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# Charter for Don Bosco educators



**DON BOSCO**  
WERKEN  
NEDERLAND

## Colophon

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## Introduction

John Bosco's work has been done by his followers, the Salesians of Don Bosco, for about 150 years. They dedicate themselves to young people in Don Bosco's footsteps. Once Don Bosco used to dream of a community that everyone, married or single, priest or layman, who wanted to work for the young were welcome to join. This idea was far too revolutionary for the church mid 19th century, but nowadays, Don Bosco's dream has partly become true: an increasing number of laymen work, paid or voluntary, in the various Don Bosco centres. People of all kinds of different beliefs and philosophies of life agree with Don Bosco's open method of working and attitude. They feel concerned about the questions of the young and find in the 'preventive system' (the Don Bosco method of working) the inspiration and attitude towards work they look for.

However, the increasing diversity of Don Bosco educators means that the demand for support and information is growing. Don Bosco educators look for the answers to questions, such as: What is the meaning of Don Bosco in the 21st century or what is the core of the system? This Charter explains how a Don Bosco Educator should work with youth and youngsters. It gives answers to many questions and guidelines of the Preventive System. However, it also presents inspiration and support during their work with youth and youngsters that (still) drop out. Working with the Don Bosco Movement requires an attitude that not only applies to working hours (9 till 5 mentality), but also in private life takes shape and develops further. This development takes place by gaining knowledge (head), by gaining experience (with your hands) and by making oneself familiar with Don Bosco's spirituality (working from your heart).

Don Bosco Educators, volunteers or paid, conform to this Charter, which is the basis for the system. And the Don Bosco Educators are loyal to the project they work on or to the centre they work in.

The quotations in this Charter are from earlier interviews with Don Bosco professionals and volunteers.

## Don Bosco's life



On 16 August 1815, when a baby boy was born in a small village in Northern Italy's poor countryside, no one had the faintest idea yet that nearly two hundred years after his birth that little John Bosco would have a valuable meaning for the young across the world.

### Choice for priesthood

John Bosco is growing up in a humble country family in Becchi, his native village. When he is two years old, his father dies. From then on, his mother struggles to meet both ends for her children.

John is a hard working boy who knows at an early age that he wants to become a priest. He likes to learn, reads a lot, but he can attend school in winter only. In summer, he has to help in the fields. Yet John is not a great student. At an early age, he believes that cheerfulness and friendship form a good basis for life. He has pleasure in amusing other people and can walk at his hands, at tightrope, and perform dice tricks. When John is nine years old, he is dreaming of a large group of boys in a courtyard and sees them laughing and playing, but he also hears them cursing. The little believer John wants to stop the cursing and begins to hit the boys. Then a beautifully dressed Man appears and says to him, 'You should try and make friends with your goodness and love, not by hitting them.' Then a splendid Lady appears in a dress decorated with twinkling stars. The cursing boys have disappeared and wild animals have taken their places. The Lady smiles and says, 'Grow up in humbleness and strength and what you see going on with those animals, you will have to do for my children.' Confusedly, John sees that the ferocious predators have changed in precious lambkins that play cheerfully, and he hears the Lady say that he will understand all in due course. This dream will stick in his mind for the rest of his life.

John Bosco fulfils his wish to become a priest and enters a Seminary (to become a priest). In 1841, after his ordination, Don Bosco does not know exactly what he wants to do.

### Choice for being a priest for the young

At the advice of his coach, Don Cafasso, he decides to continue studying at Turin. The humble farmer's son moves to the big city. What he sees there, affects him greatly. Many people move from the countryside to Turin in search of new opportunities and work. Homeless boys are roaming about aimlessly in pursuit after work they cannot find; others work in most terrible circumstances and these boys are put into prisons with serious criminals. In those Turin street youngsters' problems, the young priest finds his call: he has to dedicate himself to those boys. However, the question is how? Answering this question, Don Bosco tells the following story: On 8 December 1841, Don Bosco sees how a boy is knocked out of the church. Shocked by the way the boy is treated, he runs after him to help him. But the frightened boy hardly answers his questions. Don Bosco has a lot of trouble finding out that the boy is called Bartholomeo Garelli, is sixteen years old and is unable to read, write or even sing. Bartholomeo shakes his head in shame, 'I cannot do anything.' 'Can you whistle?' Don Bosco asks. For the first time the boy's face shows a smile. Of course, he can whistle. Once befriended to the boy, Don Bosco discovers that Bartholomeo does not attend catechesis (religious instruction) because the younger children there know a lot more about this than he does. He suggests teaching Bartholomeo for one time on a one-to-one basis. A week later, Bartholomeo returns with nine friends who do not know either what to do on a Sunday.

