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SALESIAN PEDAGOGY IN THE LIGHT OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL²

PEDAGOGIKA SALEZJAŃSKA WOBEC WSKAZAŃ SOBORU WATYKAŃSKIEGO II

Streszczenie: System prewencyjny powstał w XIX wieku. Jego twórcą był ks. Jan Bosko (1815-1888). W tym czasie Piemont borykał się z wieloma problemami społecznymi. Jednym z nich była młodzież biedna i opuszczona, która przywędrowała z okolicznych wiosek do Turynu w poszukiwaniu pracy i lepszych warunków życia. Część znajdowała zatrudnienie, reszta celem przeżycia, organizowała grupy przestępcze, wchodząc w konflikt z prawem. Więzienie turyńskie i ośrodki wychowawcze szybko zapełniły się młodzieżą z marginesu. Tą kategorią młodzieży zajął się Jan Bosko tworząc dla niej szkoły ogólnokształcące, zawodowe i internaty. Sobór Watykański II (1962-1965) nakreślił nowe linie rozwoju dla działalności Kościoła. W ten sposób chciał dokonać refleksji na temat swojego miejsca i roli w dzisiejszej kulturze oraz świecie. Po jego zakończeniu, papież Paweł VI zachęcił istniejące rodziny zakonne, stowarzyszenia i ruchy kościelne do tzw. *aggiornamento* swoich pierwotnych charyzmatów (Wirth 2009, p. 386). W tym celu Towarzystwo Salezjańskie zwołało Specjalną Kapitułę Generalną, która dokonała gruntownej analizy dotychczasowej pracy młodzieżowej. Wytyczyła również nowe paradygmaty, które odpowiadały wskazaniom Kościoła i zarazem były zgodne z ideą pracy młodzieżowej pozostawionej przez Jana Bosko.

Słowa kluczowe: pedagogika salezjańska, młodzież, Sobór Watykański II, szkolnictwo, ubóstwo, katecheza, oratorium

Abstract: The Preventive System originated in the 19th century. Its creator was Fr John Bosco (1815-1888). At the time, Piedmont was facing many social problems. One of these was the poor and abandoned youth who had migrated from the surrounding villages to Turin in search of work and better living conditions. Some found employment, the rest, in order to survive, organised criminal groups, coming into conflict with the law. Turin's prisons and juvenile

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detention centres quickly filled up with marginalised young people. This category of youngsters was taken care of by John Bosco, who set up general and vocational schools and boarding schools for them. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) drew new lines of development for the Church's activity. In doing so, it wanted to reflect on its place and role in today's culture and world. Following it, Pope Paul VI encouraged existing religious families, associations and ecclesial movements to the so-called *aggiornamento* of their original charisms. To this end, the Salesian Society convened a Special General Chapter, which carried out a thorough analysis of youth work to date. It also set out new paradigms that corresponded to the indications of the Church and at the same time were in line with the idea of youth work left by John Bosco.

Keywords: Salesian pedagogy, youth, Second Vatican Council, schooling, poverty, catechesis, oratory

Introduction

Until the Second Vatican Council, implementation of John Bosco's preventive system was conducted in line with its founder's intuition and pedagogical experience. It, moreover, relied on the structures established by him and his successors (Vojtáš 2021, p. 36). The basic forms of work organized by the Salesians were oratories, general and vocational schools, colleges, dormitories, and orphanages. At that time the Salesian Society founded by Fr. John Bosco gradually consolidated, developed its existing initiatives and created new forms of work (Vojtáš 2021a, p. 70). The Second Vatican Council, held in the years 1962-1965, provided a new impulse for reflection on the educational activity of the Salesians. One of the documents of the Council was the Decree *On the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life* (Perfectae caritatis 2002, 2) and the Declaration *On Christian Education* (Gravissimum educationis 2002, 1). These documents called on religious institutes to return to the evangelical sources as well as to their own original spirit. This would allow religious families to adapt to the changing conditions of life in the modern world and, through the realization of their own charism, become even more involved in the current life of the Church. The Salesian Society responded to the appeal of the Church authorities and set on conducting a critical analysis of its charism. This was done during the proceedings of the General Chapter XX, referred to as "Special", which lasted from June 10, 1971 to January 5, 1972. The Salesians undertook a thorough reflection on the preventive system and its application in the contemporary model of education during the Special General Chapter as well as during the following one, which took place in 1978 (Vojtáš 2021, p. 236). The above initiatives marked the opening of the Salesians to the Church and to the "signs of the times" that emerged along with new social problems. The first area of concern was poor and abandoned youth. The second issue related to the catechesis and oratory in the parish. Both problems are inscribed in the Salesian model of education (Misiaszek 1995, p. 100).

