the stranger shouted. "Don't let go!" He ran to a nearby pear tree and tied*

his end of the rope to it. Then he came to me and tied my end to the iron grating of a window of the nearby house. The snake kept furiously struggling to free itself, writhing, thrashing, and flailing about. In its fury it tore itself to pieces, scattering its flesh over the area till it was slashed to a mere skeleton. The boys by now were all around us.

The stranger then untied the rope and coiled it up. "Now watch very carefully!" he said as he put it into a box and closed it. Within a few moments he opened the box. We looked in and were astounded to see the rope shaped into the words Ave Maria. "The snake" the man said, "is a symbol of the devil, whereas the rope stands for the Rosary, a succession of Hail Marys with which we can strike, conquer and destroy all of hell's demons."

\* \* \*

In educating his youngsters Don Bosco emphasised the importance of the Rosary. He did this for four reasons:

- First: *because the Rosary is the epitome of the Gospel.* Meditating on the mysteries of the Rosary brings before our eyes incidents and key words of Jesus and Mary through the joyful, sorrowful, glorious and luminous mysteries.

- Second: *because the Rosary is the prayer that most pleases the Madonna.* In her apparitions at Lourdes and Fatima the Madonna invited the children to pray the Rosary. The Rosary is a prayer that is extremely simple, easy, straightforward and candid and can be prayed by anyone.

They say it is called "The Breviary of the Laity."

At Fatima Lucia asked the Madonna:

- Where do you come from?
- I come from Heaven.
- Have you come from Heaven?...And will I go to Heaven one day?
- Yes, you will, one day.
- And Francisco? She asked, pointing to her little cousin.

The Madonna smiled at the children and then she replied:

-Yes, he too will come but first he should pray many Rosaries.

Lucia recounted later: “The Madonna was brilliant, more brilliant than the rays of the sun and from her hand hung a Rosary.”

- *Third: because the Rosary is not a string of boring repetitions.* A mother never tires of stroking her child and expressing her love for her. Repetition is a law of love. Love is never monotonous in its uniformity of expression... Experts believe that the vocation of maternal love consists in remaining always around her child. “*If you wish to be my devoted children,*” said the Madonna to the boys (Don Bosco mentioned in a dream) – “*I will be a devoted mother to them.*” Of them Jesus said: “Father, these are those you have given me, and I give them back to you. They are yours and you gave them to me.” But from the cross Jesus gave us his Mother: “Woman, this is your son.”

- *Fourth: because the Rosary draws the maternal love of the Virgin to those who recite it.* Maternal love helps children to grow and develop. Pediatricians noticed this curious phenomenon: “Children who lack

maternal affection, even if they are well cared for, develop more slowly, grow less content and are less social. They are more easily susceptible to die than those who grow up in the care and protection of their mothers.”

Don Bosco sensed this and for this reason he never tired of recommending that his youngsters pray the Rosary.

## 22. Teach Them To Pray For the Dead

*On June 25<sup>th</sup> 1867 Don Bosco narrated this dream to his boys: When I went to bed last night I could not fall asleep directly, and so I began thinking about the soul and its mode of existence after death. Then I went to sleep. I suddenly heard someone calling me. "Come with me and your wish will be fulfilled."*

*We moved through space at the speed of thought and we got to a place totally unknown to me. High above us stood a magnificent palace. He disappeared. Left to myself, I went in, walked along a portico, went up a stairway and entered a truly regal apartment. Finally I came to a door at the end of a corridor that opened into another hall even more magnificent than all the others. At the far end, a bishop sat majestically in an imposing armchair, apparently awaiting somebody. I approached respectfully and was extremely surprised to recognize him as a dear friend of mine – Bishop...of .... (Don Bosco mentioned his name) who died two years ago. He looked healthy and friendly and indescribably handsome.*

*Then we began a conversation. The bishop told me that he had been saved but had not yet seen the Lord and so he was in need of prayers. Don Bocso went on: - Your Excellency, how long have you to wait to go to heaven?*



*He said nothing but handed me a sheet adorned with flowers blue, red, green and violet but without anything written there. I looked at the bishop amazed.*

*- Look at the top of the paper, he told me. There on the top was the number 2.*

*- Look – continued the bishop - - the judgements of God are different from those in this world.*

*- Give me some good advice that I might take to my boys. The bishop replied:*

*- Tell them that they should save their souls, the rest isn't important. And in order to save their souls it is important for them to be good, obedient and pure. They should make good and frequent Confessions and receive Communion often. Recommend to them to avoid getting misled by the false attractions of this world: all is vanity and bitterness. Tell them to cultivate purity. It is a virtue that shines in heaven. They need to cultivate prayer, obedience, shun idleness and sluggishness.*

*I bid him goodbye and hastened home so as not to lose a crumb of that beautiful advice. It then occurred to me that I should have asked the bishop to elaborate on what he had told me. So I returned. When I saw him he was in a pitiable state, he was suffering and in pain. He said:*

*- What can I do to alleviate your sufferings, your Excellency?*

*- Please pray!*

*Then a strange force pulled him out of my sight to an inner part of the palace.”*

*In the total silence Don Bosco continued: “As you see, my dear boys, this is a dream like many others. What concerns you needs no explanation. It has taught*

me a lot about the souls and purgatory and I that should pray for them.”

\* \* \*

It is a wonderful act of charity to pray for the deceased. Boys must be taught to remember those who have died.

“Are they close to us?” a youngster asked his mother who was speaking about those members of her family who had died. “Yes,” replied the mother, “even if no words come from their lips, although the sweetness of their affection may no longer touch our hearts, they are quietly near us.”

- Teach the boys to recite the prayer for the deceased: “*Eternal rest...*” when they pass a cemetery or when a funeral cortege passes them by. When someone prays: “*Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them*” they reciprocate your charity when they enjoy the peace of eternity saying to the Lord: “Lord, give him the love with which you love us like never before as he struggles through life and grant him eternal rest as you let the perpetual light which you shed on us shine upon him too.”
- Let them know that the fire of Purgatory is a fire which is a prelude to joy, while the fire of Hell is a fire of torments. Love that is God always surrounds us and we by our lives are transformed either into fire or into light. God is the ray, and our souls are specks on that ray.
- It is very helpful to celebrate Mass or to attend Mass and receive Holy Communion in suffrage for the dead and to pray for their souls. There are people

who during their life often prayed for the souls in Purgatory. You would have noticed a kind of radiating happiness that surrounds them. It is like the aura that surrounded Don Bosco. The separation of death and separation that distinguishes Heaven from Purgatory are separations in degrees of love. Teaching youngsters to pray for the dead is educating them to a refined sense of charity.

## 23. Teach Them To Love The Pope

*On the evening of May 13, 1887 Don Bosco had an audience with Pope Leo XIII. The Pope gave him a festive welcome. He asked Bishop Della Volpe to bring a small armchair nearer. Since the prelate had put it at some distance from the Pope, the Holy Father himself pulled it nearer to him and bade Don Bosco sit, pressing his hand affectionately:*

*- Oh! Dear Don Bosco, how are you...How are you?*

*Then after a brief pause he went on:*

*- Dear Don Bosco, perhaps you feel cold, do you not?*

*So saying, he went to fetch a large fur, and returned with it saying in a tone of friendly intimacy: Do you see this lovely ermine fur that was given to me today for my priestly jubilee? I want you to be the first one to use it – and he put it across Don Bosco's knees. Then, sitting once more, he again took his hand and politely asked for news about himself.*

*Don Bosco was deeply touched by this gesture of fatherly kindness and he replied:*

*- I am old, Holy Father. I am seventy-two years old. This is my last trip, the conclusion of all my undertakings.*

*That last meeting that Don Bosco had with the Pope was a touching conclusion to a life spent educating youngsters to love the Pope and the Church. When Pope Pius IX was supposed to go into exile at Gaeta,*

*Don Bosco wrote him a touching letter and offered him some money that had been collected at the cost of the personal sacrifice of each of his little urchins. That gift brought tears to the eyes of the Pope. Don Bosco was wont to say to everyone without blushing and without fear, even with some pride:*

*“I am with the Pope, and with the Pope I intend to remain a good Catholic till I die.” That teaching he instilled into all his youngsters.*

*From the time he was a child, the late Cardinal August Hlond, primate of Poland, a Salesian, was so fascinated with the person of the Holy Father that his last words before dying were these: “I have always been faithful to the Church; I have always obeyed the Pope, because I saw him as the Vicar of Christ on earth” And with his last breath he whispered to his secretary Fr. Baraniak, who later went on to become the archbishop of Poznan: “Tell the Holy Father that I was always faithful.”*

\* \* \*

*Like Don Bosco, we should educate youngsters to love the Pope because the Pope is the “sweet Christ on earth.” Our Founder, admitted to the secular liberals of his time, that he had “the art of falling in love with the Papacy more than with a thousand clerical teachers, journalists and the so-called Catholics with their excesses.” The illustrious Pius XI, recalling his personal meeting with Don Bosco, said “to have been able to read into his heart one would see that he being a faithful servant of Jesus Christ, of his Church and of his Vicar was above each and every other glory.”*

In 1867, on the occasion of the eighteenth centenary of the martyrdom of St. Peter, he republished the life of the Prince of the Apostles, and he wrote in the preface: *“Beginning with the reigning Pius IX, we go from one pope to another right back to St. Peter, up to Jesus Christ. So, the one who is united to the Pope is united to Jesus Christ, and the one who disrupts this link is shipwrecked on a stormy sea of error and is lost forever.”*

*Like Don Bosco we should teach youngsters to love the Pope, because the Pope is the infallible guide.* Man is very much in need of a trustworthy guide, otherwise he will not find the path that leads to God. The infallible Church has been to us given as a mother and guide. She proceeds like a ship on the sea. When it comes to the doctrine of salvation, the Pope, who is at the helm of this ship, is infallible.

In a dream, Don Bosco saw in command of the flagship of the Church, the Roman Pontiff who was leading the fleet in the midst of the onslaught of the enemy. She was victorious. The flagship went and anchored itself between two towering granite columns that stood in the midst of the sea. Atop one of these was the statue of the Immaculate and at its base you could read the Latin inscription: *“Help of Christians.”* On top of the other column, taller and broader, shone a Host, and below it you could read the Latin words: *“Salvation of believers.”*

This explains why Don Bosco frequently repeated to his children and his Salesians: *“Let us love the Roman Pontiffs and make no distinction of time and place in which they speak; when they give us advice, and more so when they express a desire, this for us is a command.”*

## 24. Show Them How to Live with Enthusiasm

*The Madonna often visited Don Bosco in his dreams and he recounted them to his boys to enthuse them during those first difficult years of his youth apostolate when he did not yet have a permanent place to gather his boys and he had to uproot them and move them from one place to another.*

*“Don’t be afraid, my dear sons,” he said; “a beautiful building is being built for you; we will soon take possession of it. We will have a beautiful church, a big and spacious house, huge playgrounds and countless youngsters will come to have a good time, to pray and to work here.”*

*The boys believed him and they loved him all the more. Many years later, when he was asked for his recipe for attracting youngsters, he recalled those first beautiful but difficult years with expressions that could be synthesized thus: cheerfulness, expansion and enthusiasm.*

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- The pagan philosopher Plato said: “Youth should live in a climate of enthusiasm.” Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is a magic virtue: it stimulates action, banishes discouragement and discomfort and conquers laziness.

- *Enthusiasm is communicative:* The boys sensed it when they heard Don Bosco speak of Paradise or the Madonna. He spoke in such incandescent terms that his enthusiasm was contagious. Enthusiasm is the condition that makes one excited about something and really passionate about it. When speaking enthusiastically to youngsters about a certain topic you can be certain that sparks will begin to fly.

- *To live enthusiastically you must plunge headlong into whatever you are doing.* They should feel that they are there...in the present. Boys instinctively live immersed in the present. As they grow up they lose this magnificent legacy. We must re-educate them to this. Schopenhauer, that philosopher of pessimism, used to say that most men lose their enthusiasm because they are “lumberjacks.” And he explained, “they become men when they succeed in becoming lumberjacks. When they pass through a beautiful forest they think: “How much will I earn from this tree? How many cubic meters of wood will it provide? Last year I gained so much: this year I must make more.” They are always living in the past or by the fruit of their labour, never in the present.”

- A modern educator once said: *“Enthusiasm needs to be continuously stoked.”* And what is it that stirs up a youngster’s enthusiasm? - The divine life of grace. A boy who lives in the grace of God is always cheerful and enthusiastic. A boy who does not have the grace of God is sad and unhappy. “Those who live enthusiastically, live at the dawn of eternity.”



• *Rich unexplored sources of energy exist in each of us.* From time to time you must get in touch with this mysterious reserve: and then you will feel springbursts of confidence, kindness and creative strength. Then abruptly the circuit is interrupted and you feel drawn to indolence and laziness. You should keep your circuit of enthusiasm open. Enthusiastic youngsters are very lively, filled with enthusiasm, dynamic and more lively than others. They rarely feel tired, they are never discouraged and what is their secret? It comes from a soul that is filled with grace.

## 25. Teach Them The Meaning of Fealty

*In 1886 Don Bosco received a letter from the rector of the major seminary of Montpellier in France: he pleaded with Don Bosco to tell him the secret of his pedagogy. It was already the second time that the superior of the seminary was writing to Don Bosco. Replying to him the first time Don Bosco had written: "I receive from my boys whatever I want, thanks to the fear of God that infuses their hearts." His correspondent immediately replied by post: "The fear of God is nothing else but the beginning of wisdom. Now, in order to complete this work of education what must be done after this beginning? Don Bosco, please give me the key to your system of education so I that may take advantage of it and benefit my young seminarians."*

*"My system! My system!" exclaimed Don Bosco in concluding his letter. "But you did not even know me! I have always gone ahead as the Lord inspired me and as circumstances demanded." And after a little pause for reflection he added: "strive to love in order to be loved."*

\* \* \*

Several sociologists have come to the conclusion that our generation has lost the sense of respect and parents are the first victims of this deficiency. Youngsters are more willing to accept their fathers

as playmates than as fathers, stripped of their prerogatives and their authority, they are seen as distanced and detached from their children in the same measure that they believe that they (fathers) have abolished those distances.

This current generation has been called “a generation of orphans.” It is true that the world is rapidly changing but the basic relationships that bind children to their parents are excluded from this transformation. Their manner can change but not their nature.

- *Fealty consists in respect and dependence.* Fealty is the humble acceptance of dependence. In infancy this dependence is total. It gradually decreases as the child is trained to freedom and responsibility but it never disappears. It is spiritualized and revealed in manifold forms of gratitude.

- *Instill in youngsters an appreciation for their parents.* A youngster will never forget the time when dad and mom were everything to him, when his father’s powerful hand was his only support. The child will never be able to imagine to what extent he was the centre of the thoughts and efforts of his parents. “Don’t you work for your own children?” parents declare unanimously.

- *A youngster should be taught that when his parents reach old age and death he will then be invested with his full dignity as a son.* This dignity often demands heavy obligations. They gently fade away and the faces he once admired gradually disintegrate. He needs a filial delicacy to always be alert to curb the

slightest gesture of anger, a harsh or cutting remark, any hint of nervous irritability that could hurt his aging parent due to his/her own powerlessness and uselessness or his/her physical incapacity. The son's duty becomes so overwhelming and heroic that God has made it the object of a specific commandment, "Honour your father and your mother." These painful times of old age are a long trial for children but what a way to understand the meaning of fealty! A son who cares for an aging father/mother fading away, becomes a father/mother to his father/mother.

- *To educate a youngster to a sense of fealty needs a father who guides without forcing; knowing to command without controlling; permitting freedom in an atmosphere of indulgent authority.* Especially at this critical age of adolescence, parents need a lot of understanding, respect and sweet severity! Getting a child to admit to the messy and poorly-controlled impulses of adolescence is a result of trust and gratitude towards an adult. The son then goes back from his father to God, *"from whom every family in heaven and earth has been named."* The sense of fealty naturally flows from a sense of the spiritual. That's exactly the educational system of Don Bosco.

"We sow and then, imitating the farmer, we wait patiently for harvest time."  
(Don Bosco)

## 26. *Invite Them To Be Attentive*

*On May 10, 1968 the last former pupil of Don Bosco passed away. His name was Chiuminatti. He died at the enviable age of 93. He never forgot Don Bosco, why? He saw in Don Bosco a priest who was attentive and understanding towards him as a youngster. From then on he always held Don Bosco with immense gratitude. During his first days at the school of Valdocco a heavy pall of gloom hung over his soul and clung to him like a fine mist that left him constantly depressed. Don Bosco, who possessed a high degree of sensitivity possessed to the highest degree the sweet virtue of attentiveness, saw it and approached him during recreation and asked him his name, his place of origin and his family. He suddenly asked him:*

*- Why do you have those tears in your eyes?*

*And the boy just as frankly, aware that this was a person who could comfort his soul and brighten his day replied:*

*- Why? because I don't know anyone.*

*- Tell me, what can I give you?*

*- A ball.*

*The next day Chiuminatti had a ball, a gift from Don Bosco. All his sadness vanished; he made friends; joined a team among his companions and after much*

*training and long workouts his team managed to beat the best team.*

What should you do to help those who are in difficulty? That's the art of being attentive. It is said: "*Being attentive is like being a genius: it is the flower of charity.*"

Tell youngsters that every person has within him the desire to attract the attention of others. This is the cause of many unbearable psychical sufferings. Every person in his own way, from time to time sends out perceptible alarm signals, almost like a cry of despair: "*I need your attention.*"

*How do you teach youngsters the sweet virtue of attentiveness?* Attentiveness is one of the main manifestations of respect and love that we owe to our neighbor. It is like praying for others. Being attentive towards someone is like judging him worth stopping for, just to heal his soul, even if it is only for an instant. You could say that it means entering into communion with a neighbour and giving him the assurance that his existence is worthwhile. Everyone feels lifted on a pedestal when he sees that he is carefully handled.

