

The Preventive System and the Salesian Family in dialogue with a globalised world

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MOTIVATIONS

1. We are motivated to hold this meeting to celebrate, with joy and gratitude, the 150th anniversary (1876–2026) of the foundation of the Salesian Cooperators.
2. And the anniversary we are marking of the 150th anniversary of Don Bosco's¹ text on the Preventive System² (1877–2027), proposed as a new Strenna by Fr Fabio Attard: *Charity is patient, charity is kind. Dedicated to the integral good of young people.*³
3. This is also in line with the Rector Major's guidance to the Salesian Family in his six-year programme, in which he speaks of "offering current and updated proposals for formation, for a growing evangelical and charismatic identity that meets today's challenges in the various continents and that values the precious help of charismatic shared responsibility that the members of our Family offer."
4. It is a constant request from the Delegates and Group Leaders to promote various kinds of formation of this kind.

THE TASK

To acquire a renewed understanding and a fruitful assimilation of the Preventive System, harmonising fidelity to Don Bosco's charismatic insights with a creative and discerning adaptation to the challenges of emerging cultures, inviting us to embark on concrete paths of unity and renewal within the Salesian Family in the Americas.

...

Is it possible to envisage a 'new' Preventive System? Does this mean that Don Bosco's Preventive System has gone out of fashion? Could it be that the passage of time and profound cultural changes demand an adaptation to the present day? If it needs to be updated, what guarantees that the founder's originality and charismatic insights will be preserved? What is adaptable or changeable, and what is enduring?

1. Under the same digital sky The challenges of a globalised reality.

It is evident to our eyes and, above all, to our lived experience, that the world is changing rapidly and radically. The *Aparecida* document (2007) already stated: 'We are living through **a change of**

¹ From now on, for ease of reading: DB.

² Hereinafter: PS.

³ ATTARD, Fabio. Strenna for 2027.

era, the deepest level of which is cultural;⁴ and it devoted the whole of Chapter II to describing the ‘View of missionary disciples on reality’⁵ ...

What is new about these changes, unlike those that have occurred in other eras, is that **they have a global reach** which, with differences and nuances, affects the whole world. **They are usually characterised as the phenomenon of globalisation.**⁶

Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, a leading drafter of that document, revisits this idea in many of his writings and addresses as Supreme Pontiff. He writes:

For we are not merely living through an era of change, but a change of era. We are therefore at one of those moments when **changes are no longer linear, but involve profound transformation;** they constitute choices that **rapidly transform the way we live, interact, communicate and formulate thought, the way we relate across generations, and the way we understand and live out faith and science.**⁷

At that same meeting, the Pope recalled that Cardinal Martini, in his final interview given a few days before his death, had spoken these thought-provoking words: **“The Church is two hundred years behind the times.** Why doesn’t it shake itself up? Are we afraid? Fear instead of courage? Yet the foundation of the Church is faith. Faith, trust, courage.”⁸

In the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*,⁹ Pope Francis also analyses the current reality from this perspective of globalisation, highlighting in the first chapter: ‘Dark clouds over a closed world’, and encourages all the faithful and people of good will to build universal fraternity.

*I would like... to take up many new paths of HOPE. For **God continues to sow abundant seeds of goodness in our human family** (no. 54). I invite everyone to renewed hope, for hope speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart (no. 55).*

Already the Second Vatican Council – “a historic visit of the Holy Spirit to the Church”¹⁰ – as Fr Viganó liked to recall, set out, in a clear and renewing ecclesiological framework, the attitude of faith to be adopted in order to interpret the signs of the times:

*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. **Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.***¹¹

This, too, is the challenge set out in the *Aparecida* document:

The peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean are today living in a reality marked by major changes that profoundly affect their lives. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we feel called to **discern the ‘signs of the times’, in the light of the Holy Spirit,** so that we may place ourselves at the service of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, who came so that all might have life and ‘have it to the full’ (Jn 10:10).¹²

In his recent Encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* on Artificial Intelligence,¹³ Pope Leo XIV helps us to reflect on our globalised reality which is raising questions about the very meaning of contemporary and future humanity.

⁴ Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops. *Aparecida*, Brazil, 13–31 May 2007. *Final Document*, no. 44. (Bold type added by the author).

⁵ *APARECIDA*, nos. 33–100.

⁶ *APARECIDA*, no. 34.

⁷ Address by POPE FRANCIS *to the Roman Curia* on the occasion of the presentation of Christmas greetings. 21 December 2019.

⁸ *Conversation* held on 8 August 2012 with his friend and Jesuit priest Georg Sporschill and with Federica Radice Fossat.

⁹ Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*, by the Holy Father Francis, on fraternity and social friendship.

¹⁰ VIGANÓ, Egidio, ‘*How to Reinterpret the Founder’s Charism Today*’, Letter published in ACG no. 352. Rome, 8 February 1995. p. 63.

¹¹ Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, *On the Church in the Modern World*. Rome, 7 December 1965, no. 1.

¹² *APARECIDA*, no. 33.

¹³ Hereinafter: AI.

