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The personalistic character of St. John Bosco's pedagogy

Introduction

The education of young people who would be fully socially, morally and religiously mature and responsible is nowadays the highest priority for all educational circles. However, a substantial share of today's educational principles are something between dogmatic autocracy and spontaneous "non-guided" liberalism. As a matter of fact, such extreme models turn out to be unable to mold strong, diligent, harmonious and tenacious personalities¹. They are also dubious when they absolutize individual aspects of human experience, are indifferent or openly antipathetic to any forms of one's being receptive to transcendence, the absolute, and infinity, or simply to its possibilities, and are opposed to moral or religious values that are deeply ingrained in conscience. For this reason, it is vital to find a role model who can show the right way of educating the young generation, the more so because there are so many contradictions. In the history of education, there have been many outstanding and exemplary educators. The Italian priest and great educator of youth St. John Bosco (1815–1888), known after his ordination as "Don Bosco", is one of them. His educational artistry was born from his caring and loving companionship with young people. His educational method still offers new suggestions, and stimulates and encourages a person

¹ M. Magier, *Kulturowy kontekst wychowania dziecka*, in: D. Opozda (ed.), *Rodzicielstwo. Wybrane zagadnienia kontekstów edukacyjnych*, Lublin 2007, p. 102–103.

to become someone he or she really is and ought to be by his or her nature. It also molds a person according to such premises and encourages him or her to make such decisions that he or she feels intuitively and is going to assimilate by following the voice of one's personal vocation.

It is worth reflecting on the personalistic dimension of Don Bosco's pedagogy that, also today, provides the youth with favorable conditions of integral development and education during the difficult period of building solid foundations of their own spiritual and social lives.

Human being: a perspective of development

When we look for new ways of finding the truth about a human being, we see that personalism in its educational dimension "stresses a person's uniqueness and one's right to choose one's own way of self-improvement and personal development – including any forms and levels of education. A person's dignity and freedom are in contradiction with any unjustified control of this education and manipulation of contents of education; however, this does not mean that education should be unguided"². In this context, personalism is a philosophical discipline that fully acknowledges the individual and social (integral) character of a human being who strives to fulfil his or her humanity. To a great extent, the personalistic concept of a human being as a person is based on the Christian philosophical and theological reflection on a human being, as his or her personal existence and final goal are the subject of study of both Christian philosophy and theology. In the light of this reflection, a person is perceived as a judicious and free being who is capable of learning the truth and good. In the personalistically-oriented Christian pedagogy, a person is always perceived as a subject of education³. The difficulties of today's education result most frequently from the distortion of the truth about a human being.

According to the personalistic concept of a human being as a person, a human being is subject to development – and this development is an update, or fulfilling oneself as a person. In this respect, the process of education consists in gradually reaching one's own "perfection", and competently controlling the process of self-development that makes us fully human. A human being always

² F. Adamski, *Wprowadzenie: personalizm – filozoficzny nurt myślenia w człowieku i wychowaniu*, in: idem (ed.), *Wychowanie personalistyczne*, Kraków 2005, p. 13.

³ J. Goleń, *Wychowanie seksualne w rodzinie. Studium pastoralne*, Rzeszów 2006, p. 31.

strives to be fully himself or herself, as no one can ever say that the update of his or her own self is complete. This regular, consistent, and long-term process of “fully developing one’s own self” is supported by different educational institutions and centers that take up the role of cultural brokers. The very culture acts as a means, and not a goal of education – the goal is to achieve the highest-possible level of a subject’s personal development. In this discussion, education is understood as molding a human being so that he or she can achieve his or her final goal, and at the same time for the well-being of the in which community he or she lives, the community whose achievements, inspirations and care the person uses⁴. In order to fulfill one’s personal life, a person needs to know who a human being is and what his or her final goal (sense of life) is⁵. Anthropology that is understood as a theory of a human being (person) justifies the need to educate a person and points out his or her final goal. For this reason, it is a cognitive foundation for pedagogy as a science about human education⁶.