John Bosco – creator of the educational method

Fr. John Bosco (1815-1888) was born in Becchi, a small village near Turin. Due to the premature death of his father, the family fell into serious economic problems. As a young boy, he was forced to take on various jobs to earn money. His experience during this period made him more sensitive to similar problems faced by Turin's youth at that time. Thanks to the generosity of other people, he was able to complete primary and secondary education. Following his graduation from a secondary school in Chieri, Don Bosco decided to enter the higher seminary in Turin. In 1841, he was consecrated as a priest. In order to improve his qualifications, he undertook additional three-year studies in pastoral theology. During this time, he lived in the convent boarding school for student priests. Its director, Fr. Giuseppe Cafasso, was to have a great impact on Fr. John Bosco's interests. The main object of those interests became poor and abandoned boys, as well as those who stayed in prisons and reformatories (Misiaszek 2012, p. 230).

The industrial revolution in Piedmont, gave rise to a new phenomenon in Turin, namely, formation of a new social group, which was the urban proletariat. As already mentioned, the farmers, who were fleeing the backward rural areas accounted for a significant part of it. However, the living conditions of the urban proletariat were much worse than those of the rural population. Apart from material poverty, young people were faced with moral misery, as well as cultural and educational neglect. The first pupils of Fr. John Bosco were drawn from this large group of young labourers seeking better living conditions in Turin (Spalla 1975, p. 14; Braido 1988, p. 15; Niewęglowski 2003, p. 423).

The form of Don Bosco's educational and care activity was the organization of an oratory. The institution was well-known throughout Piedmont. John Bosco, by fusing the elements of culture and religion, through the structures of the oratory, wanted to educate the young people of Turin in a spirit that we today refer to as inculturation of faith. When working with young people, he initially focused on culture and the experience drawn from this culture in relation to the holistic education of man, to complement it later with Christian and Catholic values. One of his statements can serve as confirmation of the above practice: "It does not matter where and from whose inspiration new formulas of education and teaching appear: if they are good in themselves, let us try to give them a Christian direction and ensure that they do not lose anything of the Christian spirit" (Memorie Biografiche 1898-1948, vol. II, p. 144).

In turn, when speaking directly about the need to combine faith and reason in education, John Bosco pointed to the priority of human values, their effectiveness and significance for the entire process of education, especially religious one: "The basis of the entire educational system is reason and religion. The educator should be convinced that, in principle, all pupils are open to goodness and endowed with hearts capable of gratitude. When they accept the main truths

of faith, understand the love that God has bestowed on man, learn gratitude for His gifts and that the essence of faith consists in fulfilling God's will and observing the commandments, then, believe me, most of the educational work has already been done" (*Memorie Biografiche 1898-1948*, vol. VII, p. 761; Braido 1999, p. 255).