Whilst **Leo XIII spoke** in his day of **‘new issues’ (Rerum Novarum)**, today we cannot simply limit ourselves to repeating his valuable teachings; rather, **we must ask God for the wisdom to interpret the major trends of our time**, particularly technological advances. In recent years, it has become increasingly evident just how rapidly and profoundly digitalisation, artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics are transforming our world.¹⁴ **For this reason, it is necessary to begin a shared discernment process for identifying the spiritual and cultural roots of ongoing transformations.**¹⁵

2. The source of *amorevolezza* (loving-kindness)

The origin of the Oratory’s preventive charism.

The PS, in the person of Don Bosco, was always an experience in motion, a continuous process of gestation lived out in a long process of ‘metamorphosis’ guided by the Spirit and led by the hand of Mary (the ‘queiragoga’¹⁶).

If we were to pinpoint the exact moment of the PS’s birth in Don Bosco’s life, we could state with fascinating certainty that, as a ‘charismatic inspiration’, the PS came into being **on the afternoon of 17 August 1815**, at the very moment when John Melchiorre Bosco was baptised.¹⁷ The PS emerged when the charism arose in Don Bosco’s soul as a ‘baptismal gift’ from the Holy Spirit and Mary.¹⁸ The **Salesian PS came into being with him**, with all the power of God’s grace, which became an embryonic force within the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity; in his life, these were directed towards the salvation of the poorest and most abandoned young people. The **Salesian PS grew with him**, in a process that simultaneously involved his gradual understanding of it and its gradual adaptation to the circumstances of the most neglected young people, “as God and circumstances dictated.”¹⁹ The Salesian PS is therefore essentially linked to the person of Don Bosco, who is in a state of constant movement and development.

Fr Braido states:

Don Bosco’s entire educational ‘praxis’ – a whole life devoted to young people – is ‘preventive’.²⁰ The experiential synthesis of the constituent elements of the PS **cannot be separated from Don Bosco’s personality and from the characteristic features of the institutions** in which both he and his collaborators worked.²¹

According to the same scholar:

Don Bosco, too, **gradually developed his understanding and application** of the Salesian Preventive Method **in accordance with the historical periods he lived through, the expansion of his work and the diversity of the young people** to whom he directed his educational efforts.²²

¹⁴ Encyclical Letter **Magnifica Humanitas**. By the Holy Father Leo XIV, on the protection of the human person in the age of Artificial Intelligence, no. 4.

¹⁵ *Magnifica Humanitas*, no. 6.

¹⁶ The teacher who guides or educates by taking the child by the hand.

¹⁷ Let us examine his baptismal certificate: ‘17 August 1815, John Melchior Bosco, son of Francesco Luigi and Margarita Occhiena, married name Bosco, born yesterday afternoon, and was solemnly baptised this afternoon by the Most Reverend Father Giuseppe Festa, Assistant. The godparents were Melchior Occhiena (of Capriglio) and Magdalena Bosco, widow of Mr Segundo Occhiena, of this town (Castelnuovo). – Giuseppe Segismundo, Parish Priest, Vicar Forane’. In: LENTI, Arthur. **Don Bosco: History and Charism**. Vol. 1, p. 138. CCS. Madrid, 2010.

¹⁸ “To contribute to the salvation of young people – the most delicate and precious part of human society – Through the motherly intervention of Mary, the Holy Spirit raised up St John Bosco.” **SDB Constitutions**, 1.

¹⁹ LEMOYNE, John Baptist, **Vita del Venerabile Don Bosco**, Vol. II, p. 311. Also BM XVIII, 96: “They want me to state what my method is. Really... I would not know what it is myself! I have always gone along as our Lord inspired me and as the circumstances demanded.”

²⁰ BRAIDO, Pietro. **La prassi di Don Bosco e il Sistema Preventivo. L’orizzonte storico**. In: *Il Sistema Preventivo verso il terzo millennio*. Proceedings of the 18th Week of Spirituality of the Salesian Family. Rome 1995, p. 119.

²¹ BRAIDO, Pietro, **‘Prevenire, non reprimere: Il sistema educativa di Don Bosco’**. CCS. Madrid, 2001 (p. 173).

²² See *Prevenire non reprimere*, p. 432.

For Don Bosco and his early collaborators, it was no easy task to objectify his method and translate it into precise formulations, whilst preserving its pedagogical and spiritual depth. For them, it was not possible to reduce the PS to a theoretical formulation. **“The PS was life, an experience in which they were immersed, a system lived out rather than theorised.”**²³ Giovanni Battista Francesia wrote: **“In Valdocco, the PS was something which was practised without calling it by its name.”**²⁴ This implies that, always, **“the best interpreter of Don Bosco who both theorises and writes is Don Bosco himself. He creates and shapes his educational experience and embodies it in his works, together with the educators and the young people.”**²⁵

3. Cracks in the courtyard

Difficulties in living out and embodying the Preventive System.

During his lifetime, Don Bosco had to acknowledge that even for the very first generations of Salesians it was not easy to keep the Preventive System alive. This was all the more true as the Congregation began to expand and face diverse missionary contexts, making it necessary to distinguish between what was essential and what was contingent in the educational style, and to identify how much of it could be transferred to other settings.