Here are three points to teach youngsters the virtue of attentiveness:

- *Teach boys to overcome their own selfishness.* He instinctively turns his attention to himself. The self who is the centre of all attention must give up the role of being the protagonist. He must pull himself to the sidelines. It is a fact that the ability to discount oneself for the sake of the others exists in people who are balanced rather in those who are the insecure.

- *Teach boys to be patient.* To give others one's attention means knowing how to wait. Patience is the extension of love. Those who are impatient are never attentive towards others; he finds it difficult to understand the struggles that others find themselves in.

- *Teach youngsters to show a sincere interest.* It is useless to give your attention or be attentive to another person unless you are willing to share his/her problem. You must show a sincere interest in the other and he should sense this or it is ineffective.

The most marvelous thing is that just one unhappy or distressed person who feels that someone is interested in him/her, generally turns around and begins to be interested in others. It's like a chain reaction. *Love begets love: behold the most stupendous prodigality of being attentive.* So you understand why being attentive is like being a genius. A genius creates.

"Don't wrench out your weaknesses, rather try to correct them."  
*(Don Bosco)*

## 27. A Secret to Teach Youngsters

*One evening Don Bosco told his boys: "If Dominic Savio, who's been dead now some ten years, comes here to the Oratory and sees so few daily Communions, he will certainly say: "In my time we were only 150 and I can say, everyone of us went to daily Communion with the exception of a very few. It was such a good feeling in church." And now? It seems so bad! There are over 800 boys and only a hundred go to Communion every day! Courage, my dear boys: let's see how Christian you are." Those words of Don Bosco saddened the boys but at the same time it was a stimulus to encourage their religious convictions.*

*Some evenings later, in the "goodnight" Don Bosco said this: "One of you will go to Paradise very soon, perhaps in the first half of June. Let us pray for him..." Then he passed on to another subject and said: "These days there are two great celebrations in the world: one in Paris and the other is the Centenary of St Peter's: One an exhibition to showcase the greatest inventions developed by man and the other presents an eternal and incorruptible religion. How small the achievements of man seem before those that are spiritual! They are just like a breath that is exhaled. Courage my dear boys, fervently take up the supernatural path. It is very beautiful and very rewarding."*



Don Bosco offered his boys great ideals and encouraged them *to practice the courage of the Faith “that overcomes the world.”*

- *There are two types of courage.* The first is spontaneous; it is a kind of concerned instinct in the face of some sudden crisis. The second is constant and has the capacity to resist failure and repeated defeats; boxers call it “the agonistic spirit.” It is that power that throws you back on your feet every time you hit the ground. Youngsters need a lot of this kind of courage as they venture out into the world. Repeated attempts are only signposts on the road to success. Having made a mistake, they bounce back, taking another courageous step towards complete success.

- A timid amateur was breeding butterflies as a hobby. He was so moved by the great effort that those creatures made to get out of the cocoon that he erroneously, out of a sense of goodness, tore open a cocoon with his finger nail so that the little prisoner could get out without difficulty. But the butterfly could not use its wings! That is how many parents treat their children. They want to save them the effort they need to have courage in the face of difficulty. In so doing they make them unfit for any kind of sacrifice.

*Everytime a youngster faces difficulty and succeeds, he is reinforcing his wings. Each time he decides to act with new resolve he is armed with new courage.*

Giuseppe Verdi said that being a “genius is a long exercise in perseverance.” You cannot blame him. Don Bosco frequently inculcated in his boys *the courage in an effort to persevere.*

## 28. Do You Pray For Your Boys?

*It was hot, unbearably hot. A boy who lived with Don Bosco in Turin had gone to visit some of his relatives on the outskirts of the city, in the countryside. On that sweltering afternoon he lay down in the shade. While lying under the tree, watching the tiny quivering insects in the grass he fell asleep. Suddenly he was woken up by a rumbling sound that seemed like thunder. He jumped up with a start. It was not threatening to rain and there was not even a threat of rain. He noticed suddenly that it was the devil who through some mischievous people was trying to trap him and rob him of his virtue.*

*He was terrified and he screamed: Let me go. And he fled.*

*Some hours later he returned to the Oratory in Turin but he could not explain that odd rumble of thunder that had awakened him so suddenly. In the meantime, Don Bosco, who had been absent all morning returned home that evening. He immediately asked for that boy. The Saint looked impatient and waiting for an answer which astonished him. The boy was brought. Don Bosco saw him and brightened up. He gazed at the lad with tender penetrating eyes and he sighed deeply.*

*- I'm so happy to see you. It's so good!*

*- Oh, Don Bosco, if you knew what happened to me this afternoon! ...*

- *I know everything* - interjected Don Bosco - *I know everything and I prayed so much for you.*

He said this in such a tone of voice and with such an assurance that the boy immediately knew the source of that mysterious thunder.

\* \* \*

● Don Bosco said: *“We always need sufficient time to talk to the Lord about each of the youngsters entrusted to us,”* that is, to pray for them. It is the best way to get to know them and to help them. For how long should you pray? Each day, you should spend at least a few seconds for each of them.

It’s so tragic if you cannot find the time to pray for your own youngsters, for the boys entrusted to your care. If you cannot find the time to pray for them, to meditate on them in order to better understand them, you will end up glossing over their problems.

● Don Bosco wrote: *“Education is a matter of the heart and God alone is the master. You will not succeed in anything unless God teaches you the art and hands you the keys.”*

To that youngster on that hot summer afternoon who was exposed to moral danger, Don Bosco said some wise and comforting words that parents and educators should be able to say to their children every day: *“I have prayed so much for you.”*

## 29. Don't Miss the Occasion

*June 23, 1866, was the vigil of the feast of Don Bosco and the rector of the Salesian College of Lanzo, Fr Lemoyne had come to Turin with a youngster to wish Don Bosco. He recalls: "The sun was warm. A fresh breeze ruffled the leaves of the trees. I went up to Don Bosco's room and remained with him alone for two whole hours. All the windows of the Oratory were aglow with coloured lights. The band was playing. Don Bosco and I approached the window. An ineffable joy filled my heart. Don Bosco was smiling and I said to him:*

*"Ah, Don Bosco, what a beautiful evening, do you remember the dreams of those years past? Here are the boys and the priests that Our Lady had promised!"*

*"How good the Lord is!"replied Don Bosco.*

*They talked about various things; but before leaving Don Bosco expressed to Fr Lemoyne his intention to write a letter of thanks to the boys of Lanzo for their greetings. The Saint understood the importance of such an occasion to win over the hearts of the youngsters. In fact he wrote them a wonderful letter: To my dear boys of Lanzo. My dear boys, you cannot imagine what joy I experienced at the visit of your rector Fr Lemoyne and your representative Chiriglione, my good friend. This joy grew even more when I was able to read the beautiful and affectionate letters of various classes, from several boys, assistants and*

*teachers that were sent to me. I wanted to read them all without ever being interrupted frequently with tears of emotion. My dear boys, I am grateful. I hope to see you soon and we'll talk about many important things. The grace of the Lord Jesus be always with you and may the Holy Virgin help us all to make our way to heaven. Amen. I am, with much affection, your affectionate friend in the Lord. Fr. John Bosco."*

\* \* \*

Don Bosco knew the art of taking advantage of even small opportunities to speak to the hearts of youngsters.

He never missed any opportunity to strike up a conversation with the boys in a peaceful and supernatural dialogue.

Parents should do the same with their children. Many parents often give the excuse of a lack of time. Wrong! Having a dialogue with one's children is an irreplaceable means of education.

- For *mothers*, the many household chores can become an opportunity to have contact with one or other of their children thus promoting mutual confidence.
- A *father* can take advantage of a stroll in the company of his son to exchange some views and revive mutual understanding.
- If you wish, family meals can become moments of real human contact: Dads and moms can learn a lot while talking to their sons/daughters.

- The last moments of the day, that of the “good night” can be a time for serious conversations, individual or collective, a time to review the day, an opportunity for a more confidential conversation.

An engineer, who died heroically in the war as an officer on the Russian front, wrote in his notebook this question: *“Did I give my children the attention, the time and the words towards which they could aspire? By writing to them, guiding them, encouraging them and inspiring their little souls?”*

Parents have an obligation to educate the children that the Lord has entrusted to them. The family is the first Christian community: it is there that they first meet God.

“When a boy leaves his parents to obey his vocation, Jesus Christ takes his place in the family.” *(Don Bosco)*

### 30. Teach Them To Participate In the Mass

*Don Bosco was ordained a priest on Saturday, June 5, 1841 the eve of the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, at the age of 26 in the chapel of the Archbishop of Turin. The following day, with his professor and spiritual director Fr Cafasso, he celebrated his first Mass at the altar of the Guardian Angels in the Church of St Francis of Assisi. He had wanted it to be simple, recollected and quiet so he could thank God for having led him to this goal that he had dreamed of since his childhood. At the moment of the Consecration, when the priest concentrates on thanking God for his priesthood and his loved ones, (so he wrote in his memoirs) he pleaded with the Lord for the most coveted of all priestly graces "the efficacy of the word." He wrote: "It seemed to me" he wrote towards the end of his life, "my request had been granted." And since his ordination he had become an ardent proponent of the Kingdom of God and a fiery evangelist to the souls of youngsters.*

*Between the Elevation and Communion, when the bread and wine had already become the body and blood of Christ, the liturgy inserts a time for remembering the souls of the deceased. Here the young priest John Bosco paused for a long time remembering and recommending to the Lord his first and greatest benefactors who had already passed into eternity. During those moments Don Bosco saw,*

*in a sudden flash, the kind face of the beloved Father Calosso, his first Latin teacher, through whose generosity he might have been spared the hard road of begging for alms.*

*The following day Don Bosco celebrated his second Mass at the Shrine of the Consolata “to thank the Holy Virgin for the many graces he had received from her Son” so he wrote in his Memoirs.*

\* \* \*

At that first Mass Don Bosco had received a passion to teach youngsters the Word of God and the Sacrament of Love. The Gospel and the Eucharist are the two tables at which the Church daily offers to all the faithful the means to grow and mature in Christ. Don Bosco has always been accepted as the pioneer of this divine pedagogy and even today he could be its most ardent proponent.

- *You do not just assist at Mass, you participate in it.* The height of this participation is the reception of sacramental Communion: being united with the Victim that was sacrificed on the altar. And for Don Bosco Mass was truly celebrated with the reception of Holy Communion. Frequent Confession and the daily facility offered to youngsters to have access to various confessors were made available for the sole purpose of promoting Eucharistic Communion thereafter. That fact assured him of the supernatural basis of his entire educational method: *the grace of God.*

- *Today the New Liturgy with the proclamation and explanation of God’s Word can truly bring about total participation in the Mass. From heaven Don Bosco*



rejoices infinitely and earnestly wishes that parents and educators teach the following three things in his name:

1. To preserve or to bring people the grace of God is the primary and greatest reason for participation in Holy Mass through Holy Communion. It is even more valid today than yesterday's statement of the great Educator: "Frequent Confession, frequent Communion and daily Mass are the pillars which must support the edifice of education."

2. To prepare for the Mass, if possible, compile a leaflet with brief and simple explanations of the scriptural readings. This preparation should be done explicitly in the form of a dialogue between a parent or educator and the child. You will probably not go far wrong because that was the thinking of Don Bosco when he prepared the "*Catholic Readings*" which were meant to lead people, especially if they were youngsters, to feast at the table of the Word of God.

3. To follow closely and not to apply only to others, but to oneself, the proclamation of the Word of God in the Liturgy, that is the truest and most effective form of Spiritual Communion.



**III**  
**Because**  
**the World is Not**  
**a Lonely Planet**



## 31. Save Them From Gangs

*One evening in April 1847, Don Bosco was returning late at night after attending a sick call. In the vicinity of Via Dora Grossa, now via Garibaldi, on the corner of road near Valdocco he met a group of young revelers. When they saw the priest they came up to him and started making unkind jokes about him:*

- You priests are all misers.*
- Critical and intolerant...*
- Come on, let's try and see what this one's like.*

*Don Bosco slowed down to avoid meeting them but realizing that he would be late if he did that he quickened his pace and went on courageously. He greeted them, something the youngsters didn't expect:*

- Good evening, guys, how are you?*
- Not so good, Reverend, - replied the eldest.*
- We're thirsty and we have no money. Would you pay for a litre or for a pint?*
- Oh yeah, yeah, will you pay for a pint, Reverend? - they all shouted loudly. A pint! A pint! Or we won't let you go any further.*

*And they immediately surrounded him, preventing him from going any further.*

- Well, alright, - replied Don Bosco, calmly, - Of course. In fact, you're so many, I'll make it two litres. But I'll drink with you too.*

- You seem to be a good priest, Reverend! How good it would be if they were like you!

- Let's go then, to the Alps Hotel. It's close by.

- They all trouped up behind him and entered the hotel. He brought out two bottles when he saw that they were more cheerful and less rowdy than before. He said:

- Now, you've got to do me a favour.

- Say, say, Don Bosco, not just one favour but two or three...from now on we're friends.

- If you want to be my friends, you've got to do me a favour, a favour of not cursing anymore, of not taking the name of God and Jesus Christ as you've done tonight.

- Any reason why? – asked one of the young men rather boldly – why, Don Bosco? Blasphemy escapes our lips without our noticing it but from now on it will no longer be so. There will be a change. There'll be an end to that kind of language.

They all agreed.

- So, now we can go, - Don Bosco concluded, - You great guys should go home.

- But I don't have a home, - said one.

- Me neither, - another added and the others said the same.

Don Bosco sensed the dangers that those boys were exposed to and he immediately found a solution: "then, come with me" and he took them home with him where Mamma Margaret was anxiously waiting for him.

\* \* \*

- *Gangs have always existed.* Eight-year-olds already start organizing themselves into gangs. Three or four of them get together and make up a gang with a fanciful name. They set up targets that they never achieve, their leaders change everyday. They have their first inter-gang scraps. A gang is normal at some stage for a youngster to pass through since he needs a challenge.

- *At this critical age boys and girls organize themselves into gangs.* Their rules are inspired by what they see among adults but the majority of them act contrary to adult directives: they issue passes and formulate a code of honour. While the youngster is a boy he is “identified” as such, and he has to adjust to his parents wishes. As a teenager the youngster “identifies” himself with the gang and obeys it more than he does his parents and teachers. He feels secure in the gang and insecure when he’s not part of it.

- *The gang then becomes a social problem:* Youngsters tend to want to use the gang to attack adults in order to make their way through the jungle of a society that condemns and rejects them. A psychiatrist who conducted a research on a large number of gangs that end up committing crimes has found that in almost all cases they have identical causes: parents have been disinterested or indifferent to them. They are often youngsters from broken families, or orphans. In short, they are the castaways of life who will sooner or later come into conflict with society or the law.

- *In a gang a boy feels less guilty when all his companions are like him.* Crime and vice often begin when the young initiate is subjected to a test of courage to which he submits himself. The youngster must prove that he isn't afraid to defy the law or the adults in his life. That is why he provokes the police, commits robberies, jaywalks the streets or finds himself behind the wheel of a stolen car.

- *How does one help youngsters during this crisis of adolescence?* You need to do what Don Bosco did: confront the youngsters in the street, at local haunts where they gather; win them over; become their intermediary with the adult world of which they are suspicious. Let them see you are always available to young people so they can confide their concerns to you. Know when to disappear when they are uncomfortable with your presence. Treat them with respect, as real persons.

- *Our society wastes too much time psychoanalyzing a youngster who gets violent.* It takes very little to help these youngsters. You should lend a helping hand to assist these young misfits. Their punishment, if there must be some, should never consist in reprisals, but in a recovery programme that consists of some kind of training and education. You must, like Don Bosco, “take them home with him.”

“For companions to be bad means: 1) they try to talk about dishonest things or things contrary to the virtue of modesty; 2) they speak contemptuously about religion; 3) they incite you shirk your duties.”

(Don Bosco)



## 32. *How to Handle Bad Companions*

*One morning a 12 year-old boy came to Don Bosco's room without even knocking at the door. He simply entered the room and very seriously said to Don Bosco: "Don Bosco! Write!" And Don Bosco, who knew the boy (a little angel of candor), picked up his pen and began to write down what was being dictated. The boy dictated a list of names and surnames of a group of youngsters who were instrumental in introducing into the Oratory the devilish practice of Freemasonry to corrupt his boys and to recruit them to join Masonic youth movements. They had special identity cards and a very astute work programme. In fact, they were organizing the devil's fifth column.*

*The boy revealed to Don Bosco in all detail the plans of the corrrputer. Don Bosco was sensitive to the danger of "bad apples" (as he called them) that would ruin so many good apples. With this evidence in hand he began his investigation. Within a few hours he rounded up all the boys who in their naiveté had made friends with these insidious boys and had walked away from the Oratory. But he wanted to know from a young twelve year-old how he could find the clique. After much reluctance he was compelled answer that for several days the Lord made him see everything as in a mirror and that if he did not tell Don Bosco*

*everything that morning he would be severely rebuked by Jesus after Communion.*

*In addition to the usual human means, to break up bad friendships, he gave great importance to developing a climate of the sacramental life which prevented the formation of such friendships. The Eucharist in these cases acted as a litmus test: it brought out and identified the rot in the souls of his boys.*

\* \* \*

Parents and educators are often faced with the problem of bad companions among their children. Youngsters don't realize that they run the risk; in fact, they accuse their teachers or parents of not appreciating their friends. What should they do?