Pedagogy that is understood in the spirit Christian personalism reflects on and deals in its scholarly practice with the integral education of a human being. This is education that takes into consideration the earthly (material) and supernatural (spiritual) dimension of a human being in the context of his or her vocation in life. Such pedagogy takes into account the “complexity” of a human being and his or her vocation, and lets us ask who a human being actually is in the perspective of his or her social and supernatural life. According to many philosophical conceptions that are based on Christian thought, “man was created ‘in the image and likeness’ of God the Creator and is for this reason a personal substance, a judicious and free subject who, indeed, shares his human existence with others but is an exceptionally unique being on the plane of spirit and body, who is able to transcend his body and the world. He is also a self that is ‘for himself’ and cannot be reduced to a mere ‘means’, as he is called to be immortal and see God”⁷. This understanding of a human being is fully consistent with the principles of Christian personalism, which is based on a concept of a human being that says that he or she is a person whose task in life is to fulfill (update) his or her personal potentials in accordance with the final

⁴ F. Adamski, op. cit., p. 14.

⁵ D. Bis, *Przestrzeń medialna i przemiany w procesie wychowania*, in: J. Bagrowicz, J. Horowski (ed.), *Edukacyjny potencjał religii*, Toruń 2012, p. 274–276.

⁶ B. Kiereś, *O personalizm w pedagogice. Studia i szkice z teorii wychowania*, Lublin 2009, p. 13–14.

⁷ T. Guz, *W poszukiwaniu chrześcijańskiej filozofii wychowania*, in: A. Rynio (ed.), *Wychowanie chrześcijańskie: między tradycją a współczesnością*, Lublin 2007, p. 256.

goal in life, which is known and has been freely chosen. Every human being is born as a person and is faced with the necessity of building one's own humanity in the spirit of responsibility for it by accomplishing the good. For this reason, personal life is a kind of task for a human being and building this life requires social and individual effort (self-education) that is made in the field of culture⁸.

In his teaching, John Paul II stresses strongly the fact that "from the very moment of conception, and then of birth, the new being is meant to express fully his humanity – to 'find himself' as a person. [...] 'To be human' is his fundamental vocation: 'to be human' in accordance with the gift received, in accordance with that 'talent' which is humanity itself, and only then in accordance with other talents received"⁹. Such perception of a person makes us discern that he or she is a dynamic (potential) being who strives for perfection, or fully finding himself or herself. This is a process of a person's development by his or her turning to the good and participating in it more and more until "transcending one's own self". The process consists also in learning the truth about the sense of human existence, as well as in fully discerning the image of the material and social world and a human being's place in this world¹⁰. This dynamic orientation of a person to self-development results from his or her very nature – it is a consequence of a person's conscious need to fulfil himself or herself, in terms of one's personality, mind and will in the context of the known and accepted final goal in life. Personal life is in a way assigned to a human being, which means that one is born as a person but he or she must continuously put effort into "building" one's own self as a human being. This is not only about building it "outside" – as John Paul II stresses – but above all about building it "inside", in hardship, tenaciously and patiently¹¹. Human biological and mental development is in a sense natural, but in terms of one's personal life, a human being "is born" gradually and develops thanks to education and self-education¹².

As experience shows, a human being – a person – "is able to update his or her 'nature' only when other persons participate in this process and help, which

⁸ B. Kiereś, *Współczesny wychowawca wobec antypedagogiki*, in: S. Sztobryn, B. Śliwerski (ed.), *Idee pedagogiki filozoficznej*, Łódź 2003, p. 125.

⁹ Jan Paweł II, *List do rodzin*, Kraków 1994, p. 22.

¹⁰ F. Adamski, op. cit., p. 11.

