

THE PREVENTIVE SYSTEM IN THE EDUCATION OF THE YOUNG

by St. John Bosco

On several occasions I have been asked to express orally or in writing some thoughts about the so-called PREVENTIVE SYSTEM, which is in general use in our institutions. Through lack of time I have so far been unable to meet these wishes. Presently, I intend to print the rules of our institution, which until now have nearly always been used traditionally. In this context I think it opportune to give a brief sketch which may perhaps serve as an outline to a small book which I am preparing. I hope to finish it if God gives me life enough, my sole purpose being to help in the difficult art of the education of the young. Therefore, I shall explain in what the PREVENTIVE SYSTEM consists, why it should be preferred, its practical application and its advantages.

I. In what the PREVENTIVE SYSTEM consists and why it should be preferred.

There are two systems that have been in use through all ages in the education of youth, the PREVENTIVE and the REPRESSIVE.

a. The REPRESSIVE SYSTEM consists in making the laws known to the subjects, and afterwards watching to discover the transgressors of these laws, and inflicting, when necessary, the punishment deserved. According to this system, the words and looks of the superior must always be severe and even threatening, and he must avoid all familiarity with his dependants.

In order to give weight to his authority the Rector must rarely be found among his subjects and as a rule only when it is a question of punishing or threatening. This system is easy, less troublesome, and especially suitable in the army and in general among adults and the judicious, who ought of themselves to know and remember what the law and its regulations demand.

b. Quite different from this and, I might even say opposed to it, is the PREVENTIVE SYSTEM. It consists in making the laws and regulations of an institute known. Then watching carefully so that the pupils may at all times be under the vigilant eye of the Rector and the assistants. They are like loving fathers and can converse with them, take the lead in every movement and in a kindly way give advice and correction; in other words, this system places the pupils in the impossibility of committing faults.

This system is based entirely on reason and religion, and above all on kindness. Therefore it excludes all violent punishment and tries to do without even the slightest chastisement. This system seems preferable for the following reasons:

- (1) Being forewarned, the pupil does not lose courage on account of the faults he has committed, as is the case when they are brought to the notice of the superior. Nor does he resent the correction he receives or the punishment threatened or inflicted, because it is always accompanied by a friendly PREVENTIVE warning, which appeals to his reason, and generally enlists his accord, so that he sees the necessity for the chastisement and almost desires it.
- (2) The primary reason for the system is the thoughtlessness of the young, who in one moment forget the rules of discipline and the penalties for their infringement. Consequently, a child often becomes culpable and deserving of punishment, which he had not even thought about, and which he had quite forgotten when heedlessly committing the fault he would certainly have avoided had a friendly voice warned him.

(3) The REPRESSIVE SYSTEM may stop disorder but can hardly make the offender better. Experience teaches that the young do not easily forget the punishment they have received, and for the most part foster bitter feeling, along with the desire to throw off the yoke and even to seek revenge. They may sometimes appear to be quite unaffected but anyone who follows them as they grow up knows that the reminiscences of youth are terrible. They easily forget punishments by their parents but only with great difficulty those inflicted by their teachers and some have even been known in later years to have had recourse to brutal vengeance for chastisement they had justly deserved during the course of their education. In the PREVENTIVE SYSTEM, on the contrary, the pupil becomes a friend, and the assistant, a benefactor who advises him, has his good at heart, and wishes to spare him vexation, punishment and perhaps dishonour.

(4) By the PREVENTIVE SYSTEM pupils acquire a better understanding, so that an educator can always speak to them in the language of the heart, not only during the time of their education but even afterwards. Having once succeeded in gaining the confidence of his pupils, he can subsequently exercise a great influence over them, and counsel them, advise and even correct them, whatever position they may occupy in the world later on.

For these and many other reasons it seems that the PREVENTIVE SYSTEM should be preferred.

II. Application of the PREVENTIVE SYSTEM

The practice of this system is wholly based on the words of St. Paul : "Love is patient and kind ... Love bears all things ... hopes all things, endures all things." Reason and religion are the means the educator must constantly apply; he must teach them and himself practice them, if he wishes to be obeyed and to attain his end.

1. It follows that the Rector must devote himself entirely to the boys: He should therefore never accept engagements that might keep him from his duties, and he should always be with his pupils whenever they are not engaged in some occupation, unless they are already being properly supervised by others.
2. Teachers, craft masters and assistants must be of acknowledged morality. They should strive to avoid as they would the plague every kind of affection or sentimental friendship for their pupils, and they should remember that the wrong-doing of one is alone sufficient to compromise an educational institute. Care should be taken that the pupils are never alone. As far as possible the assistants ought to precede the boys to the place where they assemble; they should remain with them until others come to take their place, and never leave the pupils unoccupied.
3. Let the boys have full liberty to jump, run and make as much noise as they please. Gymnastics, music, theatricals and outings are most efficacious means of obtaining discipline and of benefiting spiritual and bodily health. Let care be taken however that the games, the persons playing them as well as the conversation are not reprehensible. "Do anything you like," the great friend of youth, St. Philip, used to say, "as long as you do not sin."
4. Frequent confession and communion and daily Mass are the pillars which must support the edifice of education, from which we propose to banish the use of threats and the cane. Never force the boys to frequent the sacraments, but encourage them to do so, and give them every opportunity. On occasions of retreats, triduum, novenas, sermons and catechism classes let the beauty, grandeur and holiness of the catholic religion be dwelt on, for in the sacraments it

offers to all of us a very easy and useful means to attain our salvation and peace of heart. In this way children take readily to these practices of piety and will adopt them willingly with joy and benefit.