- *The teenager should be distanced, at least for a period of time, from his usual environment: a time of more serious study, a journey or deliberately prepared invitations from relatives or acquaintances are often good opportunities to sever these bad friendships. During such absences friendships like this grow weaker and often fade out completely. When the youngster is out of touch with this bad company he has time for reflection and for a beneficial maturation.*

- *And what if nothing changes? What if the teenager persists in these harmful friendships? That is when we should have recourse to prayer. From a human standpoint, the only rule is to keep affection and dialogue alive at all costs. Louisa, at 19, after several months of constant and grave differences with her*

parents, left home and moved in with a friend's parents, it seems with reasons they had never approved of. She left without a word to her father, a severe and demanding man, even harsh at times. Dialoguing with him had ceased for some time now. But she kept returning once a week, at a regular time, only to find her mother helping her to tidy up her clothes and speaking "of this and that." The candle still burned and that good mother never gave up. There was always hope.

● *Suppressing a 'bad' friendship is very difficult when it is not replaced with another friendship. It is not enough to convince a youngster to decide to make a clean break. He should also be helped to create better friendships, to trace out a new path.* Parents and educators need to intelligently direct the youngster to environments and company that is spiritually healthy. This is especially necessary during those times when youngsters get emotionally frustrated. It is then that you should take every opportunity to fill that emptiness by showing him that you love him. For this reason it is necessary for educators to always have their vigilant antennae up ready to capture all these pleas for help that mysteriously rise from the hearts of these youngsters. A great educator once said: *"You need to hear a cricket even in the din."*

"In friendship, it is experience, not the heart that teaches us."  
*(Don Bosco)*

### 33. Handling Rebellion

*Don Bosco narrates this incident: "One autumn evening I was returning from Sommariva and I had reached Carmagnola to wait for the train to Turin. It sounded the hour of seven by the station clock and it was cloudy, a dense fog descended and it had begun to rain. You could see a step in front of you. The screaming of a group of boys deafened the waiting passengers. They heard voices shouting: "Wait!" "Take it!" "Catch that!" "Stop him!" Among those cries one voice stood out. It was a dominating voice; it sounded like the voice of a general. I took advantage of the opportunity to find them gathered with their leader and with two quick steps I jumped into their midst. They all dispersed, frightened; only one of them stopped and defiantly and came forward to ask me: "Who are you, coming to disrupt our games?" "I'm a friend." We quickly became friends.*

*That provocative and rebellious boy was Michael Magone, he was fatherless and living on the street. Don Bosco welcomed him to Turin He was an explosive youngster, always getting into trouble. Don Bosco appointed a companion to stay beside him like a kind of guardian angel. This young rebel without realizing it, had a companion who most charitably and prudently accompanied him through classes, recreation, his studies and even while he cracked jokes. There was very little need of him to whisper to*

*Michael: "That's not the way to speak. That's a bad word, don't say it! Or "Don't take the name of God in vain." Michael would often grumble impatiently but finally in the face of such kindness he relented and had to admit: "Well done, you did the right thing by admonishing me. You're a great friend!" It took barely a few months for the young rebel to become a disciple of Dominic Savio. He had overcome that most stormy crisis of 'adolescence:' the crisis of rebellion.*

\* \* \*

- *For every boy, the crisis of entering adolescence needs so much planning and preparation because it could be very painful.* The youngster, who at first is open and affectionate and even docile, towards the ages of 8 to 10 years begins pre-adolescent and then the adolescent becomes irritable and crabby. Everything that he had earlier enjoyed now becomes obnoxious. He cannot accept the advice of anyone; he becomes rebellious. Any trifling observation becomes an opportunity for vehement opposition. Psychologists note that this opposition is generally more heated when the parent to whom it is directed to the one of a similar sex or his substitute (a professor, teacher or a priest).

- *It is better to ignore without reacting to a certain number of these adolescent outbursts.* Examining these outbursts more closely we realize that they are an adolescent's attempt to grope for a place in society. He cleverly directs his tirade at parents or teachers whom he sees as representatives of the authority exercised by his parents. This is the way he tests himself. This conflict is exhausting. In

exasperation parents exclaim: “They flare up for anything and everything and for nothing.” “It’s enough for me to say black and now he says, white!” “If I tell him to study first and do his homework, he begins to work carelessly!” “None of the clothes I buy for my daughter are good enough. She says they look like rags and so on. I buy something for my son and my daughter gets very upset and unhappy. But what does he really want?”

- *What attitude must I take with these rebellious tantrums? Just let them be?...let them scream?* Let your daughter choose her clothes and appreciate her own tastes which might not fit your tastes. Try and listen to her favourite singers without systemically criticizing them. Try to find out your kids’ “idols.” In short: sometimes you’ve got to accept and go along with their tastes with prudent and intelligent supervision, as Don Bosco did with the impatient Michael Magone.

- *There are times that it will be necessary to intervene,* for example, when it means maintaining a certain discipline in life. To blindly condemn everything can be dangerous. It is also dangerous to demand frankness all the time. This gradually becomes frustrating. The disgruntled youngster becomes more muted especially regarding the commanding authority of his parents. If you condemn and criticize everything, the teenager logically comes to the conclusion that you don't want him to grow. And that reaction will gradually become tremendous. Therefore, “much prayer and penance are essential,” says Don Bosco. The period of adolescence becomes a test both for parents and youngsters.

## 34. Tell It Like It Is

*I was not yet two years old when the merciful Lord hit us with a sad bereavement. My dearly loved father died unexpectedly. I do not know how I reacted on that sad occasion. One thing only do I remember, and it is my earliest memory. We were all going out from the room where he had died and I insisted on staying behind. My grieving mother addressed me, "Come, John, come with me." "If papa's not coming, I don't want to come," I answered.*

*"My poor son" my mother replied, "come with me; you no longer have a father." Having said this, she broke down and started crying as she took me by the hand and led me away. I began crying because she was crying. At that age I could not really understand what a tragedy had fallen on us in our father's death. But I always remember those words: "You have no father." I still remember what she did in the house at that time when Anthony was devastated with grief.*

\* \* \*

What a wonderful mother, Margaret was! She instinctively understood that she needed to prepare and teach her boys to face the difficulties and trials of life. We should teach our children that in life there will be both pain and joy. From the days of Adam and Eve, every generation has had to care for its sick and bury its dead.

Too often, parents and teachers expose their children only to the rosy side of life. Why then, are they surprised when their kids leave school only to realise that if they have to succeed they have to study hard and work hard? What would happen if an adult decides to resign because work is unexciting and dry, what if he discovers that in his marriage, the honeymoon is only a passing phase? He's feels that he's been deceived and unprepared with the necessary inner resources to be able to cope with these inevitable disappointments.

So here are five tips learned from life:

- *Tell it like it is.* Tell him that in addition to joy there is also pain. Let him understand that in addition to happiness there is also unhappiness. They are not to be influenced by the seasons: spring, summer, autumn or winter.

- *Take the time to teach them some of the travails of life but at the same time show them the spiritual resources that will sustain them.* “Beware – warns Manzoni – they come without fail.”

But God never disturbs the joy of his children except to prepare them for something more fulfilling and greater.” Everyone, at one time or another, has had to suffer the death of a loved one; yet there are times we are tempted to keep our youngster oblivious to the reality of death. Mamma Margaret did not do this to her son.

- *Give youngsters the strength and support to face these unpleasant events.* Be there yourself, as far as



possible, to support them with your understanding and affection, bringing them the Lord's reassurance. "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest," says Jesus.

- *Don't allow youngsters to escape pain or sadness.* A youngster's appointment with a dentist can be an unpleasant event or going to school when he hasn't done his homework. He may be tempted to escape it. Other occasions may be much more serious. A teenager avoided going to school hoping to avoid a bad grade. When his mother heard about this she said: "My son, this won't do. You will have to go and present yourself without making any excuse." The boy did not want to say anything to the teacher but his mother brought him back to school without relenting. Along the way, she explained that, although what he did wasn't right and though he had neglected his studies, he wasn't bad and the teacher would understand. When mother and son came up to the teacher, his mother walked behind her son with one arm on his shoulder while he stammered pitifully asking to be excused and apologised for everything.

- *Tell them the truth, especially when the truth is painful.* A father was soft and overly doting on his daughter. The day came when his business started going down but he hid this fact from her because he thought she would probably not understand. Because of this she continued to squander his money and demand a lavish wedding for which he had to borrow a lot of money and went into serious debt. Many years later, the woman said: "If my father had told me the truth, I would have been a better daughter and a

more understanding wife to my husband. Because, when my husband suggested that it was necessary to save some money, I was very angry and told him it was all his fault. If I had known how things really were I could have made life easier for my father and later for my husband.”

## 35. Tell Him: “We Can’t Afford It”

*One day Don Bosco was walking through the porticoes of the Oratory and on the window sill he noticed a piece of bread abandoned there. He picked it up and took it with him. He entered the refectory of the boys, it was a large hall, and he looked around, and saw with some dismay, several scraps and bits of bread being wasted. He picked them all up and gathered the crumbs too.*

*In the evening, as usual, before the boys went to sleep Don Bosco gave them the “goodnight” and he told them (and this is exactly taken from his biographical memoirs and notice that they sound like a serious warning): “My dear boys, Divine Providence looks after our needs and you will notice that it has never failed us. But if you waste the bread which the Lord provides, you are offending his goodness. We cannot allow this wastage of bread, we cannot afford it. I’m terribly afraid that if we continue in this manner the Lord will withdraw his hand from us and refuse to give us what we need.”*

*Immediately after this he cited the example from the Gospel of the multiplication of the loaves and how Jesus, after miraculously feeding the multitudes ordered his disciples to collect the leftovers so that nothing goes to waste. Don Bosco lived a frugal life and educated his boys to frugality.*

- “*We can’t afford this,*” is one of the most significant statements in any language. It helps us to distinguish unnecessary superficial desires from what is really necessary and irreplaceable. Parents and educators would do well to repeat this very often to their children. It will help them to avoid great disorders that may arise when they swim around in abundance and are comforted during the days of sad indigence when there is hunger and scarcity. A teacher often made this significant remark: “To avoid frugality you gorge on chicken for a whole week and then you are reduced to chewing its dry bones a week later.”

- *Frugality is like exercise it disciplines the body. Frugality does something more: it tempers the soul and builds character.* A writer narrates this curious incident: “The son of a poor farmer who was known to him, felt very humiliated because he could not maintain the comfortable lifestyle that his companions led, as some of them were from wealthy families. One evening he had the opportunity to overhear a conversation between his father and the father of his best friend who was civil servant. The gentleman was trying to convince the farmer to send his son to spend his holidays at a well-known and expensive resort town and he added: “You’ll see that our boys will have a blast. They’re two friends who love each other very much.”

“I can well understand that,” replied the farmer, “but we just can’t afford it.” There was silence. Then the civil servant held out his hand: “My dear sir, I cannot afford it, but I don’t have the courage to admit it.”

This conversation was recounted to me by the farmer's son much later and he added that he was never more proud of his father and that comment brought tears to my eyes. "At that moment my father looked to me like a giant," he said. That father's comment teaches us so much and several thoughts rise up in our minds. That son began to regard himself and his companions very candidly and without any pretence.

- *The inconveniences that frugality imposes on us, invigorates the soul and resizes our dreams.* They are an indispensable foundation to educate youngsters to a spirit of sacrifice and joy.

From the time he was a boy, Don Bosco lived a very frugal life. He was extremely poor but the peasant wisdom of Mamma Margaret made use of those uncomfortable conditions to inculcate in him a spirit of sacrifice and renunciation which prepared him to face sacrifices. Sometimes the mission entrusted to him by God demanded of him heroic sacrifices.

"One who is humble and affectionate will always be loved by everyone, God and men."

*(Don Bosco)*

## 36. Teach Them To be Present With Them

*As often as possible, Don Bosco was always with his youngsters, playing games with them in the playground, sitting on the grass with seven or eight youngsters around him listening carefully to what he had to say, like flowers looking up to the sun. "One of his first pupils, Canon Ballesio recalls: "I can still see the refectory, full of boys playing, singing and shouting. Some were standing around Don Bosco, others were leaning against the tables...all around Don Bosco. All you could see were a sea of heads around Don Bosco. Don Bosco did not ignore anyone. He had a word for one, a little caress for another, a smile for a third. They were all happy. Even while eating Don Bosco continued to fulfil his educative mission; being with youngsters was his irresistible passion."*

\* \* \*

To educate youngsters you need to be with them. A psychologist once wrote: "To educate youngsters is easy if you have the patience of a Carthusian, the nerves of an astronaut and very little sleep." A question may be asked: What do you think of adolescence? And the reply: "Adolescence is a very normal stage of development except for the parents of the adolescent." To understand and educate youngsters in Don Bosco's way you will need to be with them, to be present in their midst there, to be there!

The mystery of presence! To bring joy to someone by comforting him does not necessarily mean saying something. Besides, sometimes it would not even be possible. Simply being there ...present with all your sympathy and affection. A baby cries, it's afraid, and its mother comes in and immediately the tears turn into smiles. Unfortunately there are so many individuals who don't have anyone in their lives; they resemble the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda who said to Jesus: "I have no one to help into the pool when the time comes."

Teach young educators to be with youngsters least on special occasions, to cheer or comfort others.

On what occasions?

- *In moments of great joy*, for example, when a loved one has returned after a long absence. His presence only increases the joy of the new arrival.
- *In moments of great pain*, when the youngster will hardly think of it or out of timidity will restrain himself. He should be taught to be present there.
- *Visit the sick* who are normally very lonely. Youngsters should get into the habit of visiting the sick, especially their companions who are suffering or sick. Jesus divinely emphasized the importance of being present beside those who suffer. He promised his kingdom not only for a glass of water given in his name but also for visiting him when he was alone: "*I was a prisoner, I was sick and you visited me.*"

The easiest way to understand others and to be loved by them, is to be in their midst. It is like finding our soul in a corner of heaven.

Don Bosco knew this and so never tired of being with his boys.

## 37. Teach Them Humility

Count Charles Contestabile recalls: “One day I was visiting Don Bosco and I found him at his desk reading a piece of paper on which he had written some names.

- Look here - said Don Bosco - here are some of the scamps whose behaviour leaves much to be desired.

I really didn't know much of Don Bosco's educative methods. I asked him what punishment he would give the guilty ones.

- No punishment – he told me. But this is what I'll do. Look at this guy for example, (and he pointed to one of the names) this is the most mischievous rascal but he's got a good heart. During recreation, I'm going to find the time to ask him how he's getting on and doubtless, he'll tell me that he's in excellent health. “So, my boy, you're pleased with yourself, are you?” I'll say. He'll be a bit surprised and then he will lower his eyes and blush. Then with much love, I'll insist: “Come on, son, there's something wrong. If the body is healthy, perhaps it's the soul that is not, am I right? How long has it been since you made your Confession?” In a few minutes the lad will already find himself in the confessional, and then I'm pretty sure I'll never have to pull him up again.”

Count Charles Contestabile admitted that in those few words he found the secret of his education. Don Bosco taught his boys to be humble through that great sacrament of humility which was Confession.



Youngsters, like everyone else are in dire need of some humility. A real act of humility consists in abasing ourselves before God and before others in whom we see God too. Practically, this means recognizing our own inadequacy, smallness and poverty and after committing sin, recognizing our own miserable state.

- *Therefore teach youngsters to be humble, because humility enriches one, opens the heart and the mind to understand a lot. All of us start at the same level of poverty and ignorance. Even a genius recognizes the knowledge he gains from others. Mozart took the theme for his opera *The Magic Flute* overture from a sonata by Clementi. Bach was inspired by Corelli's music. A man's work is always the result of what others have done before him.*

- *Boys should be taught to be humble before any other person, ignorant or brilliant. Humility is never better demonstrated than through "a loving regard for someone who is not as clever, efficient or capable as ourselves."*

Each of us can always suggest or inspire something that is good and useful for another. Humility teaches us to take due account of a person's human potential, however modest the flame.

- *Youngsters should be taught that being humble means making themselves ready to be of service to others. Humility is, above all, service. A journalist recalls "I was struck by an influential politician who,*

after having had a snack with a group of people, simply got up and gathered up all the paper cups that were left around and threw them into the common garbage bin. He did this with great ease. “Humility does not go around asking what needs to be done, it instinctively does acts of service.

- *Teach youngsters that they shouldn't get discouraged very easily.* Humility always starts over again in spite of failure, slip ups or falls. Humility has the same function as the keel of a boat. It endures stability and balance. The faster the boat, the better balanced the keel. We need humility in proportion to our speed (our popularity, position or responsibility).

- *Educate youngsters that humility means 'rejoicing in the success of others.'* It is the only way to avoid being lead off course by envy, which comes to us so instinctively. The teammate who scores while we could not, may trigger envy within us. A little voice in us whispers: “Why don't you congratulate him?”

- *Let youngsters know that life is a long lesson in humility.* Humility is not an art that can be mastered in a fortnight. To be truly humble requires experience, and this in turn requires time. “*The one who is humble,*” Don Bosco used to say, “*is always loved by all: God and humankind.*”

## 38. Teach Them To Forgive

*One Sunday morning, Joseph Brosio, a youngster who loved Don Bosco immensely, realized that the Saint was not in the playground. Strange! He immediately went everywhere looking for him in every corner of the house. He searched and searched and finally found him in a room. Don Bosco looked sad, so sad that he was weeping.*

*“What’s happened, Don Bosco?” He asked, searching his sad face; but Don Bosco was silent shut down in pain.*

*The youngster was insistent because he wanted to know the reason for his sadness.*

*- One of our boys, - Don Bosco finally said – has outraged and reviled me. I for my part don’t care. What is worse is that he’s going down a slippery road and who knows where he’ll end up.*

*Brosio was touched to the quick. With a flash of anger he clenched his fists and assured Don Bosco that he would set things right. Don Bosco looked hard at him:*

*You want to avenge Don Bosco? You have every reason to do that on one condition. Do you think that revenge will settle everything? Will that make you happy?*

*- You’re right – Brosio said.*

*Then come with me – Don Bosco invited him to come to the church with him to pray for that insolent boy who had so hurt him.*

*Sometime later Brosio recalls – “I believe that at that moment Don Bosco was praying for me too because I felt I had literally changed. That outrage that I felt against my companion turned into forgiveness.”*

*Don Bosco used to give these bits of advice:*

*“Remember that to forgive means to forget forever.”*

*“If you expect a lot from your students, never display the hurt you have experienced from someone. Always forgive.”*

\* \* \*

There is something divine and miraculous in the way in which forgiveness can reconcile what seems absolutely irreconcilable.

