

Theology and Sports: Sport in the Educational System of Saint John Bosco

Teologia i sport. Sport w systemie wychowawczym Świętego Jana Bosko

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to show the synergy between theology and sport on the example of the educational system of Saint John Bosco created by him during his formation and pedagogical practice aimed at young people, especially the poor and neglected in intellectual, social, cultural and religious terms. The article presents the role and importance of sport in the educational system of the teacher from Turin, along with its enormous fitness and health, socio-cultural, psychological-interactional and ethical-religious potential. The analysis of the collected material shows that sports activity in the preventive system is not an addition or an insignificant decoration that can make the system image more attractive, but the foundation on which subsequent layers of the pedagogical system are built. Therefore, it may be concluded that sports activity was not included on the basis of generous voluntary action, but as an integral and complementary, necessary and inalienable element, serving the comprehensive, harmonious and holistic development of children and youth.

Keywords: theology, sports activity, education, Saint John Bosco

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest ukazanie synergii między teologią a sportem na przykładzie systemu wychowawczego Świętego Jana Bosko, który został stworzony w trakcie praktyki formacyjno-pedagogicznej ukierunkowanej na młodych, zwłaszcza biednych i zaniedbanych pod względem intelektualnym, społecznym, kulturowym i religijnym. W artykule została przedstawiona rola i znaczenie sportu w systemie wychowawczym nauczyciela z Turynu wraz z jego ogromnym potencjałem sprawnościowo-zdrowotnym, społeczno-kulturowym, psychologiczno-interakcyjnym i etyczno-religijnym. Z analizy zebranego materiału wynika, że aktywność sportowa w systemie prewencyjnym nie jest jakimś dodatkiem czy mało istotnym ozdobnikiem mogącym czynić system atrakcyjniejszym wizerunkowo, ale stanowi fundament, na którym budowane są kolejne piętra pedagogicznego systemu. Zatem aktywność sportowa nie została do niego włączona na zasadzie wspaniałomyślnej dobrowolności, ale jako integralny i komplementarny, konieczny i niezbywalny jego element, służący wszechstronnemu, harmonijnemu i holistycznemu rozwojowi dzieci i młodzieży.

Słowa kluczowe: teologia, aktywność sportowa, wychowanie, św. Jan Bosko



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INTRODUCTION

In sociopedagogical literature, four basic pedagogical systems or systems of education are distinguished, namely Christian, Herbartian, liberal and socialist. The basis of the Christian system of education is the religion revealed by Christ, which defines the personal relationship of man to God based on the principles of faith. The Herbart's system, called encyclopedic or didactic materialism, places the teacher in the center of the education process, while the student is treated instrumentally, as a specific center of knowledge acquisition, rote learning of a huge amount of information, in accordance with the teacher's requirements. The liberal system, called new education, was in sharp contrast to the Herbartian system of education. In the liberal system of education, the centre and subject of the education process became the student, who was provided with conditions for free development of interests, while the role of the teacher was to create such conditions enabling unrestricted, independent and developmental activity of the charges. The socialist system of education was founded on the assumptions of a specific ideology, politics, philosophy and worldview, the aim of which was to internalize basic pedagogical ideas by social masses. The ultimate goal was a new man and a new communist society (Śliwerski 2015; Kunowski 2004).

Father John Bosco, creating his educational system through social practice based on the foundations of religiosity and piety, reserved an important place for sports. Based on his observation of people's lives, especially of children and youth, during the great socio-cultural crisis, which particularly affected young people and manifested itself in the form of social, spiritual and intellectual poverty, tragic hygienic conditions, brutalization of interpersonal relationships, banditry, theft, prostitution, alcoholism, etc., he fully realized the importance of sport for young people. Therefore, he recognized that sport had a fundamental role to play in his formation and educational project (Niewęłowski 1998, 130-135).