Fr. John Bosco referred to his first oratory as a nomadic one. Since, it had no infrastructure of its own, on Saturdays and Sundays it rented rooms or church grounds from the familiar clergy. Time was spent on games, competitions and prayer. Boys were also offered a meal. In 1846, Don Bosco bought a plot of land in Valdocco, a poor district of Turin, where there was a modest building in need of thorough renovation. It is where the first permanent oratory was established, and soon, the playgrounds, boarding homes and a vocational school were built there. Fr. John Bosco had a highly pragmatic outlook on life (Jan Paweł II 1988, 4). He was aware that the best way to help his pupils was to offer them a chance to gain a profession. On the one hand, after graduating from such a school, the boys were able to quickly find their place in society. On the other hand, it served as a preventive factor that protected young men from entering the path of crime and conflict with the law. He presented his point of view in a letter to the Minister of the Interior, Urbano Rattazzi: "I only ask for moral support and help so that, by common consent, I may support and develop the work that aims solely at preventing the abandoned youth from finding themselves in prison and those who had been released, from finding themselves there again" (Amadei 1940, p. 472). Fr. John Bosco practiced these values himself and tried to perpetuate and instil them in his pupils. It was with this goal in mind that, in 1859, he founded the Society of St. Francis de Sales which was to continue his educational work (Braido 1988, p. 43; Niewęglowski 2011, p. 70).

Option for the Poor

Following the Council's recommendations against social injustice and on considering the realities of contemporary man's, the Salesians steered the preventive system towards a more radical interest in impoverished youth. Compared to the times of Fr. John Bosco this was a novel phenomenon. This reflection, undertaken during the sessions of the Special General Chapter and the XXI General Chapter, allowed for a better understanding of the new cultural and social context of the lives of contemporary youth. The analysis was guided by the goal of helping youth in their integral human and Christian development. The Chapter Document proposes specific methods of action to the Salesians. These include reaching out to young people in need, responsible meeting, being present among young people, adopting an understanding attitude and establishing authentic dialogue with young people. On reading the "sign of the times", it was acknowledged that their source was injustice, which prevents social balance and full liberation of man (Vojtáš 2021, p. 239). As the Chapter document reads: "The state of backwardness in many

countries, illiteracy, poverty and hunger in the world are taking on such dimensions and significance today, that immediate ad hoc work is no longer sufficient, but we must begin to work on eliminating the causes of this situation. In fact, the problem here are structures that often become a serious obstacle or which even make it impossible to implement the Gospel that is proclaimed and invoked: they do not allow the poor and oppressed to see the face of God, or to believe that the Kingdom of God has already come into the world, or to set out on the path of full salvation. These are the structures that originate from sin” (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 67; *Evangelii nuntiandi* 1981, 36). The same document also states that the contemporary world “is under the tyranny of injustice, which is revealed in the state of underdevelopment and the lack of balance among people” (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 32). Despite the development of science and technology, as well as the disorderly growth of production, modern societies are becoming “machines for the production of the poor” (Ibidem). This situation is aggravated by the contemporary socio-cultural reality, characterized by an internal confusion of values, to which young people are quick to react. It applies to such situations as: “the elevation of the human person while simultaneously humiliating people; the demand for freedom while restricting it in many areas; the pursuit of the highest values while denying all value; the desire for solidarity at a time when collective action is in crisis, the growth of the mindset of anonymity and the avoidance of involvement; the rapid exchange of information in various areas and at different levels while impeding cultural and social reforms; the pursuit of world peace and unity with simultaneous contradictions in politics, society, race, religion, and economy; the advocacy of all issues concerning the youth while at the same time marginalizing them in matters of employment, participation in social life and responsibility” (General Chapter XXI 1978, 23).

In accordance with the Council’s guidelines, the Salesians actively participated in the process of liberating young people from their limitations, difficulties, spiritual and material poverty. In their educational work, they drew attention to the phenomenon of secularization and to the development of criteria for so-called poor youth. Regarding the first issue, they set a new perspective in the educational process. It allowed for a more realistic picture of oneself and the world, enabled a more complete development of oneself and a change in the world. Following the guidelines of Vatican II, the Salesians declared that history must be taken into one’s own hands and the work of creation must be directed. Such an understanding of human existence is consistent with God’s plan (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 31). At the same time, in their educational work, they warned against a false understanding of secularism, which prioritizes man over God (*Konstytucja Dogmatyczna o Kościele* 2002, 36).