The letter written from Rome on 10 May 1884 reflects, in some way, **his acknowledgement of this frustration**. In Valdocco itself, following a period of exemplary educational vitality, a period of crisis ensued. Don Bosco astutely diagnosed this in that letter: **‘there is a desire to replace love with the coldness of a set of rules.’**²⁶ Its final lines are an appeal to the heart of every Salesian, man or woman, of any time and culture:

*And now I must finish. Do you know what this poor old man, who has spent his whole life for his dear boys, wants from you? Nothing else than, allowances being made, we should go back to the happy days of the Oratory of old. The days of affection and Christian confidence between boys and superiors; the days when we accepted and put up with difficulties for the love of Jesus Christ; the days when hearts were open with a simple candour; days of love and real joy for everyone. I want the consolation and hope that you will promise to do everything I desire for the good of your souls.*²⁷

The news reaching him **from America** at that time was no more comforting. It informed him of the punishments that were beginning to be inflicted, of harsh treatment, lack of care, and grumbling among the confreres.... Don Bosco took charge and responded with three famous letters sent to Bishop Cagliero, Fr Costamagna and Fr Tomatis, reiterating and emphasising the indisputable principles of ‘his’, ‘our’ PS.

To Bishop Cagliero:

Charity, patience, gentleness; — never degrading rebukes, punishments, never; do good to those you can, evil to no one. This holds for the Salesians among themselves, with their students and others, those who live with us, and outsiders.²⁸

To Fr Costamagna:

Furthermore, I myself would like to give a sermon, or better a talk, on the Salesian Spirit which ought to inspire and guide our actions, and every word

²³ CAVAGLIÀ, Piera. *‘Riattualizzare o rinnovare il metodo educativo di Don Bosco? Un contributo alla riflessione’*. In: *Il Sistema Preventivo verso il terzo millennio*. Proceedings of the 18th Week of Spirituality of the Salesian Family. Rome 1995, pp. 179–220.

²⁴ FRANCESIA Giovanni Battista, *Cenni biografici: Don Giovanni Bonetti Sac. Salesiano*, Torino, Tip. Salesiana 1894, 51.

²⁵ See *Prevenire non reprimere*, p. 145.

²⁶ CERIA, Eugenio, *Epistolario di S. Giovanni Bosco* SEI, Turin, 1959. Vol. IV. *Letter on the Family Spirit*, 10 May 1884, pp. 3261–269.

²⁷ BOSCO, John. *Letter from Rome, 10 May 1884*.

²⁸ Ibid. *Letter from Don Bosco to Bishop John Cagliero*, 6 August 1885, pp. 327–329. (English taken from ‘Salesian Sources’ I)

we say. The Preventive System is truly ours. Never punishments for their own sake; never humiliating words, no severe dressings-down in the presence of others. Instead, **gentle, kind, patient words** should be heard in the classrooms. Never biting words, never a blow, heavy or light. Use should be made of negative punishments, and always in a way that **those who have been warned become our friends more than ever**, and are never discouraged when they leave us. **Gentleness in speaking, in acting and in giving advice will win over everyone and everything.**²⁹

4. As Time Went On

'Preventive System' – first formulation.

In 1877 (12 March), Don Bosco opened the Salesian Work of the Patronage of St Peter in Nizza Maritima (France).³⁰ The opening programme included a 'presentation' outlining the 'history, purpose and benefits' of the Work. On 13 March, he set off on his return journey and felt the desire to put his speech on the educational method into writing. He therefore decided to write "some thoughts", the primary recipients of which were those French collaborators.

Fr Barberis commented:

*... While he was in Nice, the very solemn opening of the Patronage took place; he gave a speech and they wanted to print it to publicise the Work... (DB) **wanted a summary to be added of his views on the educational system we have, known as the Preventive System.** This task took him several days in a row; **he wrote it and rewrote it three times ...** (he said) this little piece of work will do a great deal of good in France... **The Preventive System** will be well received, the newspapers will publish it, **it will cause a stir...**³¹*

The treatise on the Preventive System falls within DB's 'mature period'. **'The clarity of the text,** a common outcome of his arduous writing process, **precludes any suggestion of "improvisation"**. It displays characteristics of **absolute novelty** and finds its only precedents in very brief notes (particularly in the "General Articles" of the Regulations for the houses) most likely drafted during the very same weeks.³²

This was followed by other 'complementary' writings which expanded upon or clarified key aspects and points concerning the PS: The 'Regulations for the Houses' (1877), 'The Preventive System Applied to Young People at Risk' (1878), 'On the Punishments to be Imposed in Salesian Houses' (1883), and the 'Letter from Rome' (1884).

The journey undertaken by those humble little pages from 1877 on the Preventive System traces a **path of growth and highlights the educational character of Don Bosco**. Little by little, that short text took on a significance of its own and broadened its reach to other audiences. It became a 'classic'. Between 1877 and 1924, more than 30 editions were published in various languages and geographical contexts, and it also formed part of other educational publications. The text came to serve as a presentation of the Salesian mission amongst young people. Don Bosco even used it 'diplomatically' to present his Work to Pope Pius IX and later to Leo XIII, as a way of demonstrating that his work was not merely a charitable or civil project, but a genuine **educational and ecclesial pastoral mission** with a sound and original methodology.