- *Forgiveness is the apex of charity. If charity is a gift then forgiveness doubles that gift.* It is a grace that redeems. Modern psychology reveals that one’s ability to forgive and to accept forgiveness is the index of a well-balanced character.

- *It is inevitable in everyday life that some person or other, even unintentionally irritates us, it hurts our pride, we are taken advantage of or abused and people become inconsiderate or ungrateful. You can usually endure small injuries but when they are repeated or become a habit they arouse in us a blind desire to return evil for evil. Without the grace of forgiveness*

an offense generates another offense and revenge leads to mutual destruction. *We should prepare our youngsters to face these difficult and harsh experiences of life, teaching them that they must learn to forgive.* How many times should we forgive? Seven times? Jesus replied, “Seventy times seven,” which means infinitely.

- *In addition to being an act of charity, forgiveness brings with it two advantages: the joy of forgiving is no less than the joy of being forgiven.* You will experience one of the paradoxes of the human nature that was redeemed by Christ: which is that the more ready we are to forgive the less we are called upon to do so. *“Already at an early age train your children to forgive the slightest snub” – advises Fr Keller, the founder of the ‘Christophers’ - “You will need it very much as adults. I would like to see young people as they come up to the altar to exchange their marriage vows, to vow to forgive one another as they pledge to be faithful and love each other. Mutual forgiveness would save many marriages and make them happy.”*

- *Above all, the virtue of healing requires prayer.* Without prayer the memory of the offence causes immense hurt. It is prayer that takes away the sting and poison from the thoughts that linger. Every parent and every teacher should teach youngsters this secret. A wise educator makes this suggestion: *“You want to take revenge? Pray instead for the one who has wronged you. Simply pray a Hail Mary. It is like a little oil thrown on the troubled waters of anger. It will immediately bring calm to the soul.”*

“You want revenge, don’t you?” Don Bosco asked Joseph Brosio. You’re right, come with me.” And he led him to the church to pray.

“To forgive is to forget forever.” (*Don Bosco*)

## 39. Teach Them Gratitude

*It was June 24, 1877, the feast of St John the Baptist and the Oratory of Valdocco appeared all geared up to celebrate the name-feast of Don Bosco. At lunch, beside Don Bosco sat an Argentine bishop and a canon; as the toast was beginning a minstrel dressed in a medieval costume burst into the room and began singing the praises of Don Bosco and the bishop. Cheers rose up from the audience. The minstrel bowed in all directions; the Canon who was impressed with the performance, went up to him and handed him a penny. The minstrel thanked him and took the coin and skipped up to Don Bosco and handed it to him.*

*- But that was for you, said the Canon, - here take this one and hold on to it.*

*The minstrel took the coin and skipped back to Don Bosco and handed it to him.*

*- Why don't you keep it for yourself? - asked the Canon who was intrigued.*

*We all belong to Don Bosco - he said very candidly. We want to express to him our gratitude.*

*The minstrel was Charles Gastini. When he was still a youngster, all alone in the world, Don Bosco picked him up and brought him to the Oratory where he grew up to be a cheerful and contented youngster and gratitude spontaneously blossomed in his little heart. When he had grown up, Gastini recalled a phrase*

*Don Bosco used to use very often: “We deplore the ungrateful because they are unhappy.”*

\* \* \*

It takes so little to say thanks. Gratitude is one of the highest expressions of love. But it must be taught and instilled in the minds of youngsters.

- *Parents and educators should teach their children to express their gratitude verbally.* A word of gratitude well expressed produces in the one who hears it, a mysterious feeling of joy, happiness and elation.
- *Youngsters should be taught to say thanks with a look, a gesture or a smile.* It only takes a simple smile to express one’s gratitude.
- *Teach youngsters to reciprocate gratitude with prayer.* Praying for a person who has done something for us is a wonderful way to reciprocate that gesture. Whispering a prayer is like presenting the Lord a blank check on which he can affix his signature. He’ll sign it and then you can claim your gift.
- *Youngsters need to know that they can express their thanks through a letter, an email or a text message.* Sometimes expressing your gratitude verbally doesn’t seem to be sufficient. Put down on paper (or in a mail) those words you haven’t expressed verbally and which will touch the reader’s heart.
- *Teach youngsters to express their gratitude through a gift.* It is not just any gift, but a gift given with



affection. A famous novelist recalls: “The most precious gift we gave our mother or father on their birthdays was keeping quiet for the whole day. Dad, my sister and I did all the housework. We did everything, even washed the dishes. Mom finally exclaimed: “Thank you, you could not have given me a more beautiful gift than the one you have given me today.”

• *Let the youngsters learn to thank God in the morning and in the evening. God is Father, Lord and Creator. Louis Bromfield wrote this beautiful prayer of thanksgiving: “O Lord, I thank you for the gift of living in a world so full of beauty. I thank for the joy of music, children, thoughts, conversations with others, books that I can read by the fireside or in bed or while the rain beats down on the roof or snow batters at the windows outside. Thank you for the smile that brightens up a face, the touch of a friendly hand, the laughter of a child or the wag of a dog’s tail. I thank you for all these things and many more. But most of all I thank you for people, kindness and understanding that infinitely dominates envy, deception and intrigue.”*

Don Bosco (Charles Gastini recalls), often said: “We deplore the ungrateful because they are unhappy.”

## 40. Teach Them Concern For Others

*One day, near the Oratory at Valdocco Don Bosco came across a young man known to everyone as one of the leaders of a notorious gang. He smiled and greeted him. The young man was stunned to see that Don Bosco was interested in him and had greeted him with such kindness and enthusiasm. He reciprocated the greeting:*

*- Good Morning – he replied with a slight nod.*

*Don Bosco showed that he was even more interested in him and said:*

*- I'm so glad to have met you. Will you do me a favour?*

*- Gladly if I can.*

*- Of course you can: would you come and have lunch with me?*

*- Me? Lunch with Don Bosco?*

*- Yes, You, why not? Today! Only with me!*

*- But you're mistaken. You've taken me for someone else.*

*- No, no ... isn't your name George?*

*- Yes, sir.*

*- So come on.*

*- But don't inconvenience yourself because of me.*

*- Don't make excuses. It's decided. Come along.*

- *But I don't have the courage to come with you, with these dirty clothes and dirty hands.*

- *It's nothing, it doesn't matter.*

- *But perhaps, at home, my mom is waiting for me.*

- *Then let her know.*

*Before such sweet pressure, the young man was forced to yield to Don Bosco. He had lunch with Don Bosco. He returned very enthusiastic. Don Bosco had ignited a spiritual fire within him, infected him with his goodness. His life changed and he became a great lad.*

\* \* \*

● *Every youngster has within himself the wonderful ability to be interested in others.* This increases or decreases depending on his will. But the will must be educated. It is not always a spontaneous reaction. A Greek philosopher alluded to this when he said: "Before a man can move the world, he has to move himself." We should teach them to show an immediate interest for each of his brothers or the person who approaches him for any task that he needs help with.

● *One of the best ways to enhance the youngster's ability is to let him freely express what he feels.* Adults are always a bit inclined to restrain the feelings of youngsters. They might sternly say something like: "Learn to control yourself." "Don't get carried away by first impressions!" Yet often these occasions are indicators of their interests. Continuous repression or warnings can obliterate or suffocate their ability to open up to others.

• *Teach youngsters the art of knowing how to give to others, especially to those who are suffering or those who are in pain; especially showing concern for those who are most neglected or rejected or those left on the fringes of society.* The father of a family once narrated this: “I remember that once I found my daughter at sunset on the seashore. The tide was rising and the evening was quiet and warm. The water was rising and invading the dry sand very gradually. Suddenly my little girl said in a whisper: “Isn’t it beautiful, daddy, to see how the sea loves the land?”

The land was indifferent and so it simply waited, but not the sea, it came up. What a marvellous lesson!

We should teach youngsters, as Jesus says, “to be a neighbour to the other,” filling every day with a few little anonymous acts of goodness and love towards those around you or those you meet. wouldn’t that be nice?

“The Lord has put us in this world for the other.” (*Don Bosco*)

## 41. Teach Him to Be Neighbourly

- *How can I teach my dear boys to be cheerful and happy? – Asked Don Bosco of one of his former pupils whom he met in a dream and who acted as his guide.*

- *With charity.*

- *With charity? But aren't they loved enough?*

- *But they're missing the best part.*

- *What's that?*

- *That the boys are not only loved, but they must know that they are loved. If you love the things they love, they will learn to see love in those things that of course are strict, like the rules, discipline, studies, mortifying themselves and they will learn to love what pleases their educators. In this way the struggle for education will become easy.*

\* \* \*

This is a great rule: “If the teacher is the first to show by example that he is being “neighbourly” towards his pupils, the youngster will, in turn, learn to be “neighbourly” to his peers and others.

The lawyer asked Jesus: “Who is my neighbour?” And Jesus told him the story of the poor man who was abandoned for dead by bandits. “A Jewish priest passed by, a Levite too. Then came a Samaritan came up to him. Which of the three men in your opinion

became neighbour to the one who fell among the robbers?” Jesus asked.

Through this parable Jesus gives an exact meaning to the word “neighbour,” which we don’t reflect enough on. The lawyer asked: And who is my neighbour? And Jesus replied: “Become a neighbour to everyone,” that is, be the one who lovingly approaches, who bends down with kindness towards the miserable, those in pain, even if they look strange, or hostile, as did the Good Samaritan with the dying man. Be a neighbour to others by loving them. That’s how youngsters will learn this lesson.

- *Teach youngsters to be attentive to the needs of others*, to strive to meet their needs, not waiting for others to do something; be like Mary at the wedding at Cana with open eyes and attentive ears, not to satisfy our own insatiable curiosity, but to capture the anguish of the world, to find out how you can be useful without being overbearing and serving without suffocating.

- *Teach youngsters to have a deep respect and understanding for others*. But this inner attitude could be vanity and a sham if charity is not prompt and flourish in service rendered to others to benefit one’s brothers. Love is a state of mind, but a state of mind that has hands that serve.

- *“What does - attention to others - mean?”* Mark Twain was asked. And he replied with a humorous expression: “When I was 16 I did not particularly pay attention to my father, so I was convinced that my

father knew nothing. But when I became 22 I became attentive to my father and was amazed to discover how many things my father knew and had learnt in just six years.”

Birds push their young out of nests. We ought to push our youngsters out of the nests of their own selfishness, offering them opportunities to be “neighbours” to everyone.

## 42. Teach Them To Be Understanding

*On May 10, 1884 wrote a long letter to the Salesians of the Valdocco Oratory in Turin. It's a jewel of a letter that reveals the great heart of Don Bosco: "Near or far away, - he writes - I always think of you. My one desire is to see you happy here and in eternity. My dear children, I feel the weight of my distance from you and not seeing you causes me unimaginable pain. He then goes on in a free and easy style; he tells them of a dream he had a few days earlier. In the dream he saw, as if in a film two scenes: the Oratory of the early days, with the boys in noisy recreation, and the Oratory of 1884, where he "could not see the enthusiasm and liveliness as he saw in the first scene."*

*- How can I revive my dear youngsters, to relive the joy and the expansiveness of the past? – He asked the mysterious guide who accompanied him in the dream.*

- With charity.*
- With charity? But aren't they loved enough?*
- The best is still missing.*
- What is that?*
- That young people not only need to be loved, but they must know that they are loved. You have to love what young people love, then young people will love what pleases their educators. Mix around familiarly*



*with the young especially during recreation. Those who want to be loved must make it clear that they love those entrusted to them. Jesus made himself little with little ones! Here is the master of familiarity. The educator must therefore be all things to everyone, ready to listen to any complaints or irritations of his boys, ready to understand them; to paternally oversee their conduct with a heart that only seeks the good of those whom God entrusted to him...*

\* \* \*

● *Understand others: that was the great rule that Don Bosco inculcated in his youngsters.* Today psychology offers us a new word, a more difficult one, but which says the same thing: empathy. Empathy is the ability to appreciate the feelings of another without being emotionally disturbed so as to influence one's own judgment. It is a state of mind that anyone can acquire, develop and improve.

● *Teach the youngster to value the feelings of others.* A scholar once noted: "A lot of friction can be smoothed out if each of us tells the other of something irritates him." What is it that causes this kind of conduct? For example: "I hate you, I would like to see you dead!" a boy shouts at his father. The father, applying empathy, penetrates the feeling that caused that outburst and understands it in the proper to usually mean: "I need you and you do not pay attention to me. Please, show me that you love me." Empathy is akin to sympathy. Sympathy says, "I share your feelings"; empathy instead says: "I understand your feelings" It is a sense of understanding that tremendously helps those in need or those who are suffering. After all, when you

are connected by rope in a mountain-climbing expedition and one of your party falls into a crevasse it does not help to keep jumping around but rather staying well-balanced will enable the one who has fallen to be helped up.”

- *Teach the youngster to get into the shoes of the other person, to see through the eyes of someone else rather than through one's own eyes.* The elderly, for example, who cannot put up with the antics, pranks or silliness of youngsters forget that they too were once teenagers, who now want them to behave like mature adults. Not that people are unwilling to accept them; they want to know the feelings that inspire their words and actions so as to be able to understand their feelings, help them and not be hurt by the responses they receive.

- *Teach the youngster to discover the sense of isolation that often pervades the other.* A young university student once said: “I think often of myself as a zero going around on two feet. I think that nobody here cares about me or my life. Please treat me as a human being and give me a bit of attention.” Understanding isolation and the feelings of the other may be the secret of effective educational work. The worker who feels that his boss considers him only as a cog in the wheel will turn out a poor job. But when he hears that his boss is sincerely interested in him, his problems, his future, his family circumstances; he is more likely to do a great job.

- *It takes patience to understand the feelings of others.* But penetrating the mind and the heart of another human being can be a very useful experience. Empathy is nothing but the thoughtfulness that another feels when you love him.

## 43. Praise: A Welcome Reward

*“May I suggest to you a very pleasant reward for your students?” said Don Bosco to a young educator who was making his first experience in school.*

*- Do this: Occasionally tell a good youngster: “I’m so pleased with you. I’m going to tell your parents.” You’ll see what effect those words of praise have on that young heart!”*

*Praise is an energetic stimulant for action. Even Don Bosco used it motivate his youngsters to being good but he knew how to measure it out in order to inspire confidence in their own strength without tempting them to vanity such that one day the boy might become too proud to accept correction.*

*In praising as in correcting, Don Bosco was always a good father who spoke to the heart of the boy. He used to say: “Every educator should always seem serene and pleasant. When correcting or warning he should always use encouraging words, never words that demean or insult. Praise, always praise those who deserve it.”*

\* \* \*

● *Youngsters should be congratulated and appreciated for a job well done, for their obedience, for the service they have rendered or for their generosity. Parents and educators must especially make themselves particularly adept in praising their youngsters.*

- *Praise is an indication of a high spiritual distinction;* It is the yardstick of refinement in a soul. One must personally be good in order to discern the good in others, to acknowledge and rejoice in becoming aware of it. When praise gushes forth from a sincere heart, it is one of the most beautiful gifts. Praise expands the soul of the one who receives it, lighting a new flame in that heart, creating an atmosphere of enthusiasm and joy.

- *Praise has the privilege to bring a youngster “to bloom,” just as a gardener does with plants.* Praise makes the youngster realise that you are interested in him.

- *Youngsters yearn to be praised;* that means that they wish to be recognized for their effort or appreciated for their success. It is not true that praising others is flattery. When praise is not sincere, it is adulation. But a compliment is praise that springs from a soul that is exquisitely good.

A lady recounted: “At a party, Helen, my eldest daughter noticed that the hostess was left alone by herself. She went up to her and said, “You’re marvellous to have organized this party and thanks for inviting me.” Later, that mother told me never had a comment of a girl made her so happy.”

- *Praise that is reported by others always pleases.* It is an amplified compliment, and is much more effective than if it were addressed directly. “You know? – a mother told her son – your friend’s mother told me you are a very well-mannered youngster. Before

leaving home, you run in from the courtyard and into the kitchen to kiss me before you leave and hearing, this thrilled me throughout the day.”

- *Praise is always warm and friendly when it comes to a youngster in private; it comes like a hand that is stretched out across a void that surrounds him.*

Don Bosco gave us the following suggestions: “Take care never to speak contemptuously about some of the defects of a youngster especially in his presence or in the presence of his classmates. If you have to correct him, let it be done when you are alone with him and with utmost gentleness. Praise those you correct and encourage the indolent.”

A psychologist wrote: “When I see something pleasant that can be praised, I realise that it is so pleasing that it causes me no effort at all.”