As an excellent observer of social life and an insightful diagnostician of the dramatic situation of children and youth, Father John Bosco established numerous educational projects (oratories, schools, boarding schools, workplaces, etc.) to create conditions for disadvantaged and neglected young people to develop their full personality in the spiritual and religious, as well as ethical, intellectual, psychological, social, cultural and professional dimension.

Sport plays an important role in Father John Bosco's educational practice as it has both autotelic and instrumental value, which means that it is practiced out of an internal need to express one's full and harmonious personality, but also that it enhances one's fitness and health at the same time helping in the implementation of socio-cultural, psychological-intellectual and spiritual-religious values. Sport in the concept of the priest from Turin is not focused on maximizing results, spectacle, fame, money and media coverage, as is currently the case with competitive and professional sports but it is subordinated to the good of students and their holistic and harmonious development (Dziubiński 2017, 183-255).

1. PURPOSE OF THE ARTICLE, MATERIAL AND RESEARCH METHOD

The aim of the article is to understand the role and importance of sport in Father John Bosco's educational system, which he created in the course of his everyday educational practice among "street youth," poor, neglected, often coming from educationally ineffective, dysfunctional and pathological families. The article is also aimed at presenting sport as an attractive and highly helpful tool for solving the problems of young people and helping them develop harmoniously based on the assumptions of Christian ethics and anthropology. Finally, the author believes that getting to know this system is also interesting as, compared to other educational, assistance and social activities, it stands out not only for its innovative, bold, dynamic and adequate character but, above all, for the subjective nature of interactions with students, filled with respect, appreciation, empathy, understanding and theological altruism.

The researched material includes the few sources left by Don Bosco, but also numerous studies compiled by his students, which can be found primarily in the 20-volume work entitled *Memorie Biografiche – Don Giovanni Bosco* (edited by: Lemoyne 1898-1917, vol. 1-9; Amadei 1939, vol. 10; Ceria 1930-1939, vol. 11-19; Foglio 1948, vol. 20), numerous scattered monographic works and book chapters as well as journal articles.

The basic method used is an analysis of literature on the educational system (desk research), conducted in a purposeful and systematic manner. This analysis is supplemented by comparative and axiological methods. The research is both descriptive and explicative, as well as explanatory and diagnostic.

2. UNDERSTANDING SPORT

In his preventive system, Father John Bosco designated an important place for youth sports activity. The educator and teacher from Turin saw it as an opportunity, on the one hand, to "attract and win over young people," but on the other hand, to make the formation and educational process also an attractive, interesting and fully acceptable offer. As an experienced and competent observer of youth life, he was fully aware that incorporating a system of games and physical activities into everyday educational, professional and social practice, triggering positive emotions of joy, happiness and fulfilment, would allow for a more effective achievement of formation and educational goals. Therefore, he considered sports and recreational activity, joyful physical play in friendly interaction with others, to be one of the basic and most effective educational measures (*Memorie Biografiche* 1898-1939, vol. 11, 222).

In the process of educating young people to be "good citizens and honest Christians," he always used sports activities as a formative and educational measure (cf. Braido 1994, 7-75). He used the benefits of sport to achieve a better understanding of his students, learn about their attitudes, their ability to compromise and interact

with peers, respect other people, share responsibility, show honesty and kindness. For Father John Bosco, sports activity provided a particularly useful method of pedagogically and epistemologically fruitful education conducted in direct and personal interaction with the pupils as a social group, but also with each of them individually. Therefore, in his works for young people, in the daily schedule, which determined the framework and time proportions of everyday activities (education, work, prayers, meals, night rest, etc.), a significant part of the time was devoted to sports activities (Przekonania 2016, 531-609).

