

Don Bosco's Fatherhood

1. Don Bosco: a diamond. Fatherhood, his most luminous facet.

In our modern world, that fatherhood doesn't get good press is the least we could say. You are young, so you don't know what happened in Paris, France, and then in all the western world, on that famous "hot May" of **1968**. A famous publicist, Gerard Mendel, gave the **following interpretation** to those events: "the time for horizontal fraternity alone has arrived, with the rejection of any vertical relationship with any father: this is **Freud's "ritual assassination of the father."** With a violent protest of flying rocks and bottles, the young, and the police, were aiming at the political father (De Gaulle), cultural fathers (teachers/professors), capitalist fathers (bosses), religious fathers (Priests), biological fathers (dads), and God Himself, as presented under the name and the figure of the Supreme Father, who creates and protects all the other fathers.

Jean-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher, had expressed this tragical rejection of fatherhood just a short time before, in a chilling page of his autobiography, entitled *Les Mots*. *"There is no good father; this is the rule. We shouldn't fault men, but the link to fatherhood, which is rotten. Bringing children into the world – what a sin! Had he lived, my father would have laid down on top of me in his entire length and would have crushed me. Fortunately, he died young, at 30 years of age..."* (pp. 11+12)

Thus, one of the most far-reaching aspects of our times is that children **reject** their having been fathered because their fathers reject their fatherhood (and mothers their maternity). Or, rather, **fathers do not resolve their anxiety and insecurity, their affective immaturity; and often, they refuse to assume all the aspects of their heavy responsibility.** Today, perhaps, **the conflictual aspect of 1968 no longer exists**, but we are now living an even more preoccupying phenomenon: **a true anthropological change: the generalized indifference toward the young.** This is expressed emblematically in the decrease in the birth tax, the nuptial tax, the growing unemployment of youth. These are the logical outcrop of the crisis of faith in regards to life, to the future, and to that which is new and different. Indifference **is the attitude obligated by a society** which, growing old at a fast rate, neurotically **falls back on itself**, without hope.

2. Don Bosco's Fundamental Intuition

Don Bosco has something to tell us precisely on this point, the heart of the young people's trouble. **Fatherhood** is what constitutes **Don Bosco's originality**, in what is most truly his.

When dealing with the difficult youths to whom he had dedicated his entire life, Don Bosco acquired, through natural wisdom and through supernatural grace, a fundamental intuition: he would never succeed in his mission as a Priest if he didn't become a father – in all the fullness and rightness of the term - to these young people.

There was a profound wound **at the center** of his life as both man and Priest. If mercy is that virtue of the heart which suffers with and feels the suffering and the anguish of another and try to lift them out of it, then we can say that Don Bosco received the **gift of mercy**. He would never again be able to forget what he had seen, no longer just in his dream, but **in all its terrible reality: adolescents** behind bars in jail! This experience of compassion, “suffering with,” **symbolically gave him his mission in its fullness**: he would never want to do anything other than **freeing youth from jail** – both real prisons and those of solitude, ignorance, delinquency, and hopelessness... His entire work was born from this experience.

As a real father of a family he must procure for hundreds of boys all those things which are necessary for their existence: a roof over their heads, clothes, food, education, a trade... but even more importantly, the love that so many of them were deprived of. Don Bosco reminds all Priests of the Christian splendor of fatherhood.

Don Bosco was a Priest, sent by a God who is just that: the infinite Father, from whom, as St. Paul tells us, **every fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its name.**” (Eph. 3:15). This is what gave him the conviction to the very depths of his being that he would have to incarnate, in the eyes of his boys, that fatherly love of the One who had sent him to them.

3. The difficult adventure of Fatherhood (Motherhood)

I like to recall this dear expression of the poet **Charles Péguy**: “The great adventure of fatherhood.” For the poet, there are two types of persons: those who take no risks, who insinuate themselves everywhere, called by a ugly word “*gli scapoloni*” (**shiftless singles**), i.e., those who are socially irresponsible and have nothing to do or contribute to society. On the other side are those who are completely involved: fathers.