We find evidence of the impact of Don Bosco's work in the writings of a priest from the Diocese of Fermo,³³ who wrote in 1886, not without some hyperbole:

²⁹ Ibid. **Letter from Don Bosco to Fr James Costamagna**, 10 August 1885, pp. 332–333. (English taken from 'Salesian Sources' I)

³⁰ For a critical study of the pamphlet, see: **Giovanni Bosco, Il sistema Preventivo nella educazione della gioventù**. Introduction and critical texts edited by Pietro Braido. Piccola Biblioteca dell'Istituto Storico Salesiano. LAS – Rome 1989.

³¹ **"Cronichette"**. 12–21 April 1877.

³² BRAIDO, Pietro. **Giovanni Bosco. L'Arte di educare. Scritti e Testimoni**. CCS. Madrid, 1994, p. 133.

³³ Le Marche, Italy.

*It has now been fifty years since Don Bosco devoted his life to the education of young people, with such excellent and far-reaching results that he has become the most famous educator of our times, both in the Old and New Worlds. **What has made him so renowned is his Preventive System.***³⁴

Fr Pietro Braido, in turn, highlights the importance of the involvement of young people and collaborators in the very experience and drafting of the booklet:

*When Don Bosco wrote it, **he may have had in mind not only his own personal experience, but also that of his collaborators**, who were as immersed as he was – and even more so – in the myriad contingencies of life within an educational world that was extremely dynamic and full of surprises.*³⁵

5. The boundaries of the first map

Validity and limits of the first formulation of the Preventive System.

According to Fr Stella, the 1877 booklet on *The Preventive System*: “offers sufficient guarantees to be considered **a focal point of Don Bosco’s literary and lived experiences**. Its principal value lies in the fact that Don Bosco **finally** succeeds in **formulating the constituent elements of his educational system**.”³⁶

Fr Braido, for his part, states emphatically: “**This is the masterpiece of a craftsman, of an architect-builder**. Like every true artist, Don Bosco struggles with the discrepancy between the imagined, the plan, the action, and what is ‘expressed’.”³⁷

This ‘mismatch’ is a phenomenon that occurs when one feels the need to express in concepts (or present in a text) something that is profoundly experiential and vital. While on the one hand capturing and making the idea accessible to a wider audience, on the other hand, writing runs the risk of fossilising, limiting or truncating the experience. One author went so far as to comment: “Writing the booklet on the Preventive System **was Don Bosco’s gravest mistake!** For in doing so, he crystallises his method, running the risk of betraying his thinking rather than expressing it in all its complexity and breadth.”³⁸

Don Bosco himself seems to be aware of this limitation and ‘warns’ the reader, stating that this text **is merely ‘the table of contents of a little work’** which he would ultimately never write.

It is Fr Stella himself who describes **the limitations of the pamphlet** in greater detail: “The ‘Preventive System’ (of 1877), in certain respects, is truly **a meagre outline** and **a not entirely coherent framework** of what might have become a comprehensive systematic treatise.”³⁹

We shall briefly list some of the limitations he points out: ‘beginning with the **“reductive” statement: “two systems have been used throughout the ages to educate young people: the repressive and the preventive”**. Secondly, expressions such as “preventive system”, “preventive assistance” and “preventive warnings” **seem to focus primarily on the faults to be prevented**. It seems that the system is defined by a negative element.... Thirdly, **it does not specify the framework of vocational training that existed in Don Bosco’s houses**. But, above all, the Preventive System suffers from an over-emphasis on schooling. For example, ‘visual’ assistance – provided in person and on an ongoing basis – versus ‘loving’ assistance – imbued

³⁴ GIORDANI, D. *La gioventù e Don Bosco di Torino*, S. Benigno Canavese, Tip. E Libreria Salesiana, 1886, p. 63.

³⁵ See P. Braido, 173.

³⁶ STELLA, Pietro. *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. II: Mentalità religiosa e spirituale. LAS, Rome, 1981, pp. 459–466.

³⁷ See *Prevenire, non reprimere*, p. 432.

³⁸ See **Riattualizzare o rinnovare il metodo educativo di Don Bosco?* p. 182 (Fr Agostino Gemelli, OFM, 1878–1959).

³⁹ See *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, p. 461.

with spirituality—such as that which Don Bosco himself provided to Dominic Savio and Michael Magone... which goes beyond mere physical and visual presence.”⁴⁰

“Don Bosco did not consider himself rigidly bound by the formulas of his Preventive System. The expression that seems most evocative and personal, *‘amorevolezza’*, does not in fact appear to have become predominant in his way of expressing himself. Moreover, he feared that its interpretation might foster particular and unhealthy friendships between educators and pupils. He also feared the emotional and disciplinary consequences: jealousy, malice, neglect of care, scandals... (Cf. Letter of ’84). In his later years, Don Bosco preferred terms that were more familiar to him to *‘amorevolezza’*, such as: **gentleness, meekness, charity, patience...**⁴¹.

6. A new city beside the old fountain

The need for a ‘new’ Preventive System.

The drafting of this booklet serves as a model for understanding what this constant tension between ‘charismatic inspiration’ and the ‘historical manifestations’ of the Preventive System might mean, whether in actions or in a text that expresses it.

A metaphor borrowed from Jorge La Pira can illustrate this dynamic tension between the origins and the updating – or renewal – of the Preventive System: **“We must build a new city beside the ancient fountain.”**⁴²

We cannot overlook the view that, throughout the historical journey that separates us from Don Bosco, the very term ‘Preventive System’ has been marred by simplifications or stereotypes, generalisations and reductionism.⁴³

From the very beginning, and always, there has been an approach that involves fidelity to Don Bosco’s charismatic inspirations and the adaptation of the Preventive System to new contexts.