“Praise when something is done well, blame when there is neglect, that is already a great reward or a punishment.” (*Don Bosco*)

## 44. With Boys Who Steal?

*On December 17, 1859 Don Bosco gave the "Goodnight" to the boys of the Oratory and this was what he said: "Since, we have the custom of handing in every evening whatever was found during the day, no matter how small, there should be no reason for thinking that someone may forget himself to the point of keeping what is not his. Nevertheless, as the devil is very cunning and may deceive someone in this matter, I want to remind you that stealing is the most dishonourable of vices. One who has been found to be a thief will never clear himself of that ugly blot. "That fellow is a thief!" his companions will say when they will be back home." "That fellow is a thief!" the townsfolk will repeat. He will be shunned by all. Yet, what is more frightful is the judgment of the Holy Spirit: Thieves will never enter heaven."*

*How much dirt can you bear in your eye? Not even a mote of dust! So too with heaven. The least thing belonging to others can bar you from there. If one were to die with but one stolen needle on his conscience, it would be enough to keep him out of paradise. True, a needle is a small matter, but he would have to pay very dearly for it in purgatory.*

*Merely confessing a sin of theft will not obtain forgiveness until one can make restitution. If he cannot at the time, he should at least have a sincere and serious will to do so as soon as possible. And*

*remember, many small things can little by little become a grave matter; a few coins today, a necktie tomorrow; a book, a writing tablet, or some other thing can in a short time build up a serious account at God's tribunal.*

*Therefore, if we do not wish to risk ruining our reputation or burdening our conscience, let us be on our guard never to touch anything not belonging to us. We should look upon other people's property as live fire. If a spark falls upon us, we hasten to brush it off. So if we find anything, leave it alone. So if you find anything, no matter how trivial – a sheet of paper, a nib, a pencil – let us leave it alone. If you need anything at any moment, ask your companions kindly to lend it to you. Besides, your superiors are around and will provide whatever you need” (EBM. VI, 195-196).*

\* \* \*

The boys who steal can be divided into three categories:

- *They steal because there is an opportunity.* At a Salesian school a basket of apples had been bought and placed on the pantry window. Within an hour all the apples had disappeared. The kitchen sister who saw Don Bosco passing that way went to complain to him: “Father, do you know what disappointed me about the boys this morning? We had bought some beautiful apples for our guests at lunch and they have all been stolen.” And Don Bosco with his usual calm demeanour said: “*The fault is not theirs but yours. Remember don't give youngsters the opportunity to commit a sin. That is our preventive system.*”

- *Stealing because of a weak character*: Someone steals because he is coerced to do so by a companion, or someone else steals because he cannot resist the urge to do the same and takes things that he likes or that he covets. The task of the educator is not to shame or condemn the boy. We should make him aware that by doing this he is harming others. And if his friends are bad companions, we must ensure that he severs relations with them. The youngster must be helped to return or repay what he has stolen.

- *Stealing on the influence of an irresistible impulse often preceded by a few hours or days of indescribable anguish*. Commonly this indescribable anguish is replaced by the fear of being caught in the act. Very often the boy-thief (of this third category) steals the same type of objects which then he does not even need. *Thieving is morbid*. Anguish reveals that the youngster steals to offset or to take revenge for an unrequited love or the love he did not receive from his parents. For example, from the day her mother began working outside the home, Georgia began to steal. Georgia whose mother forbids her from inviting her friends over for a few hours, steals money to buy candy, which she can distribute to her friends at school. When her mother permits her to bring her friends over, the thieving ceases.

With youngsters who steal there is only one course of action to be taken by parents and educators: it is the method of Don Bosco. On the moral level, they should be brought to the supernatural, which means educating them to become aware of and recognize their faults. From the educational standpoint, they



need to learn have a horror for thieving and in spite of everything they should be shown understanding, trust and affection as Don Bosco did.

## 45. Boys Who Lie

*A teacher, a contemporary of Don Bosco once wrote: "In Turin, on Via Cottolengo 32, you will find something that is not found anywhere else in the world. It is room out of which comes a boy with a face beaming with joy after he had entered with a heart burdened with sadness or humiliation. It is the room of Don Bosco. "Actually, it was in there that he soothed and cared for the moral wounds of his boys, predominantly through Confession.*

*Fr Francesca said: "It was the eve of a major feast, we went up to Don Bosco's room after he has been hearing confession for nine hours. Just at that moment a youngster asked to make his confession. He had desolation written on his face. Should Don Bosco be burdened with another confession? But Don Bosco took the candle from my hand and then turning to the little boy told him: "Wait for me in the room...I'll join you soon."*

*Don Bosco knew (and often repeated) that only giving confidence to the youngster, by allowing him to open his heart will cure him from his evil inclinations, especially the great shortcoming of telling lies.*

\* \* \*

- *One of the predominant defects of youngsters is telling lies. The lie that most often upsets anxious parents and teachers is the lie a youngster tells in*

order to hide some mischief committed. A youngster frequently tries to hide a bad grade he has received in school to avoid being reprimanded or he tries to keep his parents in the dark about some mischief he has committed, being truant or keeping company that would certainly not receive his parents' approval.

A 13 year-old youngster says he feels very distressed every time he hides from his parents the fact that he received a bad grade at school. But he can never find the courage to admit it for fear of "scolding and punishment." He therefore chooses the anguish of deception and withholding the truth, preferring to say everything at one moment to receive just a single string of rebukes.

- *The elder brothers are often confided in by the younger ones and it often helps them. In this case, a priest can become a confidant or a counsellor.* What weighs heavily on a youngster is that one day or other he will have to admit the wrong he has done. He is also tormented by the idea that he will have to confess his lie. It was a vicious circle in which the boy has been trapped; trapped in a spiral of inner torture. The youngster develops the habit of simply lying so as to avoid punishment, to avoid being judged and being accused by his parents and educators. It is the fear of punishment that causes them to do this. This habit demonstrates a sheer weakness of character and the inability to want to pay the price. In his own way, he tries to escape reality; to escape a system of social sanction. The work of the confessor or an educator therefore becomes indispensable: he lightens the tension in the youngster or rather "drives" him to avoid the habit of lying.

• *The boy who lies in a particularly difficult situation. Educators should strive to bring him back to reality.* It is, no doubt, a difficult task, because the youngster who refuses to face reality for any reason, can escape on the run, creating for himself an impenetrable world, immune to any introspection from the outside world, with a system of values and references whose access is denied to those who want to approach it. Here is a typical case in which a teenager was put back in touch with reality. In a ninth grade school essay on the early morning sounds in the home, a youngster allows his imagination to conjure up a fantasy. He read it to his mother when it was done. His mother commented: "But you hear so many other things in the morning and you haven't mentioned them. The boy apologized: "I imagined how it could be." The following morning, the mother asked the boy to listen to morning sounds with her. It was true, and the boy was convinced. They heard so many things; reality was greater than fiction. With every passing day, the boy occasionally admitted: "You know, mom, I heard a very interesting new sound today."

Throughout this patient work of human and Christian education the youngster is healed of his defect of telling lies and resumes his contact with reality, launching off into a life of joy and serenity.

**IV**  
**The Laws**  
**of Progress**  
**and Work**



## 45. Teach Them A Spirit of Sacrifice

*On the evening of June 11, 1867, Don Bosco said this to his boys: "Today we have begun the novena to Our Lady of Consolation. For the next nine days I propose the following nosegay: us all your diligence to fulfil your daily duties in school and especially in church and in your practices of piety. Make good use of your time. I also recommend that all of you make some sacrifice."*

*Don Bosco had this secret: infuse into the youngsters a spirit of sacrifice, using as his inspiration the gentle figure of the Madonna. Each of his youngsters was called to a spirit of sacrifice keeping before their eyes the image of Mary that they may more effectively carry out this admonition because their first teacher is always a mother.*

*At the same time Don Bosco uses the Madonna and places before their eyes the great reward that comes to those who mortify themselves to struggle and keep themselves in the grace of God.*

*He once told them: "On one of the last nights of the month of May, the 29<sup>th</sup> or the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, I thought of my dear boys and said to myself: "Oh, if I could dream of something that would help my boys that would be for their good." And then I fell asleep. "Suddenly I found myself in an enchanting place, a large green lawn filled with all kinds of fragrant herbs, adorned with beautiful flowers, fresh woods and streams of*

*clear water. There I saw a large number of boys, happy and very serene, dressed in the meadow flowers woven and the most uncommon of robes.*

*- Who are these boys? – I asked the one who was accompanying me.*

*He told me:*

*They are those who are in God's grace.*

*Wow, I've never seen such things and such beautifully radiant people nor could I have imagined such splendour.*

*- Suggest to me something I might tell my youngsters. Tell me once more:*

*- Inculcate in them this: that if they knew how precious and beautiful in the eyes of God is the virtue of purity, the virtues of Mary, they would be willing to make any sacrifice in order to preserve it. Tell them that they need courage to practice this beautiful virtue."*

\* \* \*

Here is a very useful lesson. With great concern, sociologists declare: modern society, people in general today, especially youngsters refuse to learn the spirit of sacrifice.

A boy was surprised that he was caught stealing from his mother's purse. He invented a lie and escaped with a mild reprimand. "It's just a prank," said the unscrupulous mother, "most youngsters are thieving magpies." When he did not want to do his house chores, his father would do it for him. That assistance was a very deceptive kind of help. Years later, as an adult, he became the vice president of a bank. In that position of responsibility he made some



disastrous speculations and altered budgets. He finally secured for himself a place in prison and the ruin of many of his fellow citizens. His mother admitted: "My son began being dishonest from the time he was a child; he started stealing from me. His father and I cultivated his weaknesses. *We never ever trained him to a spirit of sacrifice and now he has ruined us.*"

It is easy to turn a blind eye to the shadows in the dusty corners of our lives. But every ignored effort with mysterious alchemy works towards the downfall of the best in ourselves.

It is a grace that physically, mentally and spiritually we are there to remind our youngsters that there are sacrifices to be made. This is exciting; it's like a drink of water that quenches our instinctive thirst to excel or improve.

*"Whatever the sacrifice,"* said Don Bosco, *"the struggle to keep your balance is priceless."*

"Work is a powerful weapon against the enemies of the soul. My dear boys, I do not recommend to you penance and discipline but work, work, work." (Don Bosco)

## 46. Combatting Depression

*There was probably no other saint in the Church like Don Bosco who loved the chaotic joy of rowdy youngsters. Dominic Savio, who became a saint at the age of fifteen, understood this well in what turned out to be a historic joke: "Here with Don Bosco we make holiness consist in being very cheerful."*

*On January 31, 1886 Don Bosco said to the boys around him:*

*- Some years ago I dreamed that after the community Mass I was walking among my youngsters who were willingly listening to my words. But one of them was in the background.*

*I called to him and he looked at me with a very sad and wistful face. Then, a moment later he looked away. A few days ago I saw a youngster who looked exactly like the youngster I saw in the dream: he is among you.*

*- Who is it? They all asked curiously.*

*And Don Bosco said:*

*- It is not appropriate to point him out because I don't yet know the interpretation of the dream. However I remember someone in the dream holding bouquet of flowers...*

*While the boys moved off from Don Bosco, one of them asked him if he was concerned about the boy with the flowers.*

- Yes – replied Don Bosco – I’m very concerned. He suddenly grabbed the hand of a boy named Calzinari and whispered something into his ear. The boy who had escaped from Don Bosco, hearing those words, turned pale; then he replied:

- Alright.

The shadow of melancholy that lay across his face seemed to dissolve. Calmly he returned to play. Years, later Calzinari, now grown up wrote: “I cannot forget the serenity of Don Bosco and his words so filled with love. Don Bosco succeeded in getting me out of the entanglement that I had got myself into because of a fault and which depressed me and caused many repeated relapses. I felt more encouraged and confident.”

\* \* \*

Psychologists note that depression and despair infest people at intervals with surprising regularity. To one person it might come about every two weeks, to another once every two months. For the average youngster and young adult it comes intermittently once in five weeks. For girls and women the cycle of depression would be more frequent and is often accompanied by irritability and depression.

One scholar, after a broad survey of university students, noted that bouts of melancholy and depression occur most frequently during the first and last hour of the day and this is more accentuated on Mondays and touching uncommon heights during the first three months of the year.

- *Don Bosco said that idleness is the ideal soil for the fungus of dark melancholy to flourish.* He advised

the boys to take part in games with their companions, do anything rather bask in melancholy. *“Recreation, - he said, - is a relief for the mind and dispels gloom.”*

A famous celebrity advised youngsters: “Avoid loneliness and avoid idleness. If you are idle, don’t be lazy and if you’re lazy, don’t be idle.”

Melancholy is like spider’s web that invades the darkest corners of the soul and dirties it.

- *For Don Bosco, the most prodigious weapon to defeat depression is to live in the grace of God.* That was what his best pupil, Saint Dominic Savio said, “We make holiness consist in being very cheerful.”

- *Other means to overcome depression:* take a walk, read a book, play some games, listen to music, above all, do something for someone else.

The desire to make others happy, even if you cannot share that joy, is a wonderful antidote for melancholy: call or write to someone who is lonely, send a book or a gift to someone who is sick, bring sweets to a child you care about. There is no better joy than the joy of making someone else happy and cheerful.

“I don’t want anything else from youngsters. If they are good they will always be cheerful. Live joyfully as long as you do not sin.”  
*(Don Bosco)*

## 47. Using Your Free Time

*The 10 year-old Johnny Bosco asked his mother for permission to go to the fairs and markets in the villages that were around the hamlet of Becchi (his village). He wanted to learn the tricks of those jugglers. Going there became everything for him: something necessary, useful, and it filled his calendar.*

*Mamma Margaret knew her boy. She knew he was exuberant; his brain always working on some new idea or other. He harboured a great desire to learn and to know more. She did not say 'no' to him, but she objected:*

- Johnny, I have no money don't ask me for any.*
- I'll find the money mom.*

*Jugglers, acrobats, charlatans and mountebanks amazed the village people in the squares. Farmers were left speechless. John got a front row seat by paying a special ticket: two cents. He watched the movement of the fingers of jugglers, their tightrope walking, their sense of balance. Back home he tried out the trick and if it didn't work, he started again.*

*Near Becchi there was a meadow and a copse of trees. It was a great place to have a show.*

*On Sunday, people gathered on the meadow and made a circle around John. On the grass he unfolded a carpet on which he could jump. On a table he laid out his bag of tricks. He tied a rope between two trees*

*for his tightrope walk. People love the curly haired lad with a clear voice and gift that charmed them. At the age of 10 he had organized an entertainment for people purely out of love for God. Very early in life John had learned to make good use of his free time. Later, as a priest, he would always tell his boys: "Let the devil not find us unoccupied. Holidays are harvest time for the devil."*

\* \* \*

How should you occupy your free time? Don Bosco offers these three suggestions:

- *Always look for something that's to be done and begin doing it immediately.* Psychologically this is true. If you begin immediately you can easily overcome the first obstacles, and that feeling is so exhilarating and brings with it such satisfaction to enable one to tackle the next problem. That's how this magical process is repeated.
- *Put excitement into what you do.* The one who's excited in what he is doing has nothing to fear. Every opportunity and occasion in the world is good for those who love what they do. Enthusiasm is a magical virtue it conquers indolence, banishes discouragement and stimulates action. And what's more it is contagious too. Those who see enthusiasts are led to imitate them.
- *Look for things you like to do.* For example develop a hobby, for example, collecting butterflies, stamps or exploring some undiscovered place in a nearby

forest or beach. Leonardo da Vinci often stopped to draw a flower or herb by carefully lifting it off the ground level and peering at the miniature forest he encountered, then taking it home he drew it lovingly.

Many scholars of leisure compile lists of what people should or should not do in their free time. They typically put into second place recreations such as fishing, television, or watching sports events. Instead they recommend instead of following study courses such as dedicating to learn a foreign language on one's own, or reading a good book. That was perhaps what Don Bosco saw when *he advised his boys that during their holidays they should make themselves useful to others*. He told a youngster: "You can't imagine how happy I feel when I see you helping those around you." Boy Scouts know this technique well: In fact, they set out every day to do a good deed. It is even better if this action does not benefit the doer in any way, "*Your heavenly Father knows what is done in secret and he will reward you.*" Said Jesus.

"An hour gained in the morning is a treasure for the evening. A single minute of time is precious, of infinite value, infinite value to God himself."  
(Don Bosco)

## 48. Don't Forbid Them From Playing

*“My children, - Don Bosco used to say, - borrowing a typical expression of St Philip Neri, run, jump, play and do all you want provided you don't sin.” For many years, on the playground, Don Bosco was the soul of the game. He played with his boys. This was how a reporter noted the following scene: “It was 1858 and Don Bosco was a healthy 53 years-old. He had the youthfulness of an athlete. Even though his body was wearing itself out, within him was a youthful soul. Even at that age he accepted a challenge to race with his boys. He did this to give a burst of excitement to the game. He would not be able to do that much later due to a nagging swelling in his legs. Nevertheless he lined up on the starting line. At the start, he took off and the youngsters were screaming with joy. Don Bosco seemed rejuvenated. With a few strides he left behind hundreds of young people.” The reporter added: “Even though many of those youngsters were exceptionally quick.”*

*Don Bosco understood the educative importance of games: for the boys, games become a source of joy and peace.*

\* \* \*

- *Stopping youngsters from playing is stopping them from living. For boys, games are not some pastime, or some insignificant joke. During games, boys express themselves, develop their own world, through*



games, they overcome their instinctive fears, become aware of their own latent strength. During a game their aggressive spirit is released and he is able to combat his loneliness.

- *Those youngsters who are unable to play get sick.* Those who have never played freely, easily become neurotics when they reach adulthood. Any appearance of constraint or threat brings out what is hateful in a youngster. Don Bosco was not happy with just offering youngsters simple freedom in their games; he wanted to give them a “greater freedom.” The only limit he put was that one should not sin because that poisons freedom. His well-known maxim was: “Don’t say you’ve had a great day if it leaves you with remorse in your heart and a fear of God’s judgment.”