Such is a **father**: one who gives his life for love and can, therefore, never go forward alone for he feels that he is responsible every moment for the happiness of his children.

Such is **God the Father**: “*He so loved the world (the human family) so as to send His Son...*”

Such is **Don Bosco**: Father of a vast crowd of young people, sons of men and sons of God, his sons. He cannot go forward alone, and **he spends every minute of his life supporting free people, active citizens of the earthly city and of the Kingdom of God.** He dreamed they'd be protagonists and he made them protagonists so as to pull them out of the marginalization to which they had been destined. He was a father who had a strong sense of dignity and of justice, and, at the same time, a Priest who was fully incarnated in the concrete situations of his time.

4. The contribution from Don Bosco's experience

We can't expect, given the changed social, cultural, and religious conditions, to find perfect, ready-to-be-used formulae today. Certainly, Don Bosco did bequeath to us **a style of education**, a way of characteristic and original intervention which is inspired by the integral humanism of St. Francis de Sales.

A Fundamental Aspect

A Gaze of cum-passio (suffering with) and of optimism

Don Bosco is a person who dedicated himself without limits to the education of the young. This decision of his became definitive in 1846 when, after hanging between life and death on account of a grave illness and obtaining a cure thanks to the prayers of so many of his boys, he returned among them and spoke these few but most significant words: **"I owe you my life. Be certain that from this moment on, I will spend it completely for you."** And he kept his promise – even some of his last words testify to his educative passion: **"Tell my boys that I am waiting for them all in Paradise."** His was a life totally dedicated, totally spent for the salvation of the young.

Don Bosco not only "occupied himself" with the young, he "preoccupied" himself with them. It was he who would go around the city looking for the weakest, the marginalized, the ones being taken advantage of, used... there was a word of comfort for them, often an invitation to the Oratory; but there were also discussions with bosses and parent who had become brutal in their poverty, so as to guarantee a better level of life for these boys. He was among the first to guarantee work contracts; he handed on instruction; he wrote good literature and periodicals... when it came to helping the young, his imagination knew no bounds.

The young were truly at **the center of his educational attention**, constantly in his thoughts. He was never satisfied with awaiting structural reforms, but he took the initiative and met the needs of the poor.

He didn't just stand back and watch, or just cry over the difficulties, but he tried everything so as to **improve the conditions of society, to meet the objective of helping the young be**

“honest citizens and good Christians”, because he didn’t limit himself to being concerned only about material poverty, but he also concerned himself with the spiritual one.

Let’s think a bit about who these boys were: at the start he worked with the incarcerated, then he approached those who had emigrated from the nearby towns and villages and the little ones who were doing black market work, and he gave hospitality to orphans. They certainly were not the cream of the crop. They were youths whom a hard life had made them diffident. And yet he succeeded in entering into their world and gaining their trust and affection. **How did he do this?**

I believe that this has to do with the fact that Don Bosco **was enthusiastic about life and that he knew how to communicate optimism to them**. He made them feel important: there was someone who cared about them, interested himself in them, not so as to beat them or make them work, but because they were persons to whom respect was owed. Don Bosco, inspired by the example of St. Francis de Sales, had matured **a positive idea about the possibility of educating the young**. We’re not talking about some ingenuous idea, but of a **profound faith in the potential of the young, in the fruitful intervention of Divine Providence, and to which he added the mediation of the educator**.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the greatest message to us from Don Bosco is to remember that there is nothing greater in this world than to **be a father** and to **be a son**. This should in no way surprise us because **it is the basis of the Mystery of God Himself**. And if things are this way, then there’s nothing more **catastrophic** than the **rejection** or the **degradation of fatherhood and of being a son**, and nothing more important than to be a father in deed and in truth: after the image of God the Father, and learning to be a son in deed and in truth after the image of God the Son.

Every one of us is called **to join these two attitudes in his vocation: a soul of a son**, with simplicity before God the Father; and **a soul of a father (mother)**, with tenderness before the children to whom God sends us, entrusting them to us. In the measure that we realize both of these, we progress towards true **sanctity** and we fully realize our **vocation**.

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