Defining the criteria for youth poverty seems, in retrospect, to have been somewhat easier. According to the Document of the Special Chapter, the concept of poverty was understood as any of its forms. In the first place was economic

poverty, the source of all want, followed by social, cultural, moral, spiritual and emotional poverty. When discussing the recipients of the Salesian charism, the document of the Special Chapter adds yet another category of poverty, namely “the most needy”. This referred to situations of particularly severe material poverty, or the accumulation of its various forms (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 47, 48). The latter became the subject of special interest and concern of the Salesians. This was entirely in line with the Founder’s thought (General Chapter XXI 1978, 26, 85, 98, 103).

Referring to the Council’s declaration on education, the Salesians, through their educational activity, became more radically committed to serving the underprivileged and destitute. It should be underlined that the Salesians undertook work for social justice in the world and conducted it in accordance with the principles of the Gospel, and not as a result of direct involvement in politics, propagation of revolutionary ideas or proclamation of theories supporting class hatred. The Chapter documents clearly define these matters (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 67-68). The implementation of the preventive system founded on evangelical principles served as a catalyst for rejecting cooperation with institutions whose goal was not justice, human growth or the welfare of the person (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 71).

Catechesis and evangelization

Within the context of the Salesian tradition, catechesis has always been an integral part of the preventive system. Fr. John Bosco himself said that his work with the youth of Turin began with catechism lessons (Konstytucje 1984, 34; Braido 2003, p. 166). After the Second Vatican Council, this system was further enriched by the values of contemporary catechesis and evangelization (Vojtáš 2021, p. 242). A new perspective on the importance of catechesis prompted the Salesians to reflection and redefining its role in education of young people.

The main goal of catechesis is to lead every person to a mature and responsible faith (Catechesi tradendae 1996, 18-20). Thus, catechesis was acknowledged by the Church as the fundamental and most appropriate means in Christian education, as it was also mentioned in the Council’s declaration on education (Gravissimum educationis 2002, 2). The above indications were reflected in the documents of the Salesian Chapters. The Special General Chapter, when referring to the subject of catechesis, defined it as “the primary activity of the Salesian apostolate” (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 279). Education in the faith is not only one of the elements of John Bosco’s system, but it can be said that its dimension encompasses the entire educational activity of the Salesians (Misiaszek 1995, p. 114). The document of the Special General Chapter, when developing guidelines for catechesis, also referred to the General Catechetical Directory, emphasizing “the anthropological dimension of catechesis in all its aspects, placing in a continuous mutual relationship

the specific person, the Word of God and the community” (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 292). The starting point, which was the Word of God, set the task for education to become a more dynamic process. In this way, educators were able to get through to the young more effectively and help them shape a mature personality, appropriate to the needs of the time. The pupil, on the other hand, could discover the possibilities of establishing a personal relationship with Christ and draw from this friendship values for his own growth (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 301-307; Kapituła Generalna XXI 1978, 93). The evangelical dynamics became a challenge for the Salesian community, which wanted to be increasingly responsible and aware of its prophetic educational and evangelizing mission. In this perspective, every Salesian became a “preacher of the Gospel” and a “witness of the Word” (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 282; Vojtáš 2022, p. 238).

The new understanding of the educational process by the Second Vatican Council, in which evangelization constitutes its integral part, allowed the Salesians to avoid possible misunderstandings that might arise when interpreting John Bosco’s educational system with regard to one of the goals of education, namely that of the “good Christian and honest citizen”. During Don Bosco’s time, this expression had a very clear meaning. Today, in the era of pluralistic culture, this concept may seem somewhat imprecise and ambiguous. It concerns having a thorough understanding of what it means to be a Christian and of the place of Christians in the Church and in modern society (Vojtáš 2021, p. 246).