In 1995, Fr Viganó asserted, almost proudly: “I believe I am the first to use the expression **‘new Preventive System’**. I have never heard it used by others. I am pleased with this distinction, which I see as being in tune with the ‘new evangelisation’ and ‘new education.’”⁴⁴ And, in his characteristic style, he makes a statement packed with “ideological dynamite”: **Renewing the Preventive System consists in “launching Don Bosco’s charism into the third millennium!”** There and then he invites us to re-read the precious letter by Saint John Paul II: “*Iuvenum Patris*”, written on the occasion of the centenary of Don Bosco’s death,⁴⁵ in which he says:

“The peculiar trait of his brilliance is linked with the educational method which he himself called the ‘Preventive System’. In a certain sense this represents the quintessence of his pedagogical wisdom and constitutes the prophetic message which he has left to his followers and to the Church” (no. 8).

Fr Braido, one of the most eminent experts and scholars on the Preventive System, concludes his book *Prevenire non reprimere*⁴⁶ by devoting the final chapter to demonstrating the need to

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 463.

⁴¹ Ibid., 466.

⁴² LA PIRA, Giorgio. ** Il fondamento e il progetto di ogni speranza **, edited by C. Alpignano Lamioni and P. Andreoli, Rome, AVE, 1992, p. 115.

⁴³ See Viganó Egidio, p. 14.

⁴⁴ VIGANÓ, Egidio. *‘Called to Freedom’ (Gal 5:13). Rediscovering the Preventive System by educating young people in values.* In: *Il Sistema Preventivo verso il terzo millennio*. Proceedings of the 18th Week of Spirituality of the Salesian Family. Rome 1995, p. 13.

⁴⁵ Apostolic Letter *IUVENUM PATRIS* by the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II, on the centenary of the death of St John Bosco. Rome, 31 January 1988.

⁴⁶ BRAIDO, Pietro. *Il sistema educativo di Don Bosco. Prevenire, non reprimere* (CCS, Madrid, 2001), Chapter XIX, pp. 416–445.

‘restore’, reinvent and rebuild the Preventive System. He maintains that this is a task with a solid foundation because: **“the roots are strong and robust enough to bring forth, in renewed forms rich with promise for the future, ‘a new Preventive System’”**. And he lists a series of arguments that justify the need for and the possibility of renewal. One can therefore hypothesise **“a Preventive System put into practice using a variety of preventive methods.”**⁴⁷

7. Watermarks in the 1877 pamphlet

A reflective reading of the text on the Preventive System.

From a perspective more in keeping with the charism, let me present some ‘key points’ that I believe I have identified in the system of ideas conceived by DB in his drafting of the pamphlet on the Preventive System. They are like ‘watermarks’ that the author has imprinted on his text, and which allow us to attune ourselves to the most genuine expressions of his charismatic identity, projected – consciously or unconsciously – into his writing.

- First and foremost, **the text reflects an experience**. Rather than being a synthesis of ideas, it expresses concepts that have emerged explicitly from his own lived, reflected upon, shared and prayed-over experience. The introduction – *as I have often been asked to do* – clearly defines the author: Don Bosco himself. And the conclusion culminates in an extraordinary testimony: ***I have been working with young people for nearly forty years***. This is a text that one could begin reading from the end. Don Bosco lived what he writes. The PS **is the fruit of his pedagogical and spiritual wisdom**, the product of a lifetime’s experience that ‘underpins’ and lends ‘authenticity’ to everything he affirms. Therefore, in meditating on this text, we meditate on the very life of Don Bosco.
- **At the heart of the contrast** between *repressive* and *preventive* approaches **lies the bond** that the educator is able to forge with their pupils. **It is the nature of this relationship that distinguishes** one educational method from the other. **On the repressive side**, the educator’s demeanour is distant, stern and threatening, focused on punishment (with the **emphasis on enforcing the law**). **On the preventative side**, the approach is warm (*always present*), friendly and fatherly, aiming to win over the heart (**focusing on the learner as a person**). As a skilful storyteller, Don Bosco uses ‘chiaroscuro’ to depict these opposing methods with brushstrokes of light and shade. In this way, he deepens the contrast and stirs in the reader a longing for beauty.
- The deeply positive relationship between the educator and the young person is based on **an anthropology which**, drawing on an optimistic view of human nature, **believes in the inherent goodness of human beings**. The educator is able to excuse the pupil’s mistakes by attributing them to **‘ignorance’ or ‘carelessness’**, rather than assuming they are malicious. It is the humanism of St Francis de Sales that highlights the presence of **the image of the ‘child of God’** in every human being. **Don Bosco believes in these young ‘children of God’**, regardless of the state of decline in which they may find themselves. And that is why *he grants them ample freedom to jump, run and shout to their heart’s content...* **Freedom**, wrapped in charity, becomes the ‘queen’ of education and a formidable stimulus for **shared responsibility**.
- **Charity is the foundation upon which the Preventive System rests entirely**. Note **the word ‘entirely’** – that is to say, completely or absolutely, with nothing missing and no exceptions.

