

# Education as Spirituality of John Bosco: Loving Kindness

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**The article provides an analysis of the tradition of spiritual view of education as established by John Bosco (1815–1888) with a special focus on the loving kindness as the one of three essential principles of Salesian’s education. It discusses the centrality of this unique form of love based on the analysis of three key writings of Don Bosco: *Memoirs of the Oratory, The Preventive System in the Education of the Young, and The Letter from Rome.***

Education wasn't just a social or relational activity for John Bosco. It was a principle, source and, at the same time, a consequence of a spiritual experience. In general, we may say that through education John Bosco is experiencing God (Chavez 2014). One of his most important autobiographical, spiritual, and pedagogical texts entitled *Memoirs of the Oratory* (Bosco 2011) describes education as an apparition, mission, and prophecy of one's life. It actually was a space for a radically new spiritual experience and a specific spiritual discretion.

The fundamental story of a "prophecy dream" (Wiesenganger 2017) shows specific features of Don Bosco's spiritual experience. As a boy he is invited to cease such a relationship with God, which is based on the strict compliance of orders. His relationship with God doesn't have to be based on the duties and justice but on the glamorous beauty and gentleness. The same is true for education, which he gets as the mission: it is not based on the curd commands, instead it is a mission aimed at the inner conversion, where the commands cannot penetrate. Such an educational mission also becomes the way of his personal spiritual conversion, a space of permanent searching for God's identity. His shiny presence has two sides: blinds and attracts at the same time.

The apparition given to John Bosco is also a prophecy about himself. It is God, who doesn't command but attracts through His presence and causes changes. In this way John is able to recognize not only the identity of the youth, but also of himself. Education isn't only the correction of deficiencies; it is a way of life, by which is enabling the one to be a friend of God or even his son. Thus, a personal spirituality is fulfilled by education. It is the way how one can perceive God's presence.

It is important to recognize that Bosco's view of education is based on the following three principles, "*reason, religion, and loving kindness*" (Bosco 1877), while the loving kindness can be considered the first of the three (Braido 1999). However, Pascual Chaves (2013) clarifies that the loving kindness is in the tradition of Salesian educational "*without doubt a characteristic trait of his pedagogical method ... But it cannot be reduced to simply being a pedagogical principle but needs to be recognized as an essential element of his spirituality.*" This is the essential principle of spiritual view of education at John Bosco. In this article we will discuss some aspects of this unique principle of his spiritual view of education.



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## 1 Loving Kindness in the Prophecy Dream

The first time little Johnny Bosco was given an educational mission to achieve spiritual change in a group of boys was in a dream when he was nine. It is to be found in the well-known text *Memoirs of the Oratory* (Bosco 1877). A noble stranger told him in the dream: “*You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness [note It. mansuetudine] and love. Start right away to teach them the ugliness [note It. brutezza] of sin and the value [note It. preziosità] of virtue*” (Bosco 2011, 4). We can highlight three very important words: “friends”, “gentleness” and “love”.

When the nobleman says that the boys are Johnny’s “friends” that is a radically different interpretation from that presented by Johnny. The same boys who were fighting and swearing a few minutes before could not be beaten into silence. The fact that the boys he used to beat into shape were his friends required a new approach. The principle of justice that “*evil needs to be corrected justly*” must be replaced by a new principle, which surpasses it. It is impossible to make friendship on the basis of justice. The new principle passed on to little Johnny was the principle of gentle love. Here love represents a new objective towards which Bosco’s action should head. His mission is not redemption, or the end of evil, but the value of virtue. Love represents the main aim and the essence of the new educational approach entrusted to him. How is

*gentleness* related to it? In a way we can say that this concept expresses a unique definition of love. Gentleness expresses meekness, and thus refers to one of the main virtues – mildness. The task of mildness was to deal with anger the right way. Anger was causing a reaction to evil and thus prevented the awareness of the presence of good. Thus, gentleness expresses the power of love when love is expressed even in conflictual situations. *Friendship* expresses the quality of the relationship. *Love* is the first principle upon which friendship can exist and be developed. *Gentleness* expresses a specific way love can be shown. The distinction between love expressed by gentleness and that which is not means that not every love has the power to change a human being. The power and the effectiveness of gentleness is depicted in what happens to the group of boys. At the beginning of the story the boys fight and swear, then they gather around the noble man, subsequently around the noble woman and in the end, they change into lambs and bleat joyfully around them. Gentleness attracts and brings about change. It is the kind of love that is able to change a human being effectively. Gentleness embodies love that has the potential to bedazzle and result in desire. These ideas are fully developed in other key texts of Don Bosco, *The Preventive System in the Education of the Young* (Bosco 1877) and *The Letter from Rome* (Bosco 1844).