Thanks to the evangelizing content, which the Council emphasized, the program of Salesian education tried to open up to new forms of pedagogical work and apostolic care for young people (Vojtáš 2022, p. 241). The Chapter Document reads as follows: “A Salesian house, even open to the needs of young people (...) cannot fully fulfil the apostolic mission of its community if it remains the sole location where encounters with young people take place. In the spirit of St. John Bosco, and imitating the Good Shepherd, Salesians should reach out to young people in places where they stay, where they live and work” (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 361). It is clear from the above record that Salesians are supposed to and should undertake work with young people, following the example of missionaries, also outside their educational institutions, entering directly into the environment in which young people live. This undoubtedly makes it easier to comprehend the issues facing the youth and to evangelize more successfully—a process the Church refers to as inculturation: “The message of the Gospel cannot simply be separated from the culture in which it took root from the beginning (that is, from the whole world of the Bible, and specifically from the cultural environment in which Jesus of Nazareth lived); nor can it be separated without serious harm from the forms of culture in which it has been transmitted over the centuries; it is not the direct fruit of any culture, but is always transferred by means of apostolic dialogue, which necessarily inserts itself in some way into the dialogue of cultures. On the other hand, it must be recognized that the power of the Gospel is such that it transforms

and regenerates. It is not surprising that, as it penetrates a culture, it transforms many elements in it. There would be no catechesis if the Gospel changed in contact with culture. If this is neglected through forgetfulness, it will lead to the ‘emptying of the Christ’s Cross of its power’, as St. Paul so significantly puts it” (*Evangelii nuntiandi* 1981, 53; *Vojtáš* 2023, pp. 78-79).

Oratory work in the parish

The main places of work for Salesians are the oratory and educational institutions. As for the parish, it was only recognised as a form of pastoral and educational work after the Special General Chapter (*Capitolo Generale Speciale* 1971-1972, 28-30, 65, 387). Don Bosco recommended that Salesians, focusing on educational work in structures such as oratories, schools and boarding schools, should not take on parish work. If they did so, it was a very exceptional case. The new pastoral situation that arose after the end of World War II and the appeal of the Second Vatican Council to seek more effective and direct forms of work with the people, as well as a certain crisis in private schools in Italy, prompted the Salesian Society to undertake a broader reflection on the parish. The Salesians realised that the parish, with its structures, could create favourable conditions for the realisation of the congregation’s mission, namely, establishing contact with poor young people (Wirth 2000, p. 455). Parish work also allows for a better understanding of the natural environment in which young people live and function, as well as their specific problems. Contact with their parents and the entire family environment is also important (*Capitolo Generale Speciale* 1971-1972, 40).

Pastoral work in a salesian parish, by its very nature, covers all the faithful living in its territory. Taking into account the priority of works and referring to the original Salesian charism, young people should be the main focus of attention (*Capitolo Generale Speciale* 1971-1972, 180, 402, 407; Wirth 2009, p. 390). The documents of the General Chapter point out that normal evangelisation work should be enriched by the values flowing from the preventive system, namely kindness, the creation of a family spirit, balance and authentic joy (*Capitolo Generale Speciale* 1971-1972, 426 – 430; *General Chapter XXI* 1978, 140; Kuciński 1997, p. 93).

The General Chapter also draws attention to the popular character of the parish. It is advisable to run parishes in populated districts of large cities and in poorer communities. Its folk character also determines the nature and style of work of pastors and lay people. This means reaching out to those most in need and being open to their “pains, disappointments and hopes” (*Capitolo Generale Speciale* 1971-1972, 411), while avoiding working with privileged groups and elite communities. “Priests and coadjutors, says the chapter document, should above all listen deeply to the voice of the working masses and familiarise themselves with their problems, difficulties, expectations and their attitude towards the Church and the faith” (*Capitolo Generale Speciale* 1971-1972, 413).

The goals of pastoral work in a salesian parish are achieved through oratory work. The oratory should be a specific centre that organises pastoral and educational work around the educational problems of the younger generation (Kuciński 1997, p. 261). This is a criterion for the renewal and credibility of Salesian work in the Church (Konstytucje i Regulaminy 1984, 40). The oratory should be universal, i.e. open to all boys, especially those who are abandoned, poorer, less educated and less resourceful in life (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 215). The “open door” formula means not only those who want to spend their free time pleasantly at the oratory, but who are open to the educational atmosphere that exists there, created by active groups, associations and cultural life. According to the Special General Chapter, the oratory is characterised by “the existence of numerous groups of children and young people (...) organised in various ways and with their own activities; varying degrees of human and Christian maturity among its members and the commitment of both individuals and groups, as well as a wide range of their participation in the activities and life of the oratory; a great variety of activities, including leisure activities; an atmosphere of spontaneity and family spirit, in which Salesians, their collaborators and boys, sharing everything together, create a sense of trust and belonging among themselves” (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 376, 379). Opening up to the “masses” cannot overshadow individuals and groups who are accompanied by “the gradual formation of the entire youth community through the pedagogy of holidays, occasional and systematic catechesis” (General Chapter XXI, 1978, 124).