⁴⁷ See *Prevenire, non reprimere*, p. 146.

For him, **the whole Preventive System is love – charity** – which is expressed in its characteristics of: **kindness, patience, the ability to wait, to suffer and to endure all things.**

Fr Albera stated that Don Bosco's educational system: **“was nothing other than charity, that is to say, the love of God** which extends to embrace all human beings, especially the youngest and most inexperienced...”⁴⁸. St Paul's hymn to charity⁴⁹, which Fr Fabio Attard invites us to reflect upon in the Strenna 2027, establishes **the “primacy” of Charity.** Don Bosco, in his educational system, embraces the essence of **the Gospel: Charity.**

- **Winning over the heart:** this is what education is all about. The word **‘heart’** appears five times in the text. Don Bosco would go on to emphasise even further the centrality of the heart in educational work in the Letter from Rome of 1884. ***It is not enough to love... Familiarity breeds affection, affection breeds trust, and trust opens hearts... May the days of open hearts return.***⁵⁰ It is very revealing to realise that Don Bosco's earthly life, in a certain sense, ‘came to a close’ during the Mass he celebrated on 16 May 1887 at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome. It was there, before the altar of Our Lady Help of Christians, that he fully grasped it: ever since that dream he had at the age of nine, his life had embodied the love of the Heart of Jesus for abandoned young people. That is where it all lies. Education takes place between the heart of the young person and the heart of the educator, passing through the heart of God.
- **Only a Christian can practise it successfully.** From this, Don Bosco deduces, with inexorable logic, **the importance of the ‘sacraments of life’:** (frequent) **Holy Communion and Confession.** For both the educator and the pupil, these sacraments keep alive the educational relationship with **the ‘source’ of merciful love: the Sacred Heart** of our Lord.⁵¹ It is a charming touch that Don Bosco adds a note about the visit by the Queen of England's minister to highlight these ideas.
- **The educator's total dedication.** That very same **educational charity** and love **drives the educator to devote their life to their pupils.** This ‘dedicated love’ prevents them, under any circumstances, from distancing themselves from their pupils and *enables them to endure any inconvenience or fatigue. Whether near or far, I am always thinking of you; you are the sole and constant thought in my mind.*⁵² The ‘closeness’, the ‘loving presence’ and the ‘friendly support’ that John Bosco himself learnt from the Virgin Mary in his dream at the age of nine now form **the foundation of the educator's ‘authority’ and guarantee compliance with the rules** (regulations) and the morality of the house.
- **The three pillars.** **“This system rests entirely on reason, religion and loving-kindness.”** Here we see this formula, which has perhaps often become a sort of (reductive?) cliché of its identity. In reality, these are three facets into which the brilliance of the very diamond of educative and pastoral charity is broken down. God's love becomes **a light for the intellect**, so that the young person may understand, through this *friendly guidance*, the reasons for doing good; it becomes **an experience of the beauty, grandeur and sublimity of Religion** that ‘*captivates the hearts*’ of young people, *soothes their hearts and saves their souls*; and it becomes **loving-kindness – love in action** – which wins over hearts and leads young people to see their teachers and superiors *as parents and friends*. Three ‘brilliant insights’ inseparable from Don Bosco's heart, designed to address the whole person of the young person.

⁴⁸ See *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. II, p. 466.

⁴⁹ 1 Cor 13.

⁵⁰ Letter from Rome dated 10 May 1884.

⁵¹ See SDB Constitutions 11.

⁵² Ibid.

- **The art of not punishing.** It is all about avoiding punishment, which is the very opposite of love... **“No blows,”** the Lord of Dreams had told him. Here, drawing on his many years’ experience, he sets out a list of what must be avoided at all costs: *threats, the whip, the cane, harshness, violence, revenge, hitting, forcing a child to kneel, pulling ears...* The principle is: **never punish!** And his personal testimony is: ***I do not recall ever having imposed punishments of any kind.*** Consistency is one of Don Bosco’s most significant traits, and it must be so for his followers too.
- **To form ‘useful citizens and good Christians’.** In Don Bosco’s outlook, when he looks at a young person, **the family, society and the Church** are always present. For him, the human being is a ‘trinitarian’ being, a social being. Everything that happens to a child is never limited to the child alone; it is connected to those ‘communities’ which take on the role of accompanying the life as it grows; and everything that is formed within the child has repercussions on his commitment to these three societies. **The aim of education is to provide pupils with a civic, moral and scientific education.** And they become: ***a source of comfort to their families, useful citizens and good Christians.***

8. Winged Roots

Guidelines for safeguarding and implementing the Preventive System.

Let me offer a few criteria with which we may respectfully engage with our globalised reality in order to enter into dialogue with it, while striving to remain as consistent as possible with the insights drawn from the booklet on the Preventive System.

It is therefore a question of re-launching the Salesian Family and the entire Salesian Movement in the Americas towards a process of ‘recognition’, ‘deepening’, ‘assimilation’ and ‘updating’ of the Preventive System within our globalised culture of today and tomorrow. The Preventive System urges us to be proactive in keeping pace with the times.