- Psychologists reveal that: “*Later in life a youngster will be able to prove how much and how contentedly he played as a teenager.*” What do you mean “how much” and “contentedly”? By “how much” we mean did he have sufficient time to play. For example, a normal child, before reaching school age needs to play at least for at least eight hours a day. By ‘contentedly’ is meant that he is allowed to choose a game he likes and plays it in the way he likes; indeed a game that favours not thwarts him. When you watch over youngsters do not violate the freedom of a youngster, his environment and his companions. A lack of proper presence results in frequent negative effects of so many enjoyable activities. Don Bosco, who wanted ‘broader’ freedom at games and on this point he said firmly: “I will never permit games that

might compromise either the health or the morality of the boys.”

- *So many parents are shocked when they see their youngsters fly into a rage during a game!* In such cases they might predict a very bleak future. They grumble that youngsters play too much. Games are never excessive when they are well planned. Educators and psychologists emphasize the influence of physical robustness, acquired and developed in games, developing their intellect and wills too. In fact, educators and parents should be concerned with those youngsters who show traits of being introvert, melancholic or reserved. How beautiful instead it is to witness noisy youngsters playing, running, fighting, leaping in an open and healthy atmosphere! Faber says: “The joy of man is what most honours the Creator because it is a witness of the joy we have in Him.” The shouts of youngsters are music to the ears of God.

- *If youngsters are forbidden to play what happens?* They slink away and go to play all the same, illegally. But they do so harbouring a sense of guilt – the soul is poisoned. A youngster needs to expend his exuberance through the energy that he expends in games. He needs to assess, measure and estimate himself with his classmates. Not without reason a great educator once said: “It is through games that a youngster becomes part of society.”

How wise was Don Bosco’s invitation: *“My dear boys, play, jump and have as much fun as you want so long as you don’t sin.”*

## 49. TV Discipline

*It was April 1883, in Saint-Thomas de Villeneuve in Paris: a crowd was pressing around Don Bosco to see him. Suddenly two youngsters from among the crowd that surrounded Don Bosco pushed themselves forward like an impenetrable wall. They cunningly pushed themselves using a series of little tricks as only children are capable of doing and managed to get right to the front.*

*They had bright and lively eyes. Don Bosco looked at them and took each of them by the hand. He too was smiling. He spoke to them affectionately for a bit and then continued to listen to the adults but without letting go of the hands of those two boys. They were happy to stand by him. Eventually their parents came and retrieved the two boys: Don Bosco instinctively loved them.*

\* \* \*

Don Bosco had the gift of being loved, a kind of phosphorescence. He radiated kindness and youngsters were drawn to his goodness. He could ask them for anything and they were immediately ready to obey him.

• *Parents today usually complain that their children don't obey them especially when they are called away from the TV. It is a distressing problem. But you have*

to wonder: how concerned are you about being loved enough to be obeyed “easily” when the youngster is asked to make some sacrifice, especially when s/he is sitting in front of the TV?

- Up to now, doctors are unable to establish any organic abuse that television causes, but there are various nervous disorders that surface such as eye slamming, restless sleep and anxiety, nervousness, and so on.

School doctors frequently deplore the unhealthy attitudes of “TV kids.” When parents install TVs for children from an early age to let them “kill time” or to escape watching them, *children are quick to contract a typical mania: they are unable to detach themselves from the TV. They remain hooked on to it as are their parents are, out of boredom or passivity.*

- The number one piece of advice is this: *kids who have nothing to do, do it in front of the TV screen and children till school-going age should never be left alone in front of the TV.*

- Parents who prohibit the small-screen to their children on a matter of principle, making it a command and an imperative, almost a point of honour while they themselves are stuck watching television, are not good educators and irretrievably jeopardize the peace of the family.

In a large country 20,000 youngsters were asked what they thought of the attitude of their parents towards TV. A great majority of young adults suffered at the passion that the adults had for television.

Here's an answer: *“From the time we owned a TV we no longer have family life. Our parents no longer have time for us. Everything is transacted quickly so as not to miss any part of the programme. You have to eat a breakneck speed, and we don't have the slightest right to question our parents.”*

Would it not be more pleasant for mom and dad, in the company of their children, to discuss the validity of programmes, criticize certain attitudes, the actions of certain TV actors and actresses, to laugh together at the foolishness and comedy of certain shows?

- *Naturally, it up to the parents to measure out the dosage of fun and on occasion be ready to say no.* Children who love their parents understand why they are not permitted to watch a certain programme if reason for the prohibition are explained. It all depends on the degree of love that parents have earned from their children so that they will obey them.

*“One must first be loved,” Don Bosco often repeated, “then they will obey very easily.”*

## 50. Facing Difficulties

*In a dream, Don Bosco seemed to find himself in the playground of the Oratory of Valdocco, among his boys. And there, advancing towards him was a monster looking like a lion with a tawny mane and wide open jaws. The boys fled in terror. Where could they hide? Don Bosco advised them to run to the statue of the Madonna. Suddenly the Madonna became radiant and began speaking in a soft motherly voice: "Don't worry, - she said, - have faith, this is a test that Son wants."*

*A voice then shouted in Latin:*

*- Let's stand up, and lift up our hearts to God.*

*At this invitation, Don Bosco recommended that his students pray fervently. They all knelt before the Madonna who was affectionately smiling. Then the same voice ordered:*

*- Rise up.*

*Just as they were standing, Don Bosco and his boys were lifted off the ground by a supernatural force. While they were hovering there in the air, a lion broke loose from a herd of other beasts and tried to leap towards the boys and assault them. In the meantime, the Madonna sang the words from Saint Paul: "Embrace the impregnable shield of Faith." It was a song that was sweet and very melodious. Each boy was given a shining shield that radiated the shining light of the Virgin. In the centre of the shield was a*

*ring of steel encircled by diamonds and on its rim was purest gold. It symbolized Faith. Armed with a shield each, the boys attacked the lion and the other beasts. They were not afraid but faced the beasts with courage. All of a sudden the Lady spoke with a happy maternal voice and said the following: "This is the victory that overcomes the world: your Faith." At the sound of that voice all the beasts were terrified and fled in haste. The boys seemed to be delirious with joy, enveloped by the radiant light of the Virgin who was smiling and happy that they had won.*

*At the end of the dream Don Bosco admonished the boys: "Therefore, I recommend that you rekindle your faith."*

\* \* \*

From the first moment of life until the moment of our death we are constantly changing. Often it is like taking a great leap forward; at other times it is like a disastrous setback. So, we're continuously exposed to difficulties and crises. This applies especially to young people more than to others. How should you cope? It has been found that the crises are all the same, to some it becomes their total ruination, to others it surfaces unsuspecting energies from within. Here are a few suggestions.

- *People who cope well with crises are those who look at it in the face with courage:* That means, they actively strive to resolve it. They go in search of information; they prepare themselves.
- *Youngsters must be taught not to be ashamed to express their anxieties and fears.* Hiding the

seriousness of a situation is already the beginning of a failure, an escape, a prelude to a collapse.

- *Instruct youngsters to rest when they are fatigued and their strength is depleted and encourage them to return to the fight and overcome the problem once they have rested.*
- *Seeking help from the Lord in prayer during moments of difficulty is a sign of maturity.* Turning to God ensures that you are firm and secure in God.

St Peter wrote to the early Christians: *“Your adversary the devil is like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your Faith.”* Christians, pilgrims and strangers in this world, must have their gaze fixed on God’s eternity. It is there that they must be spiritually anchored as the storm rages around them. It will be their Faith that will give them the strength to resist and keep their balance even in the dark night of this world where there is no light to give them a sense of direction.

“If you pray, the two grains you sow will yield four ears. The one who prays is like one who approaches a king.” (*Don Bosco*)



## 51. Cultivating Good Habits

*In the year 1861 Don Bosco preached a spiritual retreat to the young seminarians of Bergamo. "I was among those young men, - recounts the Jesuit, Father Scaini.- I remember that in one of the sermons Don Bosco said something like this: "On one occasion I was able to ask Our Lady for the grace to have with me in Paradise thousands of youngsters (I seem to have said the number, thousands, but I'm not sure), the Madonna agreed and made me that promise. If you too wish to belong to that number, I would be happy to add you to the list on just this condition: that you take up the good habit of daily, for the rest of your life, praying the Hail Mary."*

*I do not know about my companions, but from that day I immediately took up the habit of saying that Hail Mary. One day, I found myself in Turin and went to visit Don Bosco and I asked him: "If you permit me, I would like to ask for a clarification on something very close to my heart. Do you remember when you came to the seminary of Bergamo to preach to us youngsters?" "Yes, I remember." "Well, do you remember that you spoke about a grace requested of the Madonna and advised us to take up a good habit?" and I quoted his words. "Yes, I remember. "Well, I took up the habit and have maintained it all this time: that of reciting that Hail Mary. But you have spoken to thousands of young people; now I think I'm out of*

*this category and so I'm afraid I don't belong to that fortunate number." Don Bosco looked at me, smiled and then with great confidence, reassured me: "Keep up that good habit, continue to pray that Hail Mary, and we will be together in Paradise."*

\* \* \*

"You ask me if a habit is a second nature? I will say it is even more: a habit is ten times one's nature," said the Duke of Wellington who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, the same year in which Don Bosco was born. A habit is a wheel of the social machinery, it is an invaluable conserving element. In order to instil in a youngster good habits you must suggest four fundamental things.

- *Should a youngster want to take up a good habit let him do so with the utmost momentum, like the impetus of a starter's shot for a sprinter to take off. This momentum will give him an impetus, so strong that he will not be tempted to give up so soon as otherwise happens. To some they relapse everyday and there is an increased likelihood that they will never succeed.*

- *Strive to teach the youngster never to tolerate exceptions, at least not till the new habit is securely rooted in his life. Any infraction will be like dropping a ball of string that will unwind more and more. One fall is enough for a series of successive falls thereafter. In the beginning you have to succeed at all costs. A man who wanted to start a bold initiative, but doubted whether he had the strength, sought the advice of the famous German poet Goethe. "Ah – he was heard to respond – don't blow on your hands." One who makes a new resolution every day, is like one who comes to the brink of a ditch to be crossed over and*

stops each time before going back to start running again.

- *Teach the youngster to seize the first opportunity to put into action the implementation of the resolution.* It is not enough to have good intentions: you must act immediately, while the engine is still running. The path to hell is proverbially paved with good intentions.

- *Convince youngsters that they have to keep intact their will power through spontaneous little sacrifices of daily surrender.* That is, teach the youngster to be systematically heroic in little non-essential things. Prompt him to do something every day only for the reason that he would prefer not to do it, so that tomorrow, in times of trial and testing, he will be strong and prepared to resist. Mortification of this kind is like insurance on your home. The price you pay does not bring you an immediate benefit and maybe it never will. But if a fire should really break out, the fact that you have paid your insurance will mean salvation from disaster. That is how it happens to those who, day by day acquire the habit of a focused attention, an energetic will and are ready to renounce unnecessary things.

If we knew how far we could journey with a set of good habits, we would train ourselves better.

Don Bosco was right when he said: “Develop good habits and we will be together in heaven.”

## 52. Outwitting Four Ruffians

*One morning Don Bosco was all by himself, passing a plot that had been deserted for years, in the suburbs of Turin. Suddenly four shady characters leapt up in front of him and barred his way.*

*- Reverend, we're resolving an issue and we want you to be the judge.*

*What a situation! Don Bosco was careful not to ask what the argument was that led to this conflict. He would have to take a calm and peaceful attitude.*

*- Listen, my good friends, it would be better if we go to a cafe in Piazza San Carlo for a coffee. I'll pay.*

*The four youngsters accepted. So they went into town. Along the way they chatted with Don Bosco. Suddenly the Saint said:*

*- Look, here's a church, why don't we go inside? A Hail Mary won't hurt anyone.*

*- But then you'll make us say a Rosary! Where's that going to end up?*

*- Oh no, just a Hail Mary, and nothing more, and I'll pay for the coffee afterwards.*

*The four ruffians, overpowered, reluctantly accepted and grudgingly followed the strange priest. They recited a Hail Mary; then they proceeded for the coffee. Don Bosco stirred up the conversation and within minutes he was able to look into the depths of their poor souls.*

- *What do you say if the five of us came for a bite to my mother's house? – Don Bosco suggested. – She cooks well!*

*They fell for it: first the coffee, then a bite. It almost seemed like a dream ... They suddenly found themselves in Valdocco. Don Bosco had already won them over. And then he cast his net and said:*

- *My friends, what if death suddenly snatched you up in this state and presented you before God?*

*The four were shocked and speechless. He had struck directly at their heart. Five minutes later he heard their Confession...all except one. But all of them would be back again looking for him.*

\* \* \*

● That was how Don Bosco used his educative method to conquer souls: *directing them towards the sacramental life*. Don Bosco recommended to his priests: “If you have to say a few words in a sermon, let it be about Confession. The first goal of our educational mission is to bring people to and sustain them in the grace of God. If one’s conscience is not at peace it is useless to try to carry out any other educative effort. Sin and sadness are not welcome in my house!”

● He kept saying: “*If a young man goes willingly every day, even for a minute, to pray before the Blessed Sacrament, be assured that he will do nothing wrong.*”

● Don Bosco is known as a saint of the action. Yet, hounded all the time by an infinite number of preoccupations that appeared to torment both his

flesh and his spirit, he maintained an enviably tranquil temperament, completely at rest in God and this was coupled with an intense and radiant inner life. The secret of his educational success is this: prayer, Confession and Communion, and love for the Virgin Mary. It is a very simple formula, but has an amazing effect on every young soul.

## 53. To Read, or Not to Read \*

*One day Charles Tomatis met Don Bosco holding a bundle of proofs in his hands. They were proofs of his new book in Church History. Tomatis turned to Don Bosco and asked him a rather curious question:*

*- How do you do this, Don Bosco, deal with difficult subjects, speak badly of someone who might turn out to be a national hero?*

*- Whenever I can, speak well, I speak well – replied Don Bosco – whenever I should say something bad, I keep silent.*

*- Then what do you about the Truth? Tomatis continued.*

*Here Don Bosco gave a wonderful reply:*

*- I do not write for the clever or for intellectuals; I write for ordinary people and for youngsters.*

*This explains why Don Bosco became a tireless propagator and propagandist of popular literature. “A good book, - he said, enters homes where even a priest may not enter. Introducing himself, he does not blush, if neglected he is not upset, if he is read he teaches the truth calmly. He is there in times of loneliness or boredom or in times of leisure. The book opens its pages and reveals the wonderful conversions of Augustine and Ignatius...”*

\* \* \*

But today, rather than books there are magazines that find themselves in the hands of youngsters. It has been found that even with the onset of digital communication the printed word not only has a charm of its own but is a more convenient and enjoyable way of imbibing information or entertainment. A recent survey found that the number of people reading physical books has remained fairly the same and digital books are trying to catch up with minimal success.

A statistical survey conducted among two hundred children between the ages of 12 to 13 years revealed that Walt Disney cartoon characters do not appeal any more in their place there are characters from science fiction and computer games.

This implies that there is a need to always keep an eye on the material children read.

That is the reason that there are still some suggestions on the matter, bearing in mind that wholesome education of a youngster is best founded on matter he reads on a daily basis not just for study but also for recreation.

- *Absolutely never allow violent, horror or erotic magazines or other reading material to be left in the hands of youngsters.* The effect of violent literature on the minds of youngsters is harmful. A serene, pleasing and happy worldview is so necessary for the harmonious development of a personality that is still in this nascent stage. Violence and eroticism can still wreck the life of a youngster sending him into the quagmire of crime and pornography shunning any respect the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit and causing everything to crumble after the blows dealt by such desecrations.



- *Children should preferably be made to read fantastic adventures*, publications dedicated to small animals, young protagonist adventurers who drive fast sports cars, depart for interplanetary space without a thought of the toothbrush, and avoid all cruelty and violence. In general such reading at this stage is a harmless, stimulating and enjoyable pastime.
- *Prefer comics that have a lot of humour*. Humour is a commentary on our time. Browse for example, a comic where the scene is full of international spies, helicopters and bizarre scientists; look out for witches and trolls and other weird yet harmless creatures. The *Tales of Narnia* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy are wholesome adventures, grand and captivating too.
- *It is wrong to blame comics in general and accuse them of ruining youngsters*. Youngsters do not accept our indiscriminate and downright condemnation. It is parents and educators who should browse through them first through the eyes of a youngster, then they become aware of what is valuable and enjoyable for their youngster to read or watch. It will do wonderful things for you. You will become young once again with your youngster. You will know what is harmful and what will deform or desecrate their innocent minds. You will know how to give your youngster what is wholesome to read. Parents must be able to read *with* their children, as well as play with them, following their games and tournaments.

\* *This chapter has been abridged to include all types of reading and the habit of reading in general. (Ed./Tr)*

## 54. When Youngsters Start Working

*It was early in June 1847. The sun was setting over the city of Turin, the capital of the kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont. Don Bosco was returning to his poor home at Valdocco after having fulfilled his priestly ministry at the church of St Francis of Assisi. He had reached Via San Massimo when he noticed a poor boy, a teenager leaning against an elm. He was crying. He walked up to him and asked: What's happened? Why are you crying?*

*The boy was sobbing; when that subsided he replied:  
- Everyone's let me down. My dad died before I could see him. Mom, whom I loved very much died yesterday and they buried her.*

*He wept uncontrollably. Placing his hand on the lad's shoulder he asked:*

- Where did you sleep last night?*
- At home, but now the landlord has taken away the few pieces of furniture we had. Mother had not paid the rent. Just as the coffin left the house, they shut the door. I have no one...*
- So now, what are you going to do? Where are going to go?*
- I don't know, I don't know...*
- Will you come with me? I'll do all I can to help you.*
- Oh yes, I'll come, but will you accept me?*

- Of course, I want the two of us to be friends always. He took his hand in his, comforted him and cheered him up. So he brought him home where Mamma Margaret was waiting.