### Choice for education

This was the start of Don Bosco's youth work. Don Bosco calls his Sunday group his *Oratory*, which means literally place of worship. Towards the summer, no less than eighty boys meet every Sunday for worship (with an adapted sermon for the boys), a breakfast and catechesis. Don Bosco recalls his own youth and knows that boys need more than merely study. It is essential for them to enjoy themselves too. That is why he always sees to relaxation, with games, walks and singing or stage lessons.

After his study, Don Bosco is offered a position in a girls' hospital. And although he has to leave his boys behind for this, they consistently keep coming to see him every Sunday. Some people disapprove of these visits. They do not understand why a priest occupies himself with such 'scoundrels'. Moreover, the playing boys disturb the Sunday rest of the hospital.

### Choice for the young

Don Bosco is given the choice: the hospital or his boys. A difficult choice. If he chooses for his boys, he will be dismissed, without housing, without promotion prospects or perspectives and without income. However, Don Bosco had made a promise that he would not break: he was determined to labour for his boys.

### Choice for the preventive education

The next years are not easy. Yet, despite the lack of financial means, Don Bosco keeps believing that God will not let him down and he keeps putting the needs of his boys first. His confidence is rewarded. He buys a plot to continue his *Oratory* and together with his fellow workers, he keeps looking for funds to expand the work. No project is too much for him as long as the youth benefits from it. He organises lotteries and writes hundreds of letters in order to raise money. He establishes schools to teach the boys the three R's (reading, writing and arithmetic). As well over one thirds of the boys are orphans, he sets up a boarding school. For vocational training, he begins a workshop for cobbler and tailor apprentices. Later on, he expands it with a bookbindery, a furniture works, a printing establishment and a forge. Also at other places, he begins *Oratories* in order to keep the boys off the streets and to give them opportunities to develop into honest citizens. For this, it is of major importance that the educator keeps company with the boys, gives and gains confidence. The boys may be who they are. *Oratory* does not only stand for place of worship, but for a place of worship and living, working, learning and playing.

With an open ear and eye, Don Bosco looks and listens to what is of interest to the boys and he tries to prevent that young people derail. Besides, he calls in the older boys, who teach the little ones themselves, after he has taught them further.

### Choice for the future

However, Don Bosco worries about what will happen after his death. As a result of this, he gets the idea to set up a community that works for the youth. Besides, he thinks of a community that is wider than only a congregation (monastic community); also, people that do not live in the community can join. Whether they are married or not, priests or laymen, everybody who wants to do his best for his work should be able to join his community. However, this idea is too revolutionary for the then Church authorities and Don Bosco has to adjust his plans.

In 1869, Don Bosco receives papal permission for a congregation. He names his monastic community the *Salesians* of Don Bosco after Saint Francisco of Sales, because Saint Francisco used the words patience and mildness much, in Don Bosco's view, two pivotal words for the education of youngsters. In 1872, Don Bosco founds a congregation for women that work for girls from the same inspiration, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, better known as the Salesian Sisters. The once small group of Salesians is growing fast and is gradually expanding itself all over the world. Don Bosco fulfilled his promise faithfully and dedicated himself to the young all his life. What began with the 16 years old Bartholomeo in the Turin streets, grew into a worldwide community. When Don Bosco died on 31 August 1888, no less than over 800 followers were working in France, Spain and several countries in South America. And also now, his work and principles continue living on worldwide.



## Don Bosco in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

The modernisation of the society, which began during Don Bosco's time continues nowadays. Meanwhile, much has been changed in today's society: secularisation, individualisation, economic growth, affluence and environmental pollution. The society has also become more and more multiform. Many more nationalities and religions have been mixing living together compared with those days. But also, Don Bosco met people of other denominations. In those contacts, he always showed respect, no matter they were of a different faith.