¹¹ M. Pokrywka, *Antropologiczne podstawy wychowania w rodzinie*, in: K. Jeżyna, T. Zadkiewicz (ed.), *Wychowanie w rodzinie chrześcijańskiej. Przesłanie moralne Kościoła*, Lublin 2008, p. 22.

¹² B. Kiereś, *Rodzina jako nisza ekologiczna życia osobowego człowieka*, "Episteme" 2000, no. 8, p. 163.

means that the full development of one's personal life is possible only in the community. [...] Human birth, education, development and perfection to the extent accessible to a person are only possible by means of different forms of social existence"¹³. For this reason, there is a rich diversity of interpersonal bonds to different social groups where one can experience interpersonal dependence and solidarity in becoming fully human. However, no social group can claim the right to rule over or subordinate a human being, not to mention limiting, manipulating and objectifying the process of a person's development that can be observed in different communities where a human being grows up, develops and learns. This would inevitably lead to infringing the very idea of education that is understood as a person's development, while fully respecting his or her freedom and dignity. A person's uniqueness and the right to choose one's own way of improvement and personal development are in contradiction with any forms of gaining control of the process of a person's development and education by so-called social pressure factors (political parties and social organizations, media, etc.). It is only parents, who "gave life to their child", that have the primary right and duty to participate in the process of development of their child's personality – with the child being the subject in the process – by providing the child with the most favorable conditions for the update of its potential. However, the very development of a child (the development of its personality) must be supported by its personal effort. The role and place of the "society" in this process of development are determined by the rule of supportiveness; however, in the light of this supportiveness, a person's effort "to become fully human" should be supplemented by appropriate social institutions such as family, school, and the Church. For this reason, it should be stressed that "community is in reality and in principle subordinated to a human being as a person, and striving for the common good, that is for the update of personal potentials of every member of the community, is a *sine qua non* for the existence of the community"¹⁴. The most important thing is that social life must always serve the well-being of a human being and his or her improvement and development. In this respect, a person's "fulfilling one's own self" is the process that lasts from his or her birth to natural death and where the supportive role of the society also counts, with the family and institutions that support it, are the most favorable environment for the development and education of a human being.

¹³ M.A. Krąpiec, *Ja – człowiek: zarys antropologii filozoficznej*, Lublin 1974, p. 289.

¹⁴ B. Kiereś, *Rodzina jako nisza...*, p. 164.

Don Bosco's educational project

Don Bosco's educational project, which is included in his preventive system, is an expression of his creative search and innovative approach to, especially, young people, so as to provide them with the possibility of fully developing their personal potential. Don Bosco is unique in comparison with other educators of his time because of his definite and original turning to positive educational influence. As a person of great sensitivity to the needs of others and who follows the rules of Christian love to other people, Don Bosco decides to follow this love also in the field of education by means of goodness, kindness, full acceptance and confidence in people. In Don Bosco's educational practice, personal bonds that are based on deep acceptance for the person who is being educated gain a special meaning. In the assumptions of this educational system, he clearly points out that positive, deep relations between educator and student are fundamental for the process of education and development of a human being. Thanks to his long-standing educational experience, he was firmly convinced that family atmosphere, closeness, cheerful and cordial bonds of friendship are vital to create an atmosphere of trust, which is necessary for effective education. Don Bosco was deeply convinced that he had to make his students feel his authentic kindness and goodness before he could maintain discipline, obedience and order. He left a simple instruction for his followers, but the very important one, which can be summed up as follows: Always try to make your students love you more than fear you¹⁵.