Don Bosco had a broad understanding of sports activity, namely, he did not limit it just to competition, but concentrated mostly on its fun, integration, rewarding, entertainment, regenerative, free-time and pedagogical values, which, as he believed, support the development of a harmonious and balanced human personality. He also treated sports activity as a way to increase health and immunity of the body, develop the body structure, its efficiency and endurance. Sports activity in the preventive system is not an addition or an insignificant decoration that can make the system more attractive in terms of its image, but it is the foundation on which subsequent layers of the pedagogical system are built. Therefore, sports activity was not included on a generous voluntary basis, but as an integral and complementary, necessary and inalienable element. Without this element, the system would not only be structurally unstable, but its functionality would also be significantly limited, and it would not be able to fulfill the role assigned to it by Don Bosco. To gain a better idea of the role and importance of sports activity in the preventive system, it is worth recalling several characteristic concepts that explain the way of understanding and practical use of sports activity (Braido 1964; Marszałek 1995, 233-254).

The basic concept used by Don Bosco in relation to sports activity was "recreation," which consisted in recreating, renewing or returning to the situation that occurred earlier, at the starting point, before beginning study, work or other activities requiring physical, intellectual, mental or spiritual effort or all of these together. In other words, it meant acceptable, nice and pleasant activities during leisure time free from study, work or religious practices, which were intended to provide respite, joy and entertainment, thus providing students with moments of relaxation and rest and allowing them to regain their strength after performing various duties. This concept meant not only activities related to sport in its contemporary meaning, such as physical games and activities, or trips and hiking, but also cultural activities, such as visits to the theatre, listening to music, reading, singing, recitation, conversations, participation in discussions, social meetings, etc. The basic assumption of recreation understood in this way is providing young people with unrestricted, autonomous and pleasant activity that is consistent with their interests and expectations and devoid of any external pressure or coercion. Recreation should be "fully accepted and enjoyed by young people." On the other hand, it should consider students' needs in terms of their integral development, and, moreover, be conducted in good, joyful, friendly, family atmosphere. In other

words, it should be an important free-time activity, “pleasant for both body and soul” (Bosco 1877b).

The second concept used by Don Bosco was “game.” The concept of games plays a very important role in the entire preventive system, and its understanding in the context of this system surpasses today’s idea of sports games. Games should be understood, above all, as attractive, interesting and involving activities for young people, which, among other values, would provide educators with a better opportunity to get to know their charges. Games, as a pleasant and joyful way of spending time, should also facilitate contact between educators and students and help them in carrying out more difficult, complicated tasks that require students’ commitment, effort and dedication, and which are not always nice and pleasant for students or do not always and naturally arouse their interest or attract their attention. Physical games should be diversified, they should vary in the intensity of required effort and should be held in a joyful atmosphere. They should be organized outdoors and aim at improving students’ fitness, motor skills, endurance, health and psychosocial condition. They should be inclusive, which means that they should involve not only older, the most developed and physically fit pupils, but everyone, without exception, including the youngest and least developed, as well as those with physical and motor dysfunctions. Young people, as subjects of the upbringing process, should have the opportunity to make their own decisions and choose their preferred game that is most attractive for them and which answers their needs, one during which they could freely pursue their interests and passions. They should therefore run, jump, throw and wrestle, etc., and thus be able to fully express their personality and creative attitude in and through movement. Therefore, such games should preferably be organized by young people themselves, as it is them who know best what is most interesting, attractive and appealing to them. Games, according to Father Bosco’s instructions, should be adapted to the organizational, infrastructural and equipment possibilities, but also to the circumstances resulting from the season and the associated weather conditions. The teacher from Turin, as his regulations clearly demonstrate, could not imagine that the educational environment would be deprived of the opportunity for young people to participate in games and physical activities, because, as he argued, the lack of exercise and sports activity would seriously limit the possibilities of providing effective and complete education for young people (Bosco 1877a, Art. 93; Ricaldone 1952, 213).