- Mom – Don Bosco said as he entered – I have with me a second boy. God sent him here; take care of him and prepare a bed for him.

The next day Don Bosco took care to find him a suitable place to work. The boy was intelligent, smart and fairly well educated. Don Bosco sought out a job that suited him. He asked if he liked the work environment. “Do you like being a shop assistant?” “Of course!” replied the boy.

He had done well. The boy made a career for himself and secured a respectable position in life.

\* \* \*

● *It is always a problem finding a suitable job for a teenager.* A wrong choice can ruin him for a lifetime. There was a time when a son inherited his father’s trade, so to speak. Today, several youngsters don’t even know their father’s profession. Ask a youngster: “Where does your father work?” “He’s a representative.” “Yes, but what does he do?” “Well, all day he goes around in his car and in the evening he comes back home and drops into the sofa reading the newspapers and then he goes to bed.” Youngsters claim that they learn more in school about the professions that they can choose from.

● *It is not easy to find out what profession a youngster is cut out for or the inclination he reveals.* Even at 18 or 19, young people are often hesitant about their choice of a profession. They do not know what path

to take. The family pressurizes them in one direction and the boy does not dare to oppose it. Most youngsters who have been interviewed after three years of an apprenticeship admit that they regret having chosen their present profession. They would prefer another.

- *Why not put youngsters through a series of tests that can identify their attitudes?* Many factories and companies use them. Parents should put them through these tests to gauge the propensities of their children. Instead, they often leave him the choice to take up the profession of his father. He is just as likely capable of being lured by an advertisement or a starting salary, an increase in pay or a bonus or some other social emolument and that is enough for a youngster to get lured to take up a job, perhaps reluctantly, but then he regrets it for the rest of his life.

- *However, what's even more distressing is that youngsters, having just entered the world of work get involved with coarse or immoral people.* Adolescents who have experienced this, report being psychologically traumatized by such immorality. The wound remains for a prolonged period. At work, teenagers are exposed everyday to a deluge of conversations and comments that are generally immoral. A youngster said, and his testimony is confirmed by hundreds of others. "I am disgusted by the conversations that take place at my workshop." Another said: "In places where men and women work together and a teenager is among them, it becomes very scary for the youngster. Women are known to

be more foul-mouthed than men.” Parents should not ignore anything. They should be solicitous about the places where the youngster works. Is the climate morally wholesome? That’s what Don Bosco did before he placed a youngster at an employment. Even after that he made regular visits and periodic checks on the atmosphere at the youngster's place of work. If not, then those youngsters would be exposed to terrible situations and the scars left behind would be indelible. In this regard, youngsters should not have to fight their own battles, they are not old enough.

## 55. Beware of Scholastic Crises

*On the evening of April 15, 1885, in Marseilles, Don Bosco was having dinner with one of the city's finest attorneys, the advocate Michel, who had just returned from a business tour of several nations. The conversation veered to the topic of blatant paganism in schools in some countries that were once deeply Christian. Don Bosco was listening intently and suddenly popped the question: "Advocate, in your opinion, what do you think is the cause of such an aberration?" Michel gave one explanation after another but none proved to be very convincing. At one point Don Bosco interrupted: "No, no, my good sir. The cause of the evil is only one: the education imparted in the schools is generally pagan. They are fed on all the pagan classics, pagan syllogisms and there is nothing that will ever shape them into true Christians. I have fought all my life against this perverse education that spoils the minds and hearts of young people. It was always my ideal to reform schools on the basis that are purely Christian. Now old and decrepit, I am dying with the pain of knowing that I have not done enough." His listener sensed his emotion of sweetness and pride in his voice. Don Bosco - stresses his biographer - wanted the school to be like a little shrine, like a family.*

\* \* \*

The school decides the fate of a youngster; either good or bad. If you are not convinced that a school should be a little shrine or a family then the scholastic experience of a youngster becomes a time of crises.

- *Youngsters want to learn to love.* They bring themselves to their teacher like gifts. The research of psychologists showed unequivocally the extremely close affective links that exist between teachers and their charges. Does this happen only among youngsters? In the United States they wanted to know what was the maximum that a typist could turn out in the course of a single day. For two years, in a state institution some very skilled typists were tested on machines. The resulting differences were notable. Suddenly, one day the supervisor changed; everyone was shocked with the results! The team's performance suddenly increased and the general level eventually remained as good as that of the best typist who worked on a best machine. It was decided that the foreman be changed regularly. With a nervous boss the output was low; reprimands and warnings remained unheeded and work slugged. With a calm and friendly supervisor, always ready to encourage them with a gentle and serene atmosphere the typists worked cheerfully and felt less fatigue at the end of the day and worked much better.

- *Youngsters feel abandoned into the hands of an unfavourable destiny when they are forced to live in a school that has a climate that is unlike that of a family and even unchristian.* The famous phrase: "Do not learn for school but for life," will impress university students but it will go over the heads of

school children and teenagers. What adults call “life” means absolutely nothing for a youngster. A boy learns for school and for his teachers. He wants to please his parents and his pride but he certainly does not do it for the long haul, as a goal in life.

- *Several difficulties and scholastic crises come from the excessive demands that parents make on their children: My son must be the first.* A young 10 year-old girl was brought to a paediatric clinic of a famous professor. The mother wanted her child to be treated because the girl’s grades had dropped from the first place to the third place. The excited mother said to the professor in the hearing of the girl: “If she were to remain in this position at the end of the year I would die of grief. I admit I may be strict, but I’m not stupid or ignorant.” You can imagine what happens to a child when she hears a statement like that! The warning symptoms in that girl were: she had headaches during class and a dull pain in her back. Doctors speak of this as “scholastic” headaches and “scholastic” nausea.

But at the root of all this is a lack of love. “Make yourself loved,” Don Bosco often repeated. “The school should be a little shrine like a Christian family.”



## 56. *Nine Secrets to Succeed in School*

*In a series of nine “good nights,” given during the months of November-December 1864 Don Bosco gave his boys nine secrets to do well in school. He told them to take them to heart before they went to sleep, plough them into a kind of mini-furrow. He always began with a joke or an interesting episode. He ended with the statement of the secret. He then wished them, ‘good night’ and the boys all responded, ‘thank you’ and without stopping to smile, he gazed at them affectionately as they walked past him.*

The first means to study well is to have the fear of God. *The wisdom of men is derived from that of God. How can a boy overcome his academic difficulties without the help of God? And then how will you have the will to study if your heart is stirred by unruly passions?* The second means is never to waste even one moment of time. *Restrain your imagination.* The third means: get used to not jumping from one page to another, from one issue to another. The fourth means: eat moderately. *He who starts studying on a full stomach will soon feel unwell, lethargic and heavy in the head.* The fifth means: associate with diligent companions. The sixth means: play but fairly. Playing helps you with new energy to study better. The seventh means: overcome the difficulties you encounter during your studies with perseverance. *Do not let discouragement cause you to abandon your*

*studies midway.* The eighth means: only concern yourself with things regarding school. I will now tell you the most important means: always have recourse to Mary in prayer. *Mary is the Seat of Wisdom and she is our Mother. Before you settle down to study never forget to pray a 'Hail Mary' to the Madonna.*

\* \* \*

Don Bosco based himself on an integral concept of the school. Children must live in school as an extension of their family. As in a family, so too in school, love must reign supreme, otherwise there's going to be trouble.

- *Several parents act absolutely insanely* when they are so taken with the occasional excellent results their son brings home, saying: "Last time you got such good marks, why not now? Have you gone lazy? You've got to buck up." A teenager who was first in class was forced by his parents to study till noon for four hours instead of the usual two because they feared he would lose his first place. For a while he still managed to get excellent marks but then he began to rebel. He began to lie to his parents. At the end of the year he failed. His mom and dad were devastated. The boy was put under stricter surveillance. Whenever he brought home low grades he was locked up in his room. What an absurd method! It is love that should motivate the youngster's performance.

- *Parents should realise that at school a youngster's mission is not exclusively to study, he must also (and this is a very difficult thing) integrate socially.*

At 6 years of age, most children know almost nothing about their classmates in the school community. They live as isolated individuals. At the ages of 8 or 9 years, school children form groups that try to oppose the teacher. They begin to form cliques. Within these cliques there is a tacit law that is obeyed and they begin to respect the pecking order determining what place each one has. It is at this time, around the age of nine and a half, Don Bosco suggests, that youngsters begin to excel in their studies and take on other directions.

- *At the onset of preadolescence certain typical traits begin to emerge.*

*There's the model youngster*, never prone to misbehaviour, praised by the teacher but not by his companions.

*There's the buffoon* who makes everyone laugh, ridicules the teacher and causes disorder; in general this is a lad who craves attention, affection. He probably he doesn't get enough affection at home.

*There's the superstar*, he is the envy of all; he excels in sports, beats up the bad guys but often turns into a bully.

*There's the bore*, he's always bothering you because he wants to know everything.

*There's the nondescript*, he is everyone's friend; he needs to be encouraged, because he's easily given to laziness.

And there's *the frustrated kid*, whom no one mingles with, he's left out and becomes the victim of everyone. Such youngsters need love if they are to turn out well in school.

## 57. Teach Them to Love Purity

*On January 1, 1866 Don Bosco spoke thus: I seemed to be near a village. You boys were playing about in a vast, open prairie, when suddenly water surged from the far end of the plain and we found ourselves surrounded by a flood that grew more threatening as it kept rushing toward us. Very frightened, we ran as fast as we could toward a thick-walled, isolated grist mill, however as soon as we reached there we were forced to seek safety in the upper floors, wherefrom we could gauge the wide sweep of the disaster. The water kept rising and so we had to climb to the top floor. Realizing that our situation was desperate, I urged you to put all your trust in God and Our Blessed Mother. As the water neared the top floor and chilled our hearts with terror, a huge raft suddenly materialized in front of us. Breathless with fear, everyone wanted to jump on it, but no one dared. Bracing myself, I was the first to cross over. Meanwhile, many boys were growing impatient. Either out of panic or recklessness, they rushed onto it without waiting for help. Bumping into each other or otherwise losing their balance, many fell off and were swallowed up by the murky waters. All in all, one-fourth of you boys were lost. Following my instructions and with their companions' help they boarded the raft. On it a very generous quantity of bread was safely stored in many baskets. I took command though still*

*jittery. "Mary is the Star of the Sea," I said. "She never forsakes those who trust in Her, so let us get under Her protecting mantle. Then we let the raft go to the mercy of the waves, and it began to float away. In no time we had travelled a great distance but abruptly the raft came to a stop. We had to contend with a few small whirlpools but finally we came to a full stop near a beautiful, vast shore, perfectly dry. Enticed by it, many of you jumped ashore without permission but a sudden storm swelled the waters and dashed them against the bank. Submerged to the waist and screaming in terror, they were finally swallowed up by the waves. At daybreak, our raft entered a very narrow strait between two muddy banks. We saw something worse yet – a mammoth blazing furnace with people in it, and the lid over the furnace bore the large inscription: "Sixth and Seventh Commandments." A large number of boys who had fallen off the raft or left it of their own accord wandered about on the island. To all I pointed out a gushing mineral spring. Whoever washed in its cool waters was instantly cured and returned to the raft. It is the living water that comes from the pierced heart of Jesus. As soon as we were aboard the raft, the wind rose again and out we glided through the rest of the strait into the limitless ocean. Sorrowing over the sad lot of those left behind, but grateful for Our lady's protection, we thanked Her by singing Lodate Maria. Suddenly a rainbow appeared in the sky, more marvellous and colourful than the northern lights. Before our eyes was the delightful sight of enchanting meadows, dotted with trees of every kind, radiant with light as if the sun were rising behind the background of the hills. At the centre was this majestic temple and in this temple on a pedestal stood a huge magnificent*

*statue of Mary Help of Christians. By now many of you had scattered about to admire the church's beauty. Calling you together I asked you to gather in front of Our Lady to thank Her for the many favours She had bestowed on you, but it looked as if you were but a small group. While we stood admiring the statue's heavenly beauty, to our great wonderment suddenly it seemed to come alive and smile and She said: "If you will be loving children to Me, I will be a loving mother to you!"*

\* \* \*

- *In fact, for Don Bosco purity was something supernatural. In another significant dream Don Bosco asked the devil what was the greatest obstacle he faced. The devil told him that there were two things above all: first, the devotion to Our Lady; and second, the frequent reception of the sacraments of Confession and Communion. "What I fear most, - revealed the devil - was keeping the resolutions made at Confession."*

- *In a scientific study published in a journal *Educateurs* from Paris there appeared a long article on the education to purity which emphasized the divine plan of love willed by God in creation and which emphasized *three necessary elements for any genuine education to take place: 1) Progressive knowledge of the truth; 2) Education and self-control; 3) The Grace of God.**

- *Don Bosco always insisted very much on always fleeing from occasions of sin. In this modern world that has been defined as "aphrodisiacal" by the*

philosopher Bergson, youngsters always encounter, deranged, obsessive unbalanced individuals and at any moment, when they least expect it, they can become victims of bad companions or sadistic adults. The case of Milena Sutter case is demonstrative. In 1970 she disappeared like 1500 others without any trace.

It must be said that mothers naturally tell their sons: “If you meet someone you sense to be bad, if he is rude or he tries to hurt you, don’t allow it, run away and come and tell me.” Experience shows that at least 60% of children have been affected by such dangers without their parents remotely suspecting it.

A boy becomes braver when he’s more easily able to inform his parents in case of danger of this kind.

“To stay healthy and live longer it is necessary: 1) to have a clear conscience so you will sleep peacefully at night without fear of eternity; 2) eat frugally; 3) be active; 4) keep good company or flee from the wicked.”

*(Don Bosco)*

## *The Lanzo Dream: An Educative Reality*

When I feel asleep the first night I was at Lanzo, - Don Bosco told his boys at Turin - I had a dream which is totally different from all the previous ones. I have decided to recount it to you. It is quite strange. However, as you know, I bare my very heart to my sons and keep no secrets from them. If you should happen to find something in this dream that is beneficial to your soul, make good use of it.

So during the night hours of December 6, 1876 while I was in my room - whether reading or pacing back and forth or resting in bed began dreaming.

It suddenly seemed to me that I was standing on a small mound or hillock, on the rim of a broad plain so far-reaching that the eye could not compass its boundaries lost in vastness. All was blue, blue as the calmest sea, though what I saw was not water. It resembled a highly polished, sparkling sea of glass.

Broad imposing avenues divided the plain into grand gardens of indescribable beauty, each broken up by thickets, lawns, and flower beds of varied shapes and colours. None of the plants we know could ever give you an idea of those flowers, although there was a resemblance of sorts. The very grass, the flowers, the trees, the fruit-all were of singular and magnificent beauty. Leaves were of gold, trunks and boughs were of diamonds, and every tiny detail was in keeping



with this wealth. The various kinds of plants were beyond counting. Each species and each single plant sparkled with a brilliance of its own. Scattered throughout those gardens and spread over the entire plain I could see countless buildings whose architecture, magnificence, harmony, grandeur and size were so unique that one could say all the treasures of earth could not suffice to build a single one. If only my boys had one such house, I said to myself, how they would love it, how happy they would be, and how much they would enjoy being there! Thus ran my thoughts as I gazed upon the exterior of those buildings!

As I stood there basking in the splendour of those gardens, I suddenly heard music most sweet-so delightful and enchanting a melody that I could never adequately describe it. A hundred thousand instruments played, each with its own sound, uniquely different from all others, and every possible sound set the air alive with its resonant waves. Blended with them were the songs of choristers.

In those gardens I looked upon a multitude of people enjoying themselves happily, some singing, others playing, but every voice, every note, had the effect of a thousand different instruments playing together.

One could tell from the expressions of those happy faces that the singers not only took the deepest pleasure in singing, but also received vast joy in listening to the others. The more they sang, the more pressing became their desire to sing. And this was their song: *“Salvation, honour and glory to Almighty God the Father...the Creator who was, who is and who will come to judge the living and the dead forever and ever.”*

## *Dominic Savio*

As I listened enthralled to that heavenly choir I saw an endless multitude of boys approaching me. Many I recognized as having been at the Oratory and in our other schools, but by far the majority of them were total strangers to me. Their endless ranks drew closer, headed by Dominic Savio.

I kept asking myself: Am I sleeping or am I awake? I clapped my hands and felt myself to make sure that I was seeing reality. Once that host of boys got some eight or ten paces from me, they halted. There was a flash of light far brighter than before, the music stopped, and a hushed silence fell over all. A most radiant joy encompassed all those boys and sparkled in their eyes, their countenances aglow with happiness. They looked and smiled at me very pleasantly, as though anxious to speak, but no one said a word.

Dominic Savio stepped forward a pace or two, standing so close to me that, had I stretched out my hand, I would surely have touched him. He too was silent and gazed upon me with a smile. How wonderful he looked! His garments were altogether unique. The snow-white tunic which he wore down to his feet was studded with diamonds, and there were threads of gold running through it. About his waist was fastened a broad red sash, so thickly embroidered with precious gems that they almost overlapped each other, and sewn into such a charming design with such brilliance of colours that, just looking at them, I could feel myself quite lost in admiration. From his neck hung a necklace woven of exotic but not natural flowers whose petals seemed

to be clusters of diamonds set into stems of gold. And so it was with everything else. Those flowers flashed with a preternatural sparkle brighter than the very sun, which was then brilliantly burning in all the glory of a spring morning. Their blinding sparkles reflected from Dominic's candid, ruddy countenance in an indescribable manner, so brilliant indeed that their individual species were undetectable. A crown of roses encircled his head. His hair fell down in waves to his shoulders, giving him such a handsome and lovely charm that he seemed... he seemed...an angel!