In Don Bosco's time, the way in which pedagogical problems were treated was stiff and ossified. The system of education was understood in the same way; the methods and means were fossilized. In his teaching style, Don Bosco firmly distanced himself from that understanding of the system, as the stability of its regulations limited his freedom and independence of actions. He was in favor of a system that was understood in a dynamic way. According to him, the system should have a logical structure, but at the same time it should be aimed at developing and diversifying the methods. The great practitioner of educational methods was of the opinion that only a system that was understood in that way could meet historic and social conditions and at the same time reach a particular human being. Don Bosco's preventive system was in

¹⁵ Z. Klawikowski, *Przejmująca moc dobroci. Serdeczność w kontaktach międzyludzkich rysem duchowości ks. Bosko*, in: *Peregrynacja relikwii św. Jana Bosko w Inspektoriach polskich*, Warszawa – Piła – Wrocław – Kraków 2013, p. 90–92.

favor of everything that culture and “civilization” of a particular community offered, that is, a “humanistic character” that did not accept things that were stiff and connected with a blinkered attitude and short-sightedness; contrarily, it approved of everything that was related to open and honest “optimism” that could understand everybody and was far from any form of petty and doctrinaire pressure¹⁶. However, the importance of the preventive system does not result from its brilliance and originality, but rather from its Christian character, which was implemented by Don Bosco in an honest and consistent way. It consists in “discovering” the need of a teacher’s love as an answer to every person’s radical need to “love and be loved”¹⁷.

Having reflected on what it means to be a human being, Don Bosco came to the conclusion that good is intrinsic and natural to human nature. For this reason, the whole system is primarily aimed at discovering potential powers of good that are in every human being. This does not mean turning a blind eye to the fact that evil exists, because its elimination is not central to this concept, but it results from the development of good. In this respect, the preventive system does not display any characteristics of a taming system, but it shows values to young people and provides them with conditions for their development in social and religious maturity¹⁸. The development of good guarantees a mental balance, respects – and does not destroy – a person’s inborn makings, does not influence his personality in a negative way, but releases new energy and motivates to act.

In order to be able to mold young people’s personalities in the spirit of deep respect for their dignity, Don Bosco had to modify the approach to discipline in a way that was creative and innovative in those times. He replaced restrictions with freedom. In times before Don Bosco, the resignation from fun, entertainment and humor had been imposed, but he decided to favor these factors as a means of maintaining discipline. He knew the value of and the need for discipline but was of the opinion that only discipline that was introduced in an intended and deliberate way could be helpful. According to him, external rigorism kills internal freedom, optimism and contentment in young people. In his opinion, freedom within the scope of the law and the development of

¹⁶ V. Plášek, *Vychovný systém kňaza Jána Bosca*, “Studia Scientifica Facultatis Paedagogicae” 2012, no. 4, p. 160–161.

¹⁷ M. Potočárová, *Pohľad saleziánskej spirituality a pedagogiky Jána Boska na hodnotu osoby*, “Studia Scientifica Facultatis Paedagogicae” 2012, no. 4, p. 136–137.

¹⁸ Z. Klawikowski, op. cit., p. 92.

natural inclinations serve the discipline¹⁹. Education in the 19th century was marked by educators' distance, rigidity and rigorous attitude to their students, which made mutual contact difficult or even impossible. In the preventive system, interpersonal educator-student relations are based on family atmosphere, where brotherhood, kindness to one another, trust, and direct conversation are the most important values. The teacher should share the youth's inclinations and interests, however, in such a way that they could learn how to act out of one's own choice and in accordance with the accepted values, that is, nobly and with love. When we look at Don Bosco from the perspective of his reality, we discover that he overcame in a brilliant and at the same time natural way the educational paternalism that had been implemented by many pedagogies in the preceding centuries and, in fact, had separated teachers and their students by means of pedagogical distance. Don Bosco's life was full of his interpersonal relations with the youth. The relations enriched in a personal way both him and his students and inspired both parties to develop their human abilities²⁰. From this perspective, every young person deserves special care that would enable him or her to fully develop one's own humanity, no matter what his or her state and situation are. Don Bosco's personalistic educational project is, in fact, based on three basic principles – reason, religion and love – which are supplemented by the creative and spontaneous presence of the teacher among his students.