Despite the differences between our time and Don Bosco's days, the questions youngsters are struggling with are still largely the same as the questions that young people put forward in Don Bosco's days: What am I doing here? What is the use of my life? What are my skills and abilities? What do I think is of value? For what projects do I want to work?

An other similarity to Don Bosco's time is that there are still youngsters who are in the margin of the society: the homeless, fugitives, asylum seekers and teenage dropouts. Dropouts who do not get the opportunities that others do have, or who are looking for meaning in this affluent society. In particular, Don Bosco educators work for this group of children, teenagers and youngsters put in underprivileged positions, in the same way as the then Don Bosco educators. Don Bosco was trained to be a priest and not as an educator. He attended courses and buried himself in educational theory. Of course, his own education received from his mother was a basis for him; say primal educational theory. Also, the present-day educators use their own education as a starting point and take courses in Don Bosco's Preventive System, which suits wonderfully in present time.

Not only Don Bosco's wish to help young people in disadvantaged positions, but also his approach, his way of working and his attitude to life are still alive. Don Bosco educators still feel themselves inspired by this approach, which is continued not because of the tradition, but because it is of all time and still works. Nowadays, many basic principles of Don Bosco's educating ideas can also be found again in social or pedagogic developments, and in views, as *problem-oriented working, starting a dialogue on values and standards, stimulating social responsibility and looking for the inner (intrinsic) motivation of children and youngsters*. 'Therefore the DonBosco method of working (the so-called Preventive System) is also 'of this time' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



## Don Bosco's Preventive System of Education

"Some people say that the method is theoretical, hard to explain. Then I ask them: why do you enjoy Don Bosco? They give all kinds of examples: the way of working here is so sociable; they always listen to you; you can go your own way; people trust you; they accept you as you are... Well, then I say, that is the Don Bosco approach."

The Don Bosco educational method is called the Preventive System. The name refers to a core aim of Don Bosco's: prevention. Don Bosco wanted to prevent that young people were put into prison between steeled criminals. He saw an educational task for himself: bringing up young people to honest citizens and good Christians.

Nowadays, this educational task developed by Don Bosco has been translated into four main aims of education:

- **Solidarity:** take care that young people feel a bond with each other and with society;
- **Freedom:** support the young in their search for freedom and independence;
- **Responsibility:** give youngsters a free rein to bear responsibility in concrete situations;
- **Meaning:** support young people in the development of their identity by means of open communication about the deeper reasons for existence and the core problems of life and living together; however, always with respect for youngsters' choices.

By remaining critically to our own way of working, we were able to make the transformation from 'honest citizens and good Christians' to the educational aims. These aims describe the integral education as Don Bosco meant them to be. The needs of today's young people are broadly speaking the same as those of the youngsters during Don Bosco's time. Young people need the feeling that they matter, that they mean something for other people and can play a part in our society, that someone trusts and respects them and that they can appeal to someone when necessary. They need love, friendship and guidance. Unfortunately, many young dropouts lack them and live on the fringes of our society.

"It is not a method or a list of rules; it is more an attitude you always have. I notice that I also work by the principles of the Preventive System during my other work than Don Bosco's. Openness, presence and faith; it is a way to view people and to socialize with them."

Many Don Bosco educators have the view that the Preventive System is not only a method of guiding or educating young people, but it is particularly an attitude to work (and even possibly an attitude to life) characterised by attendance, cordiality, humour and games, reason, and encouragement. Discussing all this takes place in their own facilities.

### Attendance

“By being actively present as an educator you create opportunities to get a dialogue going with youngsters. In this way, you give them an opportunity to get to know you in their field and in their own pace. If they trust you and feel at ease, they will talk about the things that worry them. That is often during a game, for instance card playing. When they want to make a date and you are not actively present, many of them see a barrier that is too high and as a consequence of this barrier many questions will remain undiscussed.”

One of the pivotal features of the Don Bosco approach is attendance. In the first place, this means to be actively present: you are among them and take part in the daily life of the youngsters, during moments of education and reflection and during games. However, active attendance is not sufficient; your attitude is also important in this. You are not a supervisor, but an accessible and approachable person that associates with the young on equal terms and is able to bring something up for dialogue with them. Often ‘small things’ matter, such as to remember someone’s name, to approach people and show interest.