8.1. As admirers and scholars of Don Bosco’s personality, our model⁵³

If ‘*amorevolezza*’ – this pedagogical love – originated with Don Bosco, a key first step towards its updating and renewal will be to delve deeper into his life and get to know him better as a person. We need to establish a relationship of affection and harmony with him, one that connects the gift of our baptism with his. It is the Holy Spirit himself (together with Mary) who has kindled his charism within us. Getting to know him better will help us to model ourselves more closely on him. This involves four complementary levels of communion: **the bond of sonship** that makes us feel and love him as **our father**, experiencing that ‘his blood’ flows within us; the **relationship as teacher and educator** that he fosters with us, to **make us** privileged **disciples** of his teachings; the connection, in him and through him, with the *God who guided every aspect of his life at every moment*, to **make us believers in ‘his’ God**; and the harmony with **his smile, his experiential joy, his affability**, his ability to ‘entertain’ us, which enchants us with the spirit of his friendship and makes us **happy to dwell in his courtyard**.

This intellectual and loving bond, cultivated through study, meditation and continuous prayer, will bring us into harmony with the God of Don Bosco, the One who reveals to us the true secrets of his Preventive System.

8.2. “Through the eyes of Don Bosco”

⁵³ See SDB Constitutions 21.

Approaching reality must mean looking at young people with love. From a Don Bosco-style perspective, as defined by Pope Francis at World Youth Day in Panama.

*I think, for example, of **Don Bosco**, who did not go anywhere to seek out young people... Don Bosco did not go to any distant or special place to seek out young people; he **simply learnt to see everything that was happening in the city through God's eyes**, and so his heart was moved by hundreds of children and young people who had been abandoned, with no education, no work and no helping hand from a community. **Many people lived in the same city; many criticised those young people, but they did not know how to look at them through God's eyes.** We must look at young people through God's eyes.⁵⁴*

As St Augustine would say, "Only those who love truly know."⁵⁵

8.3. **With one ear attuned to the Spirit and the other to young people.**

The PS 'must' be updated, not only because we must remain faithful to the ever-changing reality of young people, shaped by emerging cultures, but also because we must **remain faithful to the Holy Spirit** who continues to 'make all things new'.⁵⁶ The Salesian charism, too, 'is in motion', and it is the Spirit who rekindles it and inspires us with new responses to reality.

This involves maintaining a **dual tension**, as *Perfectae caritatis* states:

*The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes **both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the Institutes, and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time.***⁵⁷

Furthermore, the charism bestowed upon us by the Holy Spirit bears a special hallmark: **a predilection for the young**.⁵⁸ For the Salesian vocation, and the Salesian Family in particular, which is called to serve *poor, abandoned and at-risk young people*,⁵⁹ it is essential that it demonstrates and expresses this preferential option. The first article of the SDB Regulations describes at length, and almost prophetically, a list of the hardships faced by the young people we are called to serve:

*every province will study the situation and condition of youth and the common people, and periodically verify that its works and activities are providing an effective service for **young people who are poor**: in the first place for youngsters who because of **economic, social and cultural poverty** – sometimes of an extreme nature – **have no possibility of success in life**; for those who are poor at an **affective, moral and spiritual level** and and therefore **exposed to indifference, atheism and delinquency**; and for those **who live on the fringe of society and of the Church.***⁶⁰

This tension between the two charismatic poles (love of God and love of young people) is resolved in a single act of charity,⁶¹ and every generation must take on this responsibility. Failure to do so betrays the charism and fails to pass it on authentically to future generations.

8.4. **In continuous shared formation**

It is an explicit invitation from Fr Fabio that the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the booklet on the Preventive System "may become a valuable and providential opportunity to gain

⁵⁴ Pope Francis. *Address to young people. World Youth Day, Panama, 2019.*

⁵⁵ Echoing 1 John 4:7–8: 'Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God; whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love':

⁵⁶ Revelation 21:5. See also: Romans 12:2: 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what God's will is'.

⁵⁷ Decree *PERFECTAE CARITATIS. On the proper renewal of religious life*, no. 2.

⁵⁸ SDB Constitutions 14.

⁵⁹, MB XIV, 662.

⁶⁰ *SDB Constitutions, Regulations*, no. 1.

⁶¹ *SDB Constitutions* 3. See also VIGANÓ E. *Apostolic Interiority*. Fortín Mercedes, Argentina, February 1988.

a deeper understanding of the Salesian charism and to recognise our educational and pastoral commitment to young people.”

Rediscovering the PS as the SF today **calls us to ‘form ourselves’ in that way of being** (the charism we received at our baptism), **which then entails a praxis: a new way of acting** (the PS’s updated response for young people today). We are living in a privileged moment to discover the potential that, as a SF, we are called to realise in these turbulent times.

8.5. From a spiritual and educational perspective

Don Bosco’s PS urges us not to complain about the times in which we find ourselves living. Like him, we are called to have a sense of the concrete, and to allow ourselves to be moved by the spirit of initiative.⁶² In Article 20 of the SDB Constitutions, we find, in my view, one of the best ‘insights’ into the Preventive System:

*Under the guidance of Mary, his teacher, Don Bosco lived a spiritual and educational experience with the boys of the first Oratory, which he called the ‘Preventive System’. For him this was a freely given expression of love, inspired by the love of a God, who provides in advance for all his creatures, is ever present at their side and gives his life to save them. Don Bosco passes this on to us as a way of living and handing on the gospel message and of working with and through young people for their salvation. It permeates our approach to God, our personal relationships and our manner of living in community through the exercise of a charity that knows how to make itself loved.*⁶³

It is well worth reflecting on this in depth. I would emphasise the phrase **‘with and through young people’**.