\* \* \*

The other persons too were aglow with light, dressed as they all were in different but always glittering garments, some more colourful than others, each garment symbolizing something that exceeded human understanding. However, all wore the same red sash about the waist.

I kept staring and wondering: What can it all mean? How did I ever manage to get here? With no idea where I was, beside myself and shaking with awe, I dared not take a step forward. The others all remained silent. At last Dominic Savio spoke:

“Why do you stand there silent, as though you were almost devitalized?” he asked. “Aren't you the one who once feared nothing, holding your ground against slander, persecution, hostility, hardships and dangers of all sorts? Where is your courage? Say something!”

I forced myself to reply in a stammer, “I do not know what to say. Are you Dominic Savio?”

“Yes, I am. Don't you know me anymore?”

“How come you are here?” I asked, still bewildered. Savio spoke affectionately:

“I came to talk with you. We spoke together so often on earth! Do you not recall how much you loved me, or how many tokens of friendship you gave me and how kind you were to me! And did I not return the warmth of your love? How much trust I placed in you! So why are you tongue-tied? Why are you shaking? Come, ask me question or two!”

Summoning my courage, I replied,

“I am shaking because I don’t know where I am.”

“You are in the abode of happiness,” Savio answered, “where or experiences every joy, every delight.”

“Is this the reward of the just?”

“Not at all! Here we do not enjoy supernatural happiness but only natural one, though greatly magnified.”

“Everything here then is natural?”

“Yes, only enhanced by God’s power!”

“Oh, I thought this was paradise.”

“Oh, no, no!” Savio answered. “No human eye can look upon the beauty of paradise!”

“And this music, is it the music which you enjoy in heaven?”

“No, no, absolutely not!”

“Are these then natural sounds?”

“Yes, of course, but brought to perfection by God’s infinite power.”

“And this light which outshines the very sun’s brilliance - is it supernatural light? Is it heavenly light?”

“It is only natural light, fortified and perfected by God’s omnipotence.”

“Might I be allowed to see a little supernatural light?”

“No one can see it until he has come to see God as He is. The faintest ray of that light would instantly strike one dead, because the human senses are not sturdy enough to endure it.”

“Could there possibly be a natural light lovelier than this?”

“Yes, but if you could only see a single ray of natural light increased just one degree, you would go into an ecstasy.”

“Might I not see at least one tiny ray of this brighter light?”

“Yes, of course you may. I’ll give you a proof of what I say. Open your eyes.”

“They are open,” I answered.

“Pay close attention, then, and look out toward the farthest end of the crystal sea.”

\* \* \*

I looked. Instantly from the remotest heavens a sudden streak of light flashed through space, fine as a thread, but so brilliant, so piercing to my gaze faltered in pain. I shut my eyes and screamed loud enough to wake Father Lemoyne who was sleeping in the next room. In the morning he asked me in fright what had happened to me during the night to have so upset me. That filament of light was a hundred million times brighter than the sun; its brilliance could have lit up our entire universe.

After some moments I opened my eyes again. “What was that?” I asked Dominic:

“Was not that a heavenly beam?”

“It was not a supernatural light, though ever so much superior in brilliance than the light of the world. It was nothing more than earthly light rendered ever so dazzling by God’s power. Even if a vast array of light as strong as the ray you saw at the end of that crystal sea were to cover the whole world, it would still not give you an idea of the splendours of paradise.”

“Then what do you enjoy in paradise?”

“Ah, that defies all telling. The happiness of heaven no mortal beings can ever know until they die and are reunited to their Maker. We enjoy God-nothing else!”

By now I had fully recovered from my initial bewilderment and was taken up with admiring Dominic Savio’s beauty. “Why are you wearing that white, sparkling robe?” I asked him frankly.

Giving no sign of wanting to respond, Savio remained silent, but the choir, accompanied by all the instruments, sang: *Ipsi habuerunt lumbos praecinctos et dealbaverunt stolas suas in sanguine Agni* (“*They have girded themselves and have washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb*”).

“And why,” I asked as the music ended, “are you wearing that red sash about your waist?”

Again Savio did not reply and motioned that he did not wish to answer.

It was Father Alasonatti who then began to sing by himself: *Virgines enim sunt et sequuntur Agnum*

quocumque ierit (*They are virgins and follow the Lamb wherever He goes*).

I then understood that Dominic's blood-red sash was a symbol of the great sacrifices, the strenuous efforts, and the near-martyrdom he had endured to preserve the virtue of purity, and that, to remain chaste in God's eyes, he would have given up his life if the circumstances had warranted it. It was also a symbol of penance which cleanses the soul of guilt. In addition, the shining whiteness of his robe signified the baptismal innocence which he had preserved.

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## *Angels like him*

Entranced by the singing and gazing upon those endless ranks of heavenly youths massed behind Dominic Savio, I asked him:

“Who are they? ... Why are all of you so resplendent with light?”

Savio continued to remain silent and all his companions broke into song: *Hi sunt sicut Angeli Dei in caelo (They are like God's angels in heaven)*. I had noticed meanwhile that Savio seemed to enjoy a certain pre-eminence over that assembly, which kept at a respectful distance some ten paces behind him.

“Tell me, Savio,” I said, “you are the youngest of this entire following and of those who have died in our houses. Why then are you at their head as their leader? Why are you their spokesman, while they are silent?”

“I am the oldest of them all.”

“Oh, no,” I countered. “Many of them are a good deal older than you.”

“I am the oldest of the Oratory,” Dominic Savio repeated, “because I was the first to leave the world and enter into this life. Besides, “*legatione Dei fungor*” (*I am God’s ambassador*). This answer made the reason for the apparition clear to me. He was God’s envoy.

“Well, then,” I said, “let us speak of the things which most concern us at this moment.”

“Yes, and be quick. Ask me whatever you wish to know. Hours go by and the time I have been given to speak with you may run out and you might not see me again.”

“I am convinced you have something of supreme importance to tell me.”

“What could I ever tell you - I, a poor creature?” Savio said with the deepest humility. “From on high I was given the mission to speak with you. That is why I am here.”

“Then,” I exclaimed, “Tell me of the past, of the present, and of the future of our Oratory. Tell me something about my dear sons. Talk to me of my Congregation.”

“There are so many things I could tell you about that.”

“Reveal to me the things you know. Tell me about the past.”

“All the past is your responsibility,” Savio replied.

“Have I made any blunders?”

“As to the past I will say that your Congregation has already accomplished a great deal of good. Do you see that countless multitude of boys there?”



“Yes. They are so many,” I answered. “How happy they look!”

“Observe, do you see what is written at the gateway of that garden?”

“I do. It says ‘Salesian Garden.’”

“Well then,” Savio went on, “those who are there were all Salesians or Salesian pupils. They were saved by you or your priests and clerics. Or they are those whom you directed on the path of their vocation. Count them if you can! Still, there would be a hundred million times more if you only had greater faith and trust in the Lord.”

I sighed in dismay. I had no excuse for his reproach but resolved within my heart: ‘I shall endeavour to have this faith and trust in the future.’

Then I inquired,

“What of the present?”

## *A magnificent bouquet of flowers*

Savio held out a gorgeous bouquet of roses, violets, sunflowers, gentians, lilies, evergreens, perennials, and sprigs of wheat and he handed it to me.

“Look at these flowers,” he said.

“I am looking,” I replied, “but I don’t know what you mean.”

“Give this bouquet to your sons so that, when the time comes, they may offer it to the Lord. See to it that everyone has it, that no one is without it, and that no one steals it from them. Do this and you can rest assured that they will have enough to make them happy.”

“What do these flowers symbolize?”

“Get your theology book,” he replied, “and you will know.”

“I’ve studied theology,” I objected, “and I still can’t fathom any meaning from what you have given me.”

“And yet you absolutely should know these things.”

“Well then,” I pleaded, “ease my anxiety. Tell me what this is all about.”

“Do you see these flowers?” Savio obliged. “They symbolize the virtues which most delight the Lord.”

“Which are they?”

“The rose is the symbol of charity, the violet of humility, the sunflower of obedience, the gentian of penance and self-denial, and the wheat stalks of frequent Communion. Then, the lily stands for the beautiful virtue of chastity of which it is written: *Erunt sicut angeli Dei in caelo (They shall be like God’s angels in heaven)*. Finally, the evergreens and perennials tell you that these virtues must endure forever. They denote perseverance.”

“Very well, my dear Savio,” I answered. “Now tell me, you who practiced all these virtues in your lifetime, what comforted you the most at the moment of your death?”

“What do you think it was?” Savio prompted.

“Perhaps having preserved the beautiful virtue of purity?”

“Not that alone.”

“Having your conscience at peace?”

“That too is a good thing, but it is still not the best.”

“Perhaps the hope of paradise?”

“No, not even that.”

“Well, was it the treasury of good deeds you had stored up?”

“No, no.”

“Well, what was it then?” I pleaded with him, nonplussed at having failed to fathom his thought.

“The one thing that consoled me most at the hour of my death,” Savio answered, “was the assistance of the mighty and lovely Mother of the Saviour. Tell your sons never to forget to pray to Her as long as they live. But now hurry if you want me to answer more questions.”

### *Three Revelations*

“What can you tell me about the future?”

“In the coming year of 1877, you will have a painful sorrow to endure. Six and then two more of those dearest to you will be summoned into eternity. But be comforted, for they will be transplanted from this world to the gardens of heaven. They will receive their crown. And do not be worried, for the Lord will be your help and will give you other good sons.”

“God’s will be done! And what will happen to the Congregation?”

“The Lord is preparing great things for you. In the coming year your Congregation will see a dawn of glory so resplendent that it will light up the four corners of the earth. A great splendour lies in the offing. But see to it that the Lord’s chariot is not led by your Salesians off its course, out of its set path. If your priests will guide it in a manner worthy of their lofty calling, the future of your Congregation will be most glorious and will bring salvation to endless

multitudes of people. There is but one condition: that your sons be devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary and that all of them learn to preserve the virtue of chastity which so delights God.”

“Now I would like you to tell me about the Church in general,” I continued.

“The Church’s destiny is in the hands of God, our Maker. I cannot tell you what He has determined in His infinite decrees. To Himself alone He keeps such mysteries, and no heavenly creature can ever share that knowledge.”

“What will happen to Pius IX?”

“All I can tell you is that the Church’s shepherd will not have much longer to do battle here on earth. Few are the combats he must still win. Soon he will be taken from his see and the Lord will grant him his well-earned reward. The rest you know. The Church will not die. Is there anything else you want to know?”

“What will happen to me?” I asked.

“If you only knew how many tribulations still await you! But hurry now, for the time allotted me to speak to you is drawing to a close.”

Impulsively I stretched out my hands to clutch those of that blessed youth, but his hands were no firmer than thin air, and I grasped nothingness.

“How foolish!” Dominic said with a smile. “What are you trying to do?”

“I am afraid to lose you,” I exclaimed. “Are you not really here in the flesh?”

“Not in my flesh. One day I will take that up again.”

“But what is that I see? You have Dominic Savio’s features; you are Dominic Savio.”

“Look,” he said, “when a soul, separated from the body, is allowed by God to reveal itself to a human, it retains its features just as it had them in the flesh, though considerably enhanced in beauty, until it is reunited to the body on the day of the universal judgment. From then on soul and body will again be together. That is why I seem to have hands, feet and head, but you cannot grasp me because I am a pure spirit. “

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“I understand,” I answered. “I have one more question: Are all my boys on the path of salvation? Tell me how to guide them.”

“The boys whom Divine Providence has entrusted to your care can be divided into three groups. Take a look at these three sheets of paper.” (He held one out to me.)

I looked at the first. It bore one word: *Invulnerati*, unscathed, that is, those whom the devil had not been able to harm, those who had never lost their baptismal innocence. There was a great number of them and I saw them all. Many I personally knew; many others I was seeing for the first time—perhaps boys who will come to the Oratory in future years. They were all moving forward unswervingly along a narrow path, regardless of the arrows and swords and spears that were continually being hurled at them from everywhere. These weapons bristled like hedges on both sides of their path, threatening and harassing but never wounding them.

Savio then handed me a second sheet. It bore the word: *Vulnerati*, wounded, that is, those who had fallen into sin but had risen to their feet again, healed of their wounds after repentance and confession.

Their number was considerably greater than the first. They had been wounded on their passage through life by the enemies who lined their way. I scanned the list of their names and saw them all. Many dragged themselves along, bent over and disheartened.

Savio still held a third sheet in his hand, labelled: *Lassati in via iniquitatis*, exhausted on the path of iniquity. It bore the names of all those boys who at that moment were in the state of sin. Impatient to know the contents of that list, I put out my hand, but Savio quickly held the note back.

“Wait a moment,” he said, “and listen. Once you open this note, such a stench will come out that it will overcome us both and make the angels withdraw in disgust and horror. The Holy Spirit himself cannot stand the offensive odour of sin!”

“How can this be,” I objected, “since God and his angels are impassable? How can they smell a material stench?”

“They can,” he answered. “The purer and holier a creature is, the more it resembles a heavenly spirit, but the filthier and more sinful one is, the further he moves from God and His angels, who in turn withdraw from him, an object of disgust and loathing.”

He then gave me the note. “Take it,” he said, “and use it for the good of your boys, but don’t forget the bouquet of flowers which I have given you. Make sure that everyone has it and does not lose it.”

Giving me the list, he hastily withdrew and joined his companions. I opened it. I saw no names, but in an instant there flashed before my eyes all the lads therein mentioned, just as real as if they were

standing there in front of me. With great grief I saw all of them. Most I knew personally as belonging to this Oratory and to our other schools. I also noticed quite a few who rate as good boys and even some who rank among the very best but are not so at all. Then, as I opened that note, an unbearable stench emanated from it. An atrocious headache immediately seized me, and I felt so sick to my stomach that I thought I would die. The whole sky darkened, the vision vanished, and nothing was left of that wonderful sight. Suddenly a bolt of lightning flashed with a crash of thunder so deafening and frightening that I awoke in a cold sweat. That stench penetrated the very walls and got into all my clothing, so much so that for days afterward I could still detect its foulness. Even the name of the sinner is truly foul in God's eyes. Even now, no sooner do I recall that stench than I begin to shudder and choke, and my stomach turns over with retching.

There at Lanzo, where I had this dream, I began to call in some boys and soon realized that my dream was no dream but, rather, a very special favour of God that enabled me to know each one's state of soul. Of this however, I shall say nothing in public.

## *From Dream To Reality*

Because the dream showed that some Oratory boys who seemed to be among the best were actually morally bad, it gave Don Bosco cause for misgivings that it might be a mere hallucination.

That is why at Lanzo he had summoned several boys to his room in order to ascertain its truth. Hence,

too, he delayed two weeks before narrating it, and only when he felt quite sure that it had come from above did he speak. As its predictions would be fulfilled, time would corroborate its message.

The first prediction-very important to him-concerned his beloved sons who were to die in 1877: six within a short span and two later on. The Oratory records of that year bear the symbolic cross beside the names of six boys and two clerics.

The second prediction, likewise to be fulfilled in 1877, heralded for the Salesian Society a radiant dawn whose splendour would reach to the farthest ends of the earth. That same year, the Association of Salesian Cooperators began to shine on the Church's horizon, and the *Salesian Bulletin* came into existence - two events which were instrumental in spreading the knowledge and practice of Don Bosco's spirit to the ends of the earth.

The third prediction concerned the forthcoming death of Pope Pius IX, who did in fact die fourteen months later.

The last prediction had an ominous ring for Don Bosco: "If you only knew how many tribulations still await you!" And sure enough, Don Bosco's last eleven years and two months were packed with ceaseless struggles, travails and sacrifices to his very dying breath.

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From this dream several items may serve as useful aids to form the religious conscience of the adolescent.

From the point of view of religious practice, the educator has the right and the duty to discreetly and effectively help and support the youngster. You must



recommend regular attendance at Mass, Confession and Communion. Insist on morning and night prayers, prayers before and after meals and other religious practices that are practiced in traditional Christian families.

On the other hand, the educator should be discreet and cautious when it comes to Confession and Communion. One thing is to invite a youngster to make his Confession and receive Holy Communion and it is quite another to oblige or insist with moral pressure so that he may not be able to escape it.

The religious evolution of a teenager is a very personal/secret area of his intellectual and social development. The enigma is that each youngster unknown and indecipherable. There may be situations such as:

- There may be nothing that may properly be called a crisis and in which case the religious awakening will be gentle, slow and harmonious.
- Or the religious evolution of the youngster may suffer a serious decline or at least less significant, of piety, personal or external; this lack of religiosity deserves a careful diagnosis and appropriate remedies.
- Or there may be signs of an unusual spurt of a kind of mysticism.

The absence of crisis or a crisis of deficiency or excessive religiosity: these are specific situations that also admit to intermediary forms too. It is possible

and very probable too that in the case of this fourteen, fifteen or sixteen year the teenager, he begins to search for his true religious personality and because of which he might go through periods of elation or depression.

If the religious crisis that a youngster experiences manifests itself in a kind of indifference, a slowing down of piety, he must be watched carefully.

In guiding the souls of the young, Don Bosco was an incomparable teacher: his best pupil was Dominic Savio.

Dominic Savio, the protagonist of the dream at Lanzo, shot like a meteor through the life of Don Bosco. From their first meeting at Becchi to the death of the teenager in his hometown of Mondonio, they spent just over two years together. Of all his boys, Dominic was his favourite. And Don Bosco wrote his life intending it as model to be imitated.