Instead of attendance you can also speak of presence, this is a term that is also used in other methodologies.

In Don Bosco’s approach, the quality of attendance is particularly important. The most important elements are:

- **Concern:** Without imposing himself, a DonBosco educator is actively present at places where young people are in order to have fellow feeling. You can only learn what really matters for young people, if you are among them and join in.
- **Sincere interest:** A Don Bosco educator is sincerely interested in the happiness and the life of the young, he or she is not unconcerned, is happy when things go well and sometimes worries when things go less well.
- **Sportiveness:** A Don Bosco educator is fond of being with youngsters and participates with pleasure in games and entertainment.

- **Unconditionality:** A Don Bosco educator is actively present without any conditions, does not attach conditions to the efforts of young people and does not expect that they owe him or her something, because he has educated or guided them. Youngsters are accepted as they are and know that will not be let down when they make a mistake.

“The key of the Don Bosco system is acceptance; that is what really matters. Everyone wants to be accepted, young people just as well as adults. My view is full acceptance. It does not matter who pops up, I will speak to him or her, but in turn, I do expect that they show respect for me.”

### Cordiality

The Don Bosco educator creates an informal atmosphere of friendly contacts with the young and youngsters and others, in which solidarity is important. You show them that you really care about them. This cordiality is also of major importance in collaboration with colleagues and others.

### Humour and Games

Humour is essential if you work with young and youngsters. A joke breaks the ice and if you must correct behaviour, it is a good way to convey the message not only in a clearly, but also a friendly way.

You can also explain games as social games. Children and youngsters discover themselves socially and games are good exercises.

Challenging, playing the innocent, provoking a reply are options. Obviously, it is of major importance to have fun.

### Reason

“You must be reasonable. They are adolescents, so, they have to look for what is acceptable for them, to discover their sexuality. Therefore, you know they will surf to certain sites on the internet. Then, you talk with them about what is tolerable. What is acceptable and what is not? Together you find a reasonable answer. For instance, that sites showing people being killed are not tolerable. If a youngster looks for such sites later, it does make me really angry, but then everybody does understand why.”

Don Bosco educators associate with young people in reason. It is essential to offer an environment to young and youngsters, in which they learn to deal with values and standards. So, these rules are reasonable and as such that young and youngsters can go along with them, even though they will search for the limits. To be concrete, this

means, for instance, that Don Bosco educators do not behave in an authoritative manner and do not decide on any overdone rules and sanctions. "I am not going to kick a boy out of the youth centre, because his feet are on the sofa." It also means that they do not arouse false hopes, but indicate what they think what is acceptable and why. Anyone who approaches young people with reason, explains clearly his motives and plans, is confident that youngsters can be reasonable and are able to bear responsibility themselves, and respects a young person and his or her opinion, also when it is a different one.

"For me, reason has all to do with honesty and sincerity, feeling at ease, no play-acting and approaching each other as people being able to talk to each other. Not as a client and a social worker, or a child and an authoritarian adult; no, just open talk about opportunities and limits."

### Encouragement

"At first, I did not see it. Then, one time they asked me to work behind the bar or to do something else. Later on, when evaluating, you notice that you took more and more responsibility, that your self-confidence was growing and that you gradually saw a goal. This was caused by the Don Bosco educators who encouraged me repeatedly to take on something new."

One of the major tasks of a Don Bosco educator is to encourage youngsters to further development. This can be done by offering dynamic and creative programmes, or rather even by offering a frame for a programme that the young complete themselves. Delegating responsibility as much as possible, of course adapted to age and (required) skills, is an important aspect of encouraging. In this way, you show a youngster that you trust him. In fact, this applies not only to young people; also Don Bosco educators are approached in this way.

"Not only faith in young people matters, but also in the volunteers and the co-educators. I have a one hundred percent faith in them all and delegate much responsibility. They decide on the programmes, they tell me what is needed; they make a start with the activities, in consultation, of course. By delegating responsibilities to them, I encourage concern and affinity and I show people that I respect them."

Delegating responsibility and having faith do require that making mistakes is allowed. We must learn from them and therefore making mistakes is simply accepted.

"That is what Don Bosco makes attractive; your mistakes are simply accepted. Then they say that making mistakes teaches us, so it is quite natural to accept mistakes, as long as we assess them and learn from them."