## 2 Loving Kindness in The Preventive System in the Education of the Young

In his work *The Preventive System in the Education of the Young* (1877) John Bosco presents loving kindness in the context of two educational systems. These systems present two paths to the same destination and have one fundamental principle. The aim is a godly life and the principle is love. An essential difference is just in the way this aim is achieved. It means two forms of education. Bosco calls the first one “repressive”. It “*consists in making the law known to the students and then supervising them in order to detect transgressions, inflicting, wherever necessary, the merited punishment. Using this system, the words and the appearance of the Superior must always be severe, and somewhat menacing, and he himself must avoid all friendly relationships with his dependents. To give greater weight to his authority, the educator would need to be seen but*

*rarely among his subjects, and generally speaking only when it was a question of punishing or threatening.*” (Bosco 1877).

The second one, which he calls “preventive”, “*consists in making the law known to the students and then supervising them in order to detect transgressions, inflicting, wherever necessary, the merited punishment. Using this system, the words and the appearance of the Superior must always be severe, and somewhat menacing, and he himself must avoid all friendly relationships with his dependents. To give greater weight to his authority, the educator would need to be seen but rarely among his subjects, and generally speaking only when it was a question of punishing or threatening.*” (Bosco 1877).

It is very important to note that John Bosco understands these two modes of education as two forms of love. While both educational systems represent “universal” love as the principle and the way to the objective, it is only preventive education that represents loving kindness as a special form of love. This fundamental difference is shown in the next short story from *Memoirs of the Oratory* (Bosco 2011).

*On the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (December 8, 1841), I was vesting to celebrate holy Mass at the appointed time. Joseph Comotti, the sacristan, seeing a boy in a corner, asked him to come and serve my Mass. “I don’t know how,” he answered, completely embarrassed. “Come on,” repeated the sacristan, “I want you to serve Mass.”*

*“I don’t know how,” the boy repeated, “I’ve never served Mass.”*

*“You big blockhead,” said the sacristan, quite furious “if you don’t know how to serve Mass, what are you doing in the sacristy.” With that, he grabbed a feather duster and hit the poor boy about the head and shoulders.*

*As the boy beat a hasty retreat, I cried loudly, “What are you doing? Why are you beating him like that? What’s he done?”*

*“Why is he hanging round the sacristy if he doesn’t know how to serve Mass?”*

*“But you’ve done wrong.”*

*“What does it matter to you?”*

*“It matters plenty. He’s a friend of mine. Call him back at once. I need to speak with him.”*

*“Tuder, tuder!” [note It. rough, uneducated] he began to shout, as he ran after him. Promising him better treatment, he brought the lad back to me. He came over trembling and tearful because of the blows he had received.*

*“Have you attended Mass yet?” I asked him with as much loving kindness [note It. amorevolezza] as I could.*

The important key to understanding this story is that both men (the sacristan and John Bosco) are priests and represent the same universal Christian love in two forms: the first one represents “supervising love” and second one represents “assisting love”. For the sacristan the identity of the boy is defined only through his help with “serving the Mass” and he makes sure this task is completed. For Bosco, however, the boy is a friend. Friendship is the first fact of education, the principle of educational interpretation of our life. This is the same as in “the prophecy dream” in which the noble man says to little Johnny: “You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love” (Bosco 2011). The ability to help (serving Mass) is not initially important for Bosco. The “assisting love” that Bosco represents, means,

that the educator “*makes a friend of the student, who in the assistant sees a benefactor who gives him good advice, wants to make him good, to shield him from unpleasantness, from punishment, from dishonor. The Preventive system offers the student previous warning, in a way that the educator can still speak to him in the language of the heart, whether during the time of his education or later. The educator, having won the loving respect of his protégé [note It. guadagnato il cuore del suo protetto], will be able to greatly influence him, warn him, counsel him, and also correct him, even when he is employed, whether it be in the civil service, or in commerce ... The practice of this system is all based on the words of St Paul, who says: Love is patient, love is kind ... it bears all things ... hopes all things endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7)*” (Bosco 1877).

These are the reasons why Bosco asked the boy with as much loving kindness as he could.

For the boy a new life starts with that loving kindness. The text of *Preventive system* and the story in the church show one of the most essential traits of loving kindness. Only this form of love is really effective in the spiritual view of education, only loving kindness is an effective way of influencing someone. It also confirms the fundamental fact that it is not just a pedagogical method, but a real spiritual experience because of its apparition and prophecy for the children. Loving kindness is incarnated in God as someone who is patient, kind, helpful etc.

### 3 Loving Kindness in The Letter from Rome

The last text presented here is one of Bosco’s most famous letters. It is known as *The Letter from Rome*. This text clearly shows the difference between universal love and loving kindness. The whole text is a dialogue between John Bosco and two pupils of the Oratory in its early days. The boys represent two periods of the Oratory: the beginning and nowadays.