Another concept that plays an important role in the preventive system is that of the “playing field.” Again, Frater John Bosco understood this term more broadly than merely as a place to play basketball, football or volleyball as it is understood today. For him, it was an important segment or component of the formative and educational process, without which its effectiveness would be much weaker and less effective. The playing field is therefore one of the foundations of Don Bosco’s entire pedagogy. This is strongly emphasized by one of his students who writes as follows: “Try to imagine the life of Don Bosco and the life in one of his establishments without the playing field, and you will see how this life would lose

its character and what kind of an unfillable void would be created in the institution, in which a truly significant and essential part of the educational system, the most needed part, would be irretrievably lost.” The playing field is so important because it is a place where the process of formation and upbringing of young people is carried out, a process in which both actual and prospective goals are realized, regarding the physical, mental, intellectual, social, spiritual and religious side of the personality. Therefore, considering its physical parameters, the playing field should be large enough to accommodate all students who want to be together, compete, jump, run and wrestle. The youth should include teachers, educators and animators. Educators’ assistance, a characteristic feature of the discussed system, should be present during all on-field activities. Educators must ensure that there is an atmosphere of cordiality, friendship and brotherhood on the playground. Understood in this way, the pitch is a place of play, fun, entertainment, relaxation, recreation, joy and rest, but consequently, in the mind of the priest from Turin, it should serve the implementation of the process of formation and upbringing. The sports field is a place for teachers and students to meet, to pursue their sports passions and interests, but also to enter into individual and community interactions, aimed at getting closer and getting to know each other better in a climate of trust, serving to acquire social, interactive and cultural competences. Let the confirmation of the special importance of the playing field in Don Bosco’s educational system be his credo, or the credo assigned to him by his disciples, namely: “a dead playground, an alive devil – a lively playground a dead devil” (Cavaglia 1951, 41; Bosco 1984, 286).

The fourth, last and extremely important concept is the concept of “health.” Father Bosco attached great importance to taking care of the health of his charges. He treated it, as we would say today, both in an autotelic and instrumental manner. In the autotelic sense, health is a value in itself, which means that good health allows people achieve fulfilment, balance, to be joyful and well-disposed towards the social environment. On the other hand, he treated health as an instrumental value, which meant that he perceived it as a good or resource enabling pupils to carry out various educational, professional, family and social tasks. Appreciating the value of health, he sought not only to meet the current needs of his pupils in this regard, but also taught them how to take care of their health on their own. In his socio-pedagogical and evangelistic-religious practice aimed at young people, Don Bosco cared for his pupils’ good health, necessary to carry out educational, professional and social tasks, but also to overcome the hardships of life and struggle with various objective and subjective threats. He viewed physical activity, such as games, sports competition, marches, trips and gymnastics as the basic way of taking care of health and physical fitness. For him, sports activity was a vehicle of health that was powerful, attractive, full of charm and fantasy, saturated with Icarian ideas (Ricaldone 1952, 10-20).

Józef Marszałek points out that each of the above-mentioned concepts, from its own specific perspective, illuminates this extremely important space of sports

activity, which plays an important role in Don Bosco's pedagogical project. He argues that "each of the above-mentioned concepts provides a different perspective on the pedagogical function of sport. The play field answers the question: where? The game answers the question: what? Recreation answers the question: how? And health: why? In other words, these concepts define the place of action, the method of action, the purpose and effects of sports activity in the upbringing process. All categories taken together define the role of sport in personal education, showing the identity of what we call sports pedagogy in Don Bosco's terms" (Marszałek 1995, 238).

3. ANTICIPATORY, FORMATIVE AND EDUCATIONAL ROLE OF SPORT

Sport plays an important role in Don Bosco's system, and it is fully integrated into the process of educating young people. This means that it does not function as a separate segment of youth culture, within which an unrestrained game takes place, devoid of a broader cultural and teleological context, but it is rather an activity aimed at enhancing the good of helping students achieve their full personality development. Sport in the discussed system has two types of functions. On the one hand, it prevents negative phenomena and processes that may hypothetically pose a threat to the integral development of pupils. On the other hand, it is an area where young people realize their potential as it creates conditions for the development of physical fitness, immunity and health, as well as of professional, cultural, social, moral and religious competences. Therefore, on the one hand, it is preventive, anticipatory and prophylactic in nature, and on the other hand, it is educational, developmental and creative (Dziubiński 2014, 15-49).