### Facilities

Don Bosco realised that young people need their own facilities (the *Oratory*, as he called it) is very essential for young people. They need facilities for company and entertainment, where they can experiment with values and standards, can look for the limits of their opportunities and where they are allowed to learn from their own mistakes by trial and error. Own facilities are of vital importance for the development of their own identity. Taking care of such accommodation that is always open for everyone form the core aspects of Don Bosco's Preventive System. The *Oratory* that stood for place of worship and living, working, learning and playing has now become a place where young and youngsters can train themselves in the four aims of education: meaning, solidarity, responsibility, and freedom.

"The boys feel at home here, they play a game and talk about things they are interested in, such as girls or alcohol, without anybody making fuss about this or saying that it is not allowed to do that. Many cannot talk about those subjects at home. Here they decide themselves what the subjects are to talk about; it is their place."

### What does the system mean in clear terms?

When discussing the Don Bosco system, people soon ask for real examples: what is it exactly about? Point by point enumerations are not easy to give, because the various characteristics of the Preventive System affect each other. So to speak, they form links being connected in various ways. For instance, you can only encourage somebody if you know what interests him and what concerns him. To get to know this you have to attend regularly. However, that does not mean that Don Bosco educators cannot give an answer when they are asked what a Don Bosco educator concretely does.

Here are some examples of these answers.

A Don Bosco educator....

- joins in with the youngsters' perception of their environment;
- creates a relaxed and safe atmosphere where young people can be themselves;
- clearly indicates what his or her opportunities and limits are; also regarding work;
- shows young people that he cares for them;
- prepares activities well, but carries them out with flexibility, is always open for suggestions and never carries out a standard programme whatever the cost;

- does not work for young people, but with youngsters and takes it for granted that youngsters have their say and bear their own responsibility;
- encourages youngsters' own initiatives and supports them in this in order to increase their independence;
- enjoys his work.

### **Working in a team**

Don Bosco work does not imply working in a team only. The Don Bosco educator works with people who have the same view in managing young and youngsters, in or outside the working environment. In this way, the Don Bosco educator develops an individuality, which is founded on solidarity. In a team, the Don Bosco educator develops his creativity, not only by means of outside influences, but also by collaboration. Essential in this is training and refresher courses.

Reason is of vital importance for the Don Bosco educator, if he wants to perform well. Dialogue and consideration are essential. All this cannot be done without the appreciation of what they do. At the right moments, time and attention should be kept free for inspiration fed by other people and by relaxing.

### **Don Bosco's spirit**

Don Bosco's method stems from his religious education, his spirituality. Nowadays, not all Don Bosco educators work from a religious faith. However, this does not mean that the evangelical character of the Don Bosco method has disappeared; on the contrary, it lives on in the emotional style of working, calling up each other and strengthening each other. Don Bosco read the gospel from a certain point of view: the one from a merciful God that does not let people down. By dedicating himself to young people unconditionally, Don Bosco wanted to live after the gospel.

Compassion and unconditionality can still be found in the Don Bosco projects. At the same time, the Salesian Society shows respect for other religions and philosophies of life and it realises that every human being, irrespective of his view of faith or belief, struggles with spiritual questions, and looks for sources of inspiration and other breeding grounds for strength.

More about spirituality in general and Don Bosco's in particular can be found in the booklets *Don Bosco werk vandaag; de spirituele missie (Don Bosco work today; the spiritual mission is an essay written by Jurja Steenmeijer)* and *De spiritualiteit van Don Bosco - jouw spirit (Don Bosco's spirituality - your spirit)*.



## Conclusion

This Charter is not a straitjacket of rules and guidelines, which Don Bosco educators must adhere to strictly. It gives guidelines and a direction for those who have their hearts in the right place and want to dedicate themselves to young and youngsters. The Charter gives the educators a solid basis to make themselves familiar with Don Bosco's Preventive System of Education. It offers a source of inspiration and a ground to continually look critically at their own method of managing young and youngsters in consultation with others. If necessary, they can develop and professionalize the method.

This Charter is an appeal to everyone and invites people to dedicate themselves with all their hearts to young and youngsters in a way as written above, so as an attitude to life instead of to work.

Each child has good qualities. However, you should take the trouble to find out.