8.6. In communion and synodality

Today, the historical figure of Don Bosco no longer exists; **today, ‘we’ are Don Bosco**, and therefore the charism continues in history through us. **We are the PS**. The active subject is a **‘communal’ subject** (the Community, the EPC, the SF). We must recognise ourselves in this identity of communion and unity that defines our character, because it is in our very spiritual DNA.

As Fr Braido testified to us: the PS itself, inherited from our father, was also built by him through an essential interaction with his collaborators and with the young people themselves.

Pope Leo XIV guides us in this direction:

*“For this reason, it is necessary to begin a **shared discernment** process for identifying the spiritual and cultural roots of ongoing transformations.”*⁶⁴

8.7. Articulating and reinterpreting the four Oratory dimensions

The four dimensions of the ‘Oratory criterion’⁶⁵ **connect with the deepest needs of young people’s hearts**: the need to be loved and to belong to human communities that accompany them and help them to grow: the family, the Church, the school and the playground.

Don Bosco analysed the reality of his time (and provides us with this fundamental criterion for interpreting the suffering of young people throughout the ages) by delving into **the causes** that lead to their suffering. In his experience, young people re-offended and ended up in prison⁶⁶ **because they were abandoned to their own resources**.⁶⁷ For him, **abandonment** is the deepest

⁶² See SDB Constitutions, Articles 19 and 20.

⁶³ SDB Constitutions 20.

⁶⁴ *Magnifica Humanitas*, no. 6.

⁶⁵ See SDB Constitutions, 40.

⁶⁶ The greatest degree of moral decline among young people in his time.

⁶⁷ BOSCO, John. *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*. Critical edition edited by Fr F. Peraza Leal. CSFPA, Quito 2023, p. 151. (English translation New Rochelle, 2024, p. 125.)

cause of all the sufferings of youth. To address this ‘syndrome of abandonment’,⁶⁸ Don Bosco devised a comprehensive response known as the ‘Oratory’, which is ‘a home that welcomed, a parish that evangelised, a school that prepared them for life, and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves.’

Personally, I believe that today’s globalised culture affects young people above all by giving rise to these four major afflictions: a sense of **loneliness**; a lack of **ultimate meaning in life**; frustration at the impossibility of meeting basic needs due to a lack of **access to work and education**; and the **loss of the joy and freedom** of life, built upon the communion of friendship. The PS, through the implementation of the ‘Oratory dimensions’ – which should be found in all our works and activities – responds to these painful shortcomings and offers a healing and inclusive solution.

8.8. **Fostering processes**

A fundamental feature of today’s globalised culture is **its intrinsic ‘mobility’** – a dimension that is, moreover, constitutive of human beings themselves⁶⁹. Cultures evolve, change, flow and transform. They are ‘liquid’⁷⁰. They are even ‘mutant’.⁷¹

Pope Francis, on a subject close to his heart, guides us to interpret reality through a hermeneutics of history that involves: **‘initiating processes rather than occupying spaces.’**⁷²

*‘God reveals himself in a historical revelation, in time. Time sets processes in motion; space crystallises them. God is found in time, in ongoing processes. ... We must set processes in motion, rather than occupy spaces. ... This means prioritising actions that generate new dynamics. And it calls for patience and waiting.’*⁷³ For this reason, it is urgent that we read the signs of the times through the eyes of faith, so that the direction of this change “may raise new and old questions that it is right and necessary to confront.”⁷⁴

8.9. **With humour, joy, and a smile on our faces**

‘A cheerful face, a heart on one’s sleeve’ – that is the Salesian, as we used to hear in our novitiates, as a symbolic summary of the PS. Fr Albera never forgot Don Bosco’s face, especially: **‘the smile that blossomed perpetually on his lips, always fresh and ever-changing, yet always serene’**, which captivated them, ‘from which sprang the work that won over our hearts.’⁷⁵ Don Bosco himself concludes his booklet on the PS with these words: “And with God’s help, I have always managed not only to ensure that the pupils fulfilled their duty, but even more so to get them to do simply what I wished.” A hymn to the “madness of mutual love”.

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⁶⁸ See GUEX, Germaine. *La Neurosis de abandono*; Edition: 3rd ed.; Published in Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1965.

⁶⁹ *Panta rei* (πάντα ῥεῖ): ‘everything flows’, attributed to Heraclitus.

⁷⁰ BAUMAN, Zygmunt. *Culture in the World of Liquid Modernity*. D.R. 2013, Fondo de Cultura Económica Argentina.

⁷¹ BARICCO, Alessandro. *Los bárbaros. Ensayo sobre la mutación*. Anagrama. Rome, 2006.

⁷² *Address by Pope Francis to the Roman Curia*, on the occasion of the presentation of Christmas greetings. 21 December 2019.

⁷³ *Interview* with Fr Antonio Spadaro: **La Civiltà Cattolica**, 19 September 2013, p. 468.

⁷⁴ *Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany*, 29 June 2019.

⁷⁵ Cf. Paul Albera. *Circular Letter: Don Bosco, our model*.