This is the description of the first period of the Oratory: “*It was a scene full of life, full of movement, full of fun. Some were running, some were jumping, some were skipping ... There was singing and laughing on all sides, there were priests and clerics everywhere and the boys were yelling and shouting all round them. You could see that the greatest cordiality, and confidence reigned between youngsters and superiors*” (Bosco 1884).

The following description of the present situation of the Oratory is not so positive.

*“But no more could I hear the joyful shouts and singing, no longer was there the lively activity of the previous scene. In the faces and actions of many boys there was evident a weary boredom, a surliness, a suspicion, that pained my heart”* (Bosco 1884).

That situation is the reason for John Bosco’s question: *“But how can we bring these youngsters to life again so that we can get back to the liveliness, the happiness, the warmth of the old days?”* (Bosco 1884). The dialogue after this question defines a special form of love.

*“With charity!”*

*“With love? But don’t my boys get enough love? You know how I love them. You know how much I have suffered and put up with for them these forty years, and how much I endure and suffer even now. How many hardships, how many humiliations, how much opposition, how many persecutions to give them bread, a home, teachers, and especially to provide for the salvation of their souls. I have done everything I possibly could for them; they are the object of all my affections.”*

*“I’m not referring to you.”*

*“Then to whom are you referring? To those who take my place? To the rectors, the prefects, the teachers, the assistants? Don’t you see that they are martyrs to study and work, and how they burn out their young lives for those Divine Providence has entrusted to them?”*

*“I can see all that and I am well aware of it, but it is not enough; the best thing is missing.”*

*“That the youngsters should not only be loved but that they themselves should know that they are loved.”*

*“But have they not got eyes in their heads? Have they no intelligence? Don’t they see how much is done for them, and all of it out of love?”*

*“No, I repeat: it is not enough.”*

Love is not enough. Being martyrs of love and care is not enough because this love is unable to open the hearts of children. Bosco’s education begins with confidence and confidence needs familiarity. *“How then are we to set about breaking down this barrier?”* asked Bosco (1884).

*“By a friendly informal relationship with the boys, especially in recreation. You cannot have love without this familiarity, and where this is not evident there can be no confidence. If you want to be loved, you must make it clear that you love. Jesus Christ made himself little with the little ones and bore our weaknesses. He is our master in the matter of the friendly approach... One who knows he is loved loves in return, and one who loves can obtain anything, especially from the young. This confidence creates an electric current between youngsters and their superiors.*

*Hearts are opened, needs and weaknesses made known”* (Bosco 1884).

As we can see, loving kindness expresses the fact that in order to create an effective educational relationship it is necessary that the young are not only loved but that they know that they are loved. It is a special style of relationships and affection that awakens in the hearts of the young all their potential and makes it mature even into the ability of total self-donation. That is exactly the meaning of the prophecy dream. Love must be present and at the same time enchanting, beautiful, tender, cordial etc. In the experience of John Bosco only loving kindness is *“authentic love because it draws its strength from God; it is love which shows itself in the language of simplicity, cordiality and fidelity; it is love which gives rise to a desire to correspond; it is love which calls forth trust, opening the way to confidence and to profound communion (‘education is a matter of the heart’)”* (Chaves 2013).

## 4 Conclusions

In the educational spirituality of John Bosco, the “form” of love is the basic condition of truly encountering God and at the same time of effective education. Loving kindness is the expression of affectivity based on love. It is not something individual and private. In this sense, affectivity is aimed at another person. It is the recognition of good in others; it is the discovery of good and participation in it. Thus loving kindness as “affective love” forms the right education and brings effectiveness. Only it allows a real encounter with God. At the same time, it is true that loving kindness becomes a *sign* of the love of God, and a means of re-awakening his presence in the hearts of those who are reached by Don Bosco’s goodness. From this comes the conviction that the apostolic spirituality of the Salesian Family is characterized not by a generic kind of love, but by the ability *to love and make oneself loved* (Chaves 2013).

We conclude our reflection with a poem. Its author is a child who tells his mother what is going through his mind and stays in his heart as he watches what she does.

## When You Thought I Wasn't Looking

*When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I saw you hang my first painting on the refrigerator  
and I immediately wanted to paint another one.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I saw you feed a stray cat,  
and I learned that it was good to be kind to animals.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking  
I saw you make my favorite cake for me  
and I learned that the little things can be the special things in life.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I saw you make a meal and take it to a friend who was sick  
and I learned that we all have to help take care of each other.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I saw you take care of our house and everyone in it  
and I learned we have to take care of what we are given.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I saw how you handled your responsibilities, even when you didn't feel well  
and I learned that I would have to be responsible when I grow up.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I saw tears come from your eyes  
and I learned that sometimes things hurt, but it's all right to cry.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I saw that you cared  
and I wanted to be everything that I could be.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I learned most of life's lessons that I need to know  
to be a good and productive person when I grow up.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I looked at you and wanted to say,  
"Thanks for all the things I saw when you thought I wasn't looking."*

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