

STRENNA 2008

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EDUCATING WITH THE HEART OF DON BOSCO

A SAINTLY EDUCATOR

The situation of youth at the present day has changed a great deal and presents a whole variety of different conditions and aspects. Yet today too those same questions remain that occupied the mind of Don Bosco from the beginning of his ministry in his desire to understand and his determination to act (John Paul II, Juvenum Patris, 6).

Dear members of the **Salesian Family**, we are beginning a new year which I pray will bring you many graces and blessings. During 2008 I should like to offer you some reflections on Salesian education, aware that, as Pope John Paul II wrote on January 31, 1988: "The situation of youth...has changed a great deal. Yet today too those same questions remain that occupied the mind of Don Bosco: **Who are these young people? What are they looking for? Where are they going? What do they need?** (JP, 6). Speaking about Salesian education leads me above all to speak about Don Bosco, who "realized his personal holiness through an educational commitment lived with zeal and an apostolic heart, and who at the same time knew how to propose holiness as the practical objective of his pedagogy" (JP 5). Don Bosco achieved holiness by being a holy educator. Pius XI did not hesitate to describe him as "*educator princeps*."

_ A happy combination of personal gifts and circumstances led Don Bosco to become the *father*, *teacher*, and *friend* of youth, as John Paul II declared him to be on account of his natural talent for approaching young people and gaining their trust, on account of the priestly ministry that gave him a profound knowledge of the human heart, and on account of his practical experience of the power of grace in a boy's development, a practical capacity for bringing his original ideas to fulfillment.

At the basis of it all, however, there is a vocation: for Don Bosco serving the young was the response to a call from the Lord. His originality consists in bringing together holiness and education as regards the tasks involved, ascetical discipline, and the expression of love. He **is a saintly educator and an educator saint**. From this combination emerged a "system," a combination of intuitions and practice that can be presented in a treatise, narrated in a film, sung in a song, or represented in a musical. It is a question, in fact, of an adventure in which he involved collaborators and helped his boys to dream. Taken up by his followers, for whom education is also a vocation, it has been brought to a great variety of different cultural contexts and translated into different forms of education, corresponding to the situation of the young people for whom it was intended.

_ When we look again at the personal life of Don Bosco or the history of his works, certain questions come to mind: And nowadays? Are his ideas still relevant? To what extent can the solutions that he applied (dialog between the generations, the handing on of values, etc.) help to resolve what for us are insuperable difficulties? I won't attempt to list all the differences between Don Bosco's times and ours. There is no shortage of them, and not small ones in many areas: in the situation of young people, in the family, in morals, in the way of thinking about education, in religious practice. If it is difficult to understand experiences from the past in an attempt at historical reconstruction, it will be even more difficult to try to translate them into a radically different context. And yet we are convinced "that what happened in the case of Don Bosco was a moment of grace, full of potential; a moment that contains inspirations for parents and educators, that has a wealth of ideas, like seeds waiting to burst into flower." (Pietro Braido, *Prevenire non reprimere*)

Education, especially that of disadvantaged youth, is not a task to be fulfilled but a vocation. Don Bosco was a charismatic pioneer who went way beyond making rules and putting them into practice. He created the Preventive System, urged on by a powerful social conscience, but very much in his own way. Nowadays the need is no less: to harness all the available resources, fostering vocations and projects of service. The effectiveness of education lies in its quality, beginning with that of the educator, in the educational climate, in the program, and in its declared objectives. The complexity of society, the multiplicity of the visions and the messages on offer, the separation between different areas of life—all these have produced trends and dangers for education too. One is that of the fragmentation of what is offered and of the way it is received. Another is a process of selection according to personal preferences. The *optional* has been transferred from the marketplace to life itself. Everyone is aware of the difficult alternatives that need to be reconciled: individual advantage and solidarity, love and sexuality, a temporal view of things and a sense of God, the floods of information and the difficulty of evaluating it, rights and duties, freedom and conscience. Clearly the grace of unity in the educator's heart and personal holiness contribute in large measure to overcoming these and other tensions present in the field of education.