With the opening of parishes, a new problem arose in Salesian activities, namely the presence of girls in the oratory. Until then, only young men had been able to use the oratory facilities. The Society’s documents took a negative stance on the creation of a mixed oratory (General Chapter XXI 1978, 125). However, they did allow girls to attend so-called youth centres, which operated within the parish. The reason given for allowing girls to attend was “a response to pedagogical requirements, which dictate that young people, living in their own complex world, should be treated in such a way as to help them develop fully” (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 355). The documents of the Salesian Society have developed a number of proposals, guidelines and methodological standards for oratories and youth centres, with the aim of providing young people with an integral Christian education. It is proposed here to divide young people into groups, which should be formative and faith-developing in nature, to create an educational community in which young people take an active and responsible part, and to involve lay collaborators, especially parents, who act as animators and educators. Young people should be offered various forms of activity, while taking into account their needs in terms of creativity and use of free time. The educational process should take into account the involvement of young people in apostolic and social activities for the benefit of the local community and environment, as well as making a conscious effort to open up to dialogue with young people who are far from the Church and

Christian ideals (General Chapter XXI 1978, 126; Misiaszek 1995, p. 121). In this context, it is worth recalling the documents of the Salesian congregation, which clearly state that “the driving force behind all this work must be the Salesian, who is to be guided by the method of the ‘Good Shepherd’, live for young people and be a clear sign of God’s love for humanity” (Atti del Capitolo/Consiglio Generale 1966, 30; General Chapter XXI 1978, 126).

In the context of the challenges of parish work, attention should be paid to the presence, role and tasks of lay collaborators in Salesian education. The Salesians’ activities to date, which have been rather closed in nature (school, boarding school), have limited their participation, leaving the Salesians with all the responsibility. The Second Vatican Council, in its Declaration on Christian Education (Gravissimum educationis 3), as well as contemporary pedagogy and psychology, draw attention to the fundamental and specific role of the family in education. Therefore, in Salesian documents, we find the statement that the family is not only a complementary factor, but an indispensable and normative factor in the process of educating young people (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 356). It is important to note the significance of other lay people in youth work. These are the aforementioned Salesian cooperators (cooperatori) and former pupils (exallievi). Both groups perform a “specific educational role” (General Chapter XXI 1978, 72), which is different from the work of the Salesians but fully integrated with it (Martelli 1985, p. 115). Their activities, their work in the oratory and in the centre youth ministry, it is “the task of fulfilling in the world the mission entrusted to them by the Founder” (Capitolo Generale Speciale 1971-1972, 152). They can contribute a lot of good to youth work, create a family atmosphere and enrich it with their own experiences. The activities of Salesian collaborators and former pupils, through the implementation of statutory guidelines, fit perfectly into the conciliar guidelines on the activities of the laity in the Church (Vojtas 2023, p. 80).

Conclusion

The Second Vatican Council took place between 1962 and 1965, and its main aim was the so-called *aggiornamento* of the Church and its teaching, to the challenges of the 20th century. The Council’s resolutions set out certain directions for renewal. Following it, the then Pope Paul VI, encouraged religious families, associations and movements to reflect on their charisms. The Salesian Society took up this challenge. The Salesians dedicated two General Chapters to the search for new impulses in youth work and the reception of modern methods of education: A Special General Chapter in 1971-1972 and the XXI General Chapter in 1978. The Salesians seem to have responded adequately to the challenges and “signs of the times” that emerged in the life of many societies in the 1960s.

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