The preventive assumptions of Father Bosco's educational system in relation to sports activities consist in anticipating the physical and health development of young people in order to prevent possible threats and avoid or minimize the possibility of diseases and various types of fitness and health dysfunctions. Therefore, even though young people have good physical fitness and good health, he believes that it should be constantly developed and accumulated in order to achieve the highest, subjectively understood level of pupils' development. Preventive care for health and physical fitness, which is part of the process of personality formation and education for a healthy life, can be reduced to a few rules. The first one concerns the care for the sick. Ill health involves the necessity to consciously give up the role of a healthy person and withdraw from everyday duties and to take on the role of a sick person for whom society has prepared a different scenario of being and acting. The state of ill health and the assumed role of the sick person require taking appropriate actions, which will ultimately allow for recovery of health as quickly as possible. However, Don Bosco also draws attention, which is still valid today, that the Aristotelian principle of moderation should be respected during therapy, and in this case when taking medications (Ricaldone 1952, 4-30).

The second rule concerns hygiene and rational nutrition. It is a kind of directive to eat healthily, which means that young people should regularly eat tasty

meals adapted to their needs both in terms of the amount of food and its calorie content. Eating meals should be included in the schedule or daily plan. Therefore, meals should not be consumed “anyhow and anywhere,” but in a place specially designated for this purpose, in accordance with adopted cultural patterns in this regard, calmly and without excessive haste. One should also avoid “overeating” during meals or “snacking” between meals (*Memorie Biografiche* 1904, vol. 4, 184; Ricaldone 1952, 25).

The third rule concerns work and rest. Work should not exhaust the body beyond its strength or lead to exceeding the limits of human capabilities. Work should be well thought out, planned and organized. This also means that work should be performed considering knowledge of its organization, using technical means and modern technologies. A working person should have substantive competences and targeted qualifications adequate to the professional position held. Don Bosco, who lived in an agricultural and working society, also pointed out that work should not be undertaken immediately after a meal, or during the night-time. After work, there should be time for rest, relaxation, recreation, renewal and regeneration of strength (*Memorie Biografiche* 1898-1901, vol. 1, 73, 318; vol. 2, 517; 1939, vol. 10, 1017; 1939, vol. 19, 157, 320; Ricaldone 1952, 3).

The fourth rule is related to the need to maintain personal hygiene, proper selection of clothing, but also appropriate behaviour in various life situations and circumstances. Therefore, young people should not neglect the natural bodily needs resulting from their development but should also take care of their hygiene and refrain from satisfying somatic and sensual desires, which mark weakness of character and hedonistic tendencies. Young people should also avoid staying in excessively cold, or windy (drafty) places, especially when they are hot and sweaty. They should protect themselves against getting wet and staying in humid or heavily sunlit, hot places. At the same time, according to Don Bosco’s instructions and recommendations, they should be tough and resistant to the discomforts associated with changes in the seasons, temperature, work, study and all the inconveniences related to social life (*Memorie Biografiche* 1898, vol. 1, 73; 1939, vol. 10, 1016).

The fifth rule is closely related to maintaining hygiene and order in rooms and places where young people spend a lot of time. This concerns schools, dormitories, oratories and factories that were their home or place of permanent residence. These rooms should be provided with fresh air and the possibility of using natural sunlight. They should be equipped with sanitary facilities that meet the requirements, adapted to the number of young people staying there. All rooms should also be clean and hygienic as well as kept in good order (Misiaszek 1998, 136-145).