In Don Bosco's personalistic pedagogy, "reason" is a principle of pedagogical realism and educational prudence. Education that is based on the principle of reason enriches the preventive system with optimistic humanism that makes us believe in the natural and supernatural "wealth" of a human being. It does not ignore a person's weakness but, above all, emphasizes his or her advantages and focuses on good things. In this context, it is assumed that every person, however poor or with whatever different negative experiences, has a source of enough energy to live and develop in a proper way. Furthermore, the principle of reason that is applied in the pedagogical practice aims at regulating any interpersonal relations in the educational environment. In accordance with this principle, everything in education should be reasonable: rules, requests, orders,

¹⁹ J. Niewęglowski, *Wychowawczo-społeczna działalność salezjanów w Polsce w latach 1898–1989*, Warszawa 2011, p. 74–75.

²⁰ P. Chávez Villanueva, *Wzorem Księdza Bosko – wychowawcy ofiarujemy młodzieży Ewangelię radości stosując pedagogię dobroci*, http://salezjanie.pl/sites/default/files/pliki/czytelnia/7054/prezentacja_wiazanki_2013.pdf (31 grudnia 2013).

punishments, prizes, and teachers' opinions²¹. In Don Bosco's pedagogy, the reference to the principle of reason is a *sine qua non* for the development of the healthy and well-balanced personalities of students who would be responsible for their decisions and ready to lead an intensive social and spiritual life. Another important element of the preventive system is "religion" that accents also transcendent dimension. Don Bosco was convinced that "religion" was a condition of educational effectiveness, as it was an internal pedagogical principle that shaped the contents, forms and means of education of children and the youth²². In his ideal model of personalistic education, the principle of religion aims above all at enriching the student internally, as well as at his or her diligent, enthusiastic and creative performance of everyday duties such as joy, learning, obedience, love for God and other people, and fulfilling one's own religious practices²³. This is not only a matter of "religious education" but also of the religious core of one's whole life that imbues both students and teachers with the values that they accept and follow in everyday life. Then, the third principle of Don Bosco's pedagogy is "a teacher's love" that is also referred to as "kindness". It is visible in the educator's attitude and is characterized by his concern for his students' development and human and supernatural well-being. In pedagogical practice, it means that the teacher's approach is pervaded with deep kindness, which helps him to become a friend of the youth and create an atmosphere of true and liberating "educational presence" in the group of students²⁴. This is a complex reality where availability, healthy rules and a proper way of conduct are crucial. In this respect, education that is based on "love" comprises in teaching to students such values that could form their mature personality.

"The teacher's presence" is an important element that completes the three components (reason, religion, love) of Don Bosco's pedagogy. This presence reflects the character of any educational relations in the preventive system, which means that the educator is always concerned about his students' development. According to Don Bosco's educational concept, the educator's main task is to actively participate in the process of molding his students' personalities. His contact with students is essential, but also multidimensional²⁵. In this context,

²¹ J. Niewęglowski, *Charakterystyczne cechy wychowawcy w stylu ks. Bosko*, in: tegoż (ed.), *Ksiądz Bosko i jego system wychowawczy*, Warszawa 2000, p. 183.

²² K. Misiaszek, *Główne idee systemu prewencyjnego św. Jana Bosko*, "Seminare" 1987/1988, no. 9, p. 49.

²³ J. Niewęglowski, *Charakterystyczne cechy...*, p. 184–185.

²⁴ Jan Paweł II, *Ojciec i nauczyciel młodzieży*, in: J. Niewęglowski (ed.), op. cit., p. 60–62.

²⁵ J. Niewęglowski, *Charakterystyczne cechy...*, p. 187–188.

the educator's presence among the youth should express his or her acceptance of their positive inclinations and interests, however, in a way that would teach them how to act in a conscious way, out of free choice and in accordance with the accepted values. In the course of time, the educator also becomes a role model for many young people and helps them develop their personalities in a proper and effective way, and overcome the problems and difficulties that they face in their lives. The educator's presence among his or her students is a positive activity. In this activity, the educator helps his or her students to do good.

