

Session 1: Foundation

Preventive vs. Repressive, the opening of the curriculum

Welcome

This is the first of 8 weekly sessions on St. John Bosco's *Preventive System in the Education of the Young* (1877). The next 7 weeks rotate through Bosco's three pillars, Reason, Religion, and Loving-kindness, twice each, and close with an integration session on real cases from our own lives.

The contract is one specific moment from your week, every week. Without it, this is a book club. With it, we get something else.

Opening prayer

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

St. John Bosco, you took the hardest cases and formed them into men. Help us to take the souls God has placed under our care, our wives, our children, the men we sponsor, and form them with the same patience, the same reason, the same love that you used. Teach us to be present before we are productive, to be patient before we are pleased, and to lead with our hearts before we lead with our authority. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

St. John Bosco, ora pro nobis.

Today's reading

From Don Bosco's introduction to The Preventive System in the Education of the Young, Turin, 1877.

More than once I have been asked to express, either verbally or in writing, some thoughts on the so-called Preventive System, which we are accustomed to use in our houses. For lack of time I have not yet been able to satisfy this desire, and now, since I am about to print the Rule that until now has almost always been followed by tradition, I think it fitting to give here a brief account of it. Let this serve as the outline of a small work I am preparing, if God grants me enough life to finish it, and let it serve solely for the benefit of the difficult art of educating the young. I shall therefore explain: what the Preventive System consists of and why it should be preferred; its practical application; and its advantages.

I. What the Preventive System Consists Of, and Why It Should Be Preferred

Two systems have been used in every age in the education of the young: the Preventive and the Repressive. The Repressive system consists in making the law known to one's charges and then watching them in order to identify the transgressors and inflict, where necessary, the deserved punishment. Under this system the words and appearance of the Superior must always be severe, even threatening, and he himself must avoid every familiarity with those under his care.

The Rector, in order to lend weight to his authority, must rarely be found among his subjects, and for the most part only when there is occasion to punish or threaten. This system is easy and less demanding, and is particularly useful in the military and, in general, among adults and persons of sound judgment, who ought to be capable on their own of knowing and remembering what conforms to the laws and to other prescriptions.

Different, and I would say opposite, is the Preventive System. It consists in making the prescriptions and regulations of an Institute known, and then watching over the students in such a way that they always feel upon them the vigilant eye of the Rector or of the assistants. These men, like loving fathers, speak with them, serve as their guides in every event, give counsel, and correct them with affection. That is to say: the Preventive System puts the students in a position where it is practically impossible for them to commit faults.

This system rests entirely upon Reason (*ragione*), Religion (*religione*), and Loving-kindness (*amorevolezza*). For this reason it excludes every violent punishment and even seeks to keep light punishments at a distance. It seems to me preferable for the following reasons:

I. The student who has been warned ahead of time is not humiliated by the faults he commits, as he would be if those faults were reported up to the Superior. Nor does he become angry over the correction he receives, or over the punishment threatened or inflicted, because there is always a friendly and preventive warning that gives him a reason for it, and most of the time succeeds in winning his heart. The result is that the student recognizes the necessity of the correction and almost desires it.

II. The most essential reason is the volatility of youth. In a single moment a young man forgets the rules of discipline and the punishments those rules threaten. So a boy often makes himself guilty and deserving of a penalty he had never paid any attention to, that he was not thinking about at all in the moment of his fault, and that he would certainly have avoided if a friendly voice had warned him.

III. The Repressive system can prevent disorder, but it will rarely make the offenders themselves any better. It has also been observed that young men do not forget the punishments they have suffered. For the most part they hold on to a bitterness and a desire to shake off the yoke, and even to take revenge. The Preventive System, on the contrary, makes the student your friend. In his assistant he sees a benefactor who warns him, who wants to make him good, to free him from heartache, from punishments, and from disgrace.

IV. The Preventive System forms the student in such a way that the educator will always be able to speak to him in the language of the heart, both during his education and afterwards. Once the educator has won the heart of the boy in his charge, he will be able to exercise great influence over him: he will be able to advise him, counsel him, and even correct him later, when he is grown and out in his employment, in his civil office, or in commerce. For these and many other reasons, it seems that the Preventive System should prevail over the Repressive.

The concept in plain language

The Preventive System rests on three pillars: Reason, Religion, and Loving-kindness. It contrasts with the Repressive System, which rests on rules, surveillance, and punishment. Every father defaults to one or the other under pressure. The next 8 weeks are about learning to default differently.

Discussion questions

1. When you read Bosco's description of the two systems, which one did the man who raised you default to? Be specific about a moment.
 2. Under stress, late at night, tired, after the kid has done the same thing twice already, which system do *you* default to? What does that default look like in your kitchen?
 3. Bosco wrote this for teachers in a boarding school. We're fathers in our own homes. What's harder about applying this at home than in a classroom? What's easier?
 4. The Repressive System looks like control. What does it actually feel like, both for the kid and for the father using it?
 5. Bosco's two systems aren't only about discipline. They're about the kind of Father we hold in our heads. Which of the two reflects the relationship you've experienced with, or understanding you have of, God your Father? Which reflects the kind of relationship you want?
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The deeper theological move

Our relationships with others are always a reflection of the reality of our relationship with God. Not our ideas of how things should be, but how they actually are. The Repressive Father you grew up with, the Repressive Father you've become under stress, the Repressive Father you accidentally name when you pray, they are the same distorted image. Naming Bosco's distinction is the beginning of seeing the distortion. Healing it is the beginning of being able to image God differently for your own kids.

Every man at this table needs a Father before he can be one. The wound he carries forward is the same wound he sees in his own kids when he loses his temper. In the end all these fathers need a Father, and this can be the beginning of seeing and healing their own relationship with the One they're meant to mirror.

And the reason Bosco could do this work in the first place is that he himself was a son. His prayer life, his Confessions, his daily Mass were the engine. Everything he gave those boys came from what he received first. The men around this table will form their kids only to the degree they let themselves be formed by the same Father Bosco was formed by.

Live application

Name one specific moment in the last 7 days where you defaulted to the Repressive, you yelled, you punished reactively, you commanded without explaining, you withdrew. One sentence per man. Just name it; we'll work it in the weeks ahead.

Monday-morning commitment

This week, notice one moment where you would have defaulted to the Repressive. Pause for three seconds. Try the Preventive instead. Be ready to report back next week.

My moment to watch for this week:

My one specific person:

Closing prayer

Father, we thank you for the wisdom of your servant John Bosco, and for the brothers around this table. Send us back to our homes this morning ready to be the fathers, the husbands, and the brothers you have called us to be. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sancte Ioannes Bosco, ora pro nobis. Sancte Francisce Salesii, ora pro nobis.

The full 8-week arc, how to bring a moment, and the source translations are in the overview at <https://don-bosco.studiovellum.ai>.