The sixth rule is closely related to the psychological and emotional hygiene and young people’s mental state. This rule highlights the fact that every young person should lead a noble and responsible life, in full harmony with the natural environment, as well as with the closer and wider social environment. It is because, maintaining correct relationships with the above-mentioned environments is the guarantee and the source of both mental and physical health, as well as of

satisfaction, well-being and internal balance. The life of every young person, as Father Bosco believed, should be characterized by peace of conscience, internal and spiritual order free from the feeling of guilt resulting from breaking the accepted cultural and religious standards that so often causes disruptions in interactions with the social environment. Young people should be ambitious, consistent in pursuing their goals and resilient in life, which means that they should not succumb to moments of doubt, feelings of discouragement, breakdown, sadness, or fear that disorganize social and internal life, suppress and disperse personal energies (Dziubiński 2014, 15-49).

The seventh rule is related to the care for health and physical fitness, which Father Bosco gave great importance to in his educational system. He saw them as the foundation of all other activities, not only those of a physical nature, but also those involving intellectual, psychological or spiritual effort. In one of his works, he recalls the basic rules of conduct for young people, which ensure their proper development, promote their health and bring the desired pedagogical effects in the form of a properly formed personality. Taking into account health and physical fitness of his pupils, he wrote: "In order to stay healthy and live long, it is necessary, firstly, to have a calm conscience that will not be burdened with the feeling of guilt for inappropriate behaviour towards others, secondly, moderation and prudence in eating, and thirdly, an active life and rich in games and physical activities, and fourthly, good company, which has a beneficial effect on the personal development of the student and protects him against promiscuity" (*Memorie Biografiche* 1905-1907, vol. 5, 155; vol. 6, 302).

Don Bosco's vision of sports activity is integral, which means that games and physical activities are integrated into the overall vision of a young person's development. Sports activity is complementary to other activities undertaken by students and only together with these, it constitutes a pedagogical unity. It is important because, on the one hand, it is attractive to young people and, on the other, it creates conditions for unconventional fulfilment of tasks related to the process of their growth towards becoming "honest citizens and good Christians" in a climate of fun and joy (Dziubiński 2017, 193-255).

CONCLUSION

The presented concept of sport in the educational system of St. John Bosco allows us to formulate a few final conclusions. This concept refers to and is firmly embedded in modern personalistic, humanistic and Christian thought. It contains many ontological, epistemological, anthropological, axiological, ethical and social anticipations that are confirmed in contemporary theological, philosophical, pedagogical and sociological findings.

Sport in the educational system is completely and thoroughly saturated with modern pedagogical thought and based on the truth of the Gospel. The modernity of this idea lies in the abandonment of authoritarian pedagogy in favour of subjective

pedagogy, in which the student is the most important element of the upbringing process, actively participating in all stages of the educational process. Modernity also means abandoning the use of penalties and various types of coercion, even symbolic ones. The saturation of the educational system with the truth of the Gospel involves basing the entire system on permanent and unchanging Christian values, which, on the one hand, make the system more durable and, on the other, enhance its natural and supernatural meaning.

Sport in Don Bosco's educational system appears as an attractive value serving "to create a noble person," "an honest citizen and a good Christian." It is skilfully integrated into both subjective and Christian education, which means that the entire process of human formation is based on the love for one's neighbour (the pupil), love that results from God's love for man.

Therefore, sport in Don Bosco's educational system occupies an extremely important and important place and appears on the one hand as an autotelic value, and on the other, as an instrumental one. This means that it is practiced to meet the natural physical needs of young people, but also that it serves as a means to realize fitness and health, social and professional, moral and intellectual and spiritual and religious values. Its importance results from the fact that it is the foundation of the entire educational system, without which the entire pedagogical structure would lose its footing.

The inclusion of sport in Don Bosco's educational system makes it more attractive to young people and better adapted to solve their problems, regardless of the socio-political system of a given country. This is confirmed by the fact that the system is currently used on all continents and in over 140 countries around the world.

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