According to Don Bosco's conviction, an educator may influence his or her students more effectively while devoting them a proper amount of time and being able to speak to them "from his or her heart". It is important to reprimand one's students by showing them "kindness" and not expressing anger, impatience or punishing them and treating them like objects²⁶. A cold and repressive attitude always causes fear and creates an atmosphere of discontent and mutual distrust in the educator-student relations. Don Bosco never educated "on a large scale", as his formation of the youth was never like taming but consisted in focusing on his students' individuality. Above all, he was a person who had unbelievable intuition and a talent for showing kindness to the least and poorest. He was an educator who created a personalistic style of education, where the principle of freedom reigned supreme. He perceived this principle as something given by the Creator to humans. For this reason, he was convinced that showing confidence in his students was the best way of conduct, which could at the same time act as a spur to their further development and educational "dialogue"²⁷. Because of this fact, his educational activity aimed at molding a person who would be socially and religiously mature. According to him, a young person who was mature from the human and Christian perspective was predisposed to the greatest extent to bring about a social and moral revival of the society and the world.

Concluding remarks

St. John Bosco's pedagogy is now an up-to-date educational offer that can fascinate both teachers and the youth by making them free and creative in their

²⁶ M. Łobocki, *Współczesne tendencje w wychowaniu a system wychowawczy św. Jana Bosko*, in: J. Niewęglowski (ed.), op. cit., p. 266–267.

²⁷ C. Bissoli, *Jan Paweł II o systemie wychowawczym księdza Bosko*, przekł. K. Misiaszek, Warszawa 2001, p. 60.

everyday life and actions. It creates a specific pedagogical atmosphere where family-like and “democratic” relations bring teachers closer to their students and students closer to their teachers, so that they can build together a harmonious educational community. The personalistic principles of the preventive system make it possible to specify the aims of education in a proper way and at the same time provide the youth with a chance to supplement what is natural with what is supernatural by living one’s life to the fullest. The lifestyle suggested by Don Bosco’s educational model gives the youth a natural opportunity to accept their personal responsibility for their own social and religious development. In this way, the youth’s experience of faith and life becomes their ethical and moral experience, which adds new quality to their existence. A contemporary teacher who follows the principles of the preventive system in his or her educational activity is creative enough to be able to enrich the minds of children and the youth.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł ukazuje system wychowawczy jednego z wybitnych włoskich pedagogów XIX wieku – Jana Bosko, którego myśl pedagogiczna również dzisiaj nie przestaje fascynować wielu pedagogów, czyniąc z nich „artystów” w dziedzinie wychowania. Tekst wskazuje na oryginalność systemu prewencyjnego, która wyraża się w iście nowatorskim sposobie wykorzystania tradycyjnych wartości jakimi są rozum, religia i miłość. Autor zwraca również uwagę na potencjalną możliwość wykorzystania

systemu prewencyjnego Jana Bosko we współczesnej pracy pedagogicznej, gdyż stanowi on niezwykle cenne „narzędzie” w procesie kształtowanie u młodzieży osobowości dojrzałych i harmonijnych – dobrych chrześcijan i uczciwych obywateli.

Słowa kluczowe: młodzież, rozum, religia, miłość, system prewencyjny, wychowanie

Summary

This article presents the educational system of one of the leading Italian educators of the 19th century, St. John Bosco, whose pedagogical thought even today continues to fascinate many teachers, making them “artists” in the field of education. This paper addresses the originality of the preventive system, which is truly innovative in the use of traditional values such as reason, religion and love. The author also notes the potential for the use of a preventive system of Don Bosco in modern teaching, since it is an extremely valuable “tool” in the development of young people’s mature and harmonious personality – good Christians and decent citizens.

Key words: youth, reason, religion, love, preventive system, education