5. Let the greatest vigilance be exercised so as to prevent bad books, bad companies or persons who indulge in improper conversations from entering the institution. A good doorkeeper is a treasure for a house of education.

6. Every evening after Night Prayers before the boys go to rest, the Rector or someone in his stead shall address them briefly, giving them advice or counsel concerning what is to be done or what is to be avoided. Let him try to draw some moral reflection from events that have happened during the day in the house or outside; but his words should never take more than two or three minutes. It is the key to good behavior, to the smooth running of the school and to success in education.

7. Avoid as a plague the opinion that the first communion should be deferred to a late age, when generally the Devil has already gained possession of a boy's heart, with incalculable prejudice to his innocence. According to the discipline of the early Church, it was the custom to give little children the consecrated hosts that remained over after the Easter communion. This serves to show us how much the Church desires children to be admitted to holy communion at an early age. When a child can distinguish between Bread and bread, and shows sufficient knowledge, give no further thought to his age, but let the heavenly king come and reign in that happy soul.

8. Catechisms invariably recommend frequent communion. St. Philip Neri counseled weekly and even more frequent communion. The Council of Trent clearly states that it greatly desires that every faithful Christian should receive holy communion whenever he hears Mass, and that this communion should not only be spiritual but also sacramental, so that greater fruit may be reaped from this august and divine sacrifice.

III. ADVANTAGES OF THE PREVENTIVE SYSTEM

Some say that this system is difficult in practice. I reply that for the pupils it is easier, more satisfactory and more advantageous. To the teacher it certainly does present some difficulties, which however can be diminished if he applies himself to his task with zeal. An educator is one who is consecrated to the welfare of his pupils, and therefore he should be ready to face every difficulty and fatigue in order to obtain his object, which is the civic, moral and intellectual education of his pupils.

In addition to the advantages already mentioned, the following may be added:

The pupil will always be respectful towards his educators, and will ever remember their care with pleasure. He will look upon them as fathers and brothers. Wherever they may go, Salesian pupils are generally the consolation of their families and useful citizens.

Whatever may be the character, disposition and moral state of a boy at the time of his admission, parents can rest assured that their son will not become worse; indeed, it can be held as certain that he will always make some improvement. In fact, certain boys who for a long time had been the scourge of their parents, and had even been refused admission to houses of correction, have changed their ways. They began to live upright lives, and are now filling honourable positions in society and are the support of their families and a credit to the country they live in.

If it should happen that any boys who have already contracted bad habits enter the institute, they could not have a bad influence on their companions. The good boys would not suffer any harm from association with them, since there is neither time, place nor opportunity, because, the assistant, whom we suppose to be present, would speedily intervene.

IV. A WORD ON PUNISHMENTS

What rules should be followed in inflicting punishments? First of all, never have recourse to punishments if possible, but whenever necessity demands stern measures, let the following be borne in mind:

1. An educator should seek to win the love of his pupils if he wishes to inspire fear in them. When he succeeds in doing this, the withholding of some token of kindness is a punishment that stimulates emulation, gives courage and never degrades.
2. With the young, punishment is whatever is meant as a punishment. It has been noticed that in the case of some boys, a reproachful look is more effective than a slap in the face would be. Praise for work done well, and blame in the case of carelessness is already a great reward or punishment.
3. Except in very rare cases corrections and punishments should never be given publicly. But always privately and in the absence of companions; and the greatest prudence and patience should be used to bring the pupil to see his fault, with the aid of reason and religion.
4. To strike a boy in any way, to make him kneel in a painful position, to pull his ears, and other similar punishments, must be absolutely avoided because the law forbids them and because they greatly irritate the boys and degrade the educator.
5. The Rector shall make sure that the disciplinary measures, including rules and punishments, are known to the pupils so that no one can make excuse that he did not know what was commanded or forbidden.

If this system is carried out in our houses, I believe that we shall be able to obtain good results, without having recourse to the use of the cane and other corporal punishments. Though I have been dealing with boys for forty years, I do not recall having used punishments of any kind. Yet, by the help of God I have always obtained not only what duty required, but also what was simply a wish on my part, and that from the very boys in regard to whom all hopes of success seemed lost.