

Salesian Tools for a Successful Education

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St. Francis de Sales is best known as the “Doctor of the love of God” for his genius in presenting spiritual life and the heights of holiness in the most uplifting and encouraging way. He is less known, perhaps, as the patron saint of Catholic communications, a title he earned for being a great diplomat and model for educators. These two qualities of our saint have inspired many to become disciples of his spirituality and great Catholic educators.



St. Francis De Sales

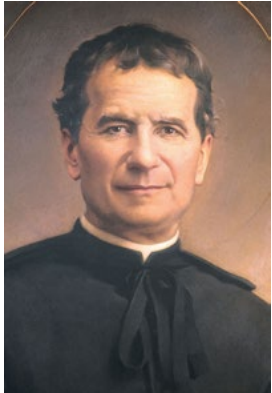
If Saint Francis possessed the genius to make spiritual life and holiness a matter of everyone’s affair and concern, and not something exclusive to priests, religious, and sisters (as it was considered by many at his time), it is because he had a profound understanding of human nature, of human psychology, and of the passions of the soul. The fact that his *Introduction to the Devote Life* quickly became a best seller is evidence of this gift; he was able to present the heights of spiritual life and the easiness with which anyone can reach them.

Saint Francis de Sales’ teachings center on a great desire to understand the human soul, and his first concern, before being a saint maker, is to form men and women who are truly men and women, with integrity, and desirous of corresponding fully to the nature received by their Creator. He desired for dear souls to understand the mechanism of our own souls, including the passions, intelligence, and will, and thereby, to form good and holy fathers and husbands, mothers and wives, priests



and religious, and even children. Profoundly imbued in the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas, he made his own this fundamental principle: grace presupposes nature, *Gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*. Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it.

Concerning the topic of Catholic Education, which occupies our attention here, let us continue following in the footsteps of our saint with one of his most faithful



Don Bosco

disciples. This man, who was born into a simple family of farmers, who was left without a father at the age of two, who was ordained at the age of twenty-six, who deeply interiorized and made his spirituality his own, and was able to apply it in a wonderful matter to youth, is Saint Giovanni Melchior, better known as Don Bosco.

Bosco laid a solid foundation for the reformation of culture and the sanctification of families and society at large, and founded the Salesian Sister Order, one of the largest religious congregation of women.

It is important to remember that the fundamental mission of man, as we teach our children, whatever his or her state in life is, consists in knowing, loving,

and serving God better. Without proposing these ends to ourselves and our children, education will fall into a purely legalistic task, with a series of rules and constraints established to preserve the very fragile “common good” of society. Deprived of any transcendence (relation with God) and supernatural reward (relation with the promise of eternal life) this mission will be doomed to fail. Conversely, to fulfill this vocation. For one at the school of Don Bosco, the difficult task of Catholic education should be rooted in four solid pillars.

These four pillars, or four qualities to hold the entire edifice of good Catholic education, are as follows:

First, the Love for Greatness

Second, the Love for the Truth

Third, the Practice of Firmness

Fourth, the Practice of Gentleness

Educators understand the difficulty of maintaining these pillars when building up a beautiful edifice of virtues in the youth, and the ease with which it can collapse if that delicate balance is not carefully adjusted.

Before diving into the importance of the love for Grandeur and Truth, for the hearts and minds of our children, we must be extremely careful not to fall into two false ideologies widely spread in today’s culture.



First, an unleashed love for grandeur could lead to profound disillusion and the temptation to desire the fleeting mirages of a superficial, artificial, passing world that rejects the reality of what constitutes what we are, what the world is, and the purpose of our lives: to know, serve, and love God. The second pertains to Truth itself, which can lead to embracing false “truths” and ideologies that have the appearance of truth, especially when endorsed and promoted by a majority as we see too often today, but disturb reason and contradict Truth itself. Saint Paul warned us as he warned St. Timothy:

“There will come a time when they will not endure the sound doctrine; but having itching ears, will head up to themselves teachers according to their lusts, and they will turn away their hearing from the truth and turn aside rather to fables.”

I) Love for Greatness:

Present to your children and yourself great ideals and goals; have a deep love and desire for grandeur. As Samuel Ulman puts it in his excellent poem “Youth”;

“Whether sixty or sixteen, there is in every human being’s heart the lure of wonder, the unfailing child-like appetite of what’s next, and the joy of the game of living”.

How true this is! It is even more so the case when transposed in the light of Christian hope, and of the joy of living found in the myriads of saints who have preceded us!

The history of civilization offers countless examples of great figures, not only Saints but great men and women, who have proposed to society beautiful and powerful aides to develop man’s capacity to wonder,



Michelangelo, Pietà, 1498–1499

to dream, and to be uplifted on the natural level through art, music, literature, and more. This allows for the building of solid foundations for the flourishing of spiritual life! Take the example of the great Western Civilization under the Benedictine influence in

the Middle Ages. Love for a certain nobility of soul, and great ideals influenced generations of Christians. This love for greatness became a nursery of saints as history has proved.

We can see the natural attraction to Grandeur in the tendency most youths have, as they look ahead and make big plans for themselves. Many desire to get married, maybe to get rich, to have children, to have a great career, a holy family, to help the poor and to serve God, and so on. But all these great ideals also require us to make choices. This is where a difficulty arises. Unfortunately, the Internet and AI era today present us with fictitious, superficial, godless ideals and models, all falsely promising happiness. The world gives us an incessant promise of happiness, fame, glory, and peace, but the limits of these promises are quickly encountered at the closing of the Internet browser after a simple finger click.



To fulfill one’s vocation, we must make choices. Both priests and parents exist as mentors, to remind the youth that leaving too many doors open is to take the risk never to make the step forward to enter one of them. This capacity to make choices will slowly grow with time for each person. Each young person in time becomes more and more accountable for their actions. This is why it is important to impart to our children the idea of responsibility and avoid the shame of young adults still “babysat” by their parents, constituting a terrible handicap in the choice-making and in the acceptance of responsibilities.

Any good education requires, at its core, learning to make choices, good choices, with prudence and discernment and avoiding two pitfalls: pusillanimity



or presumption. The former generates a certain fear regarding the choices to be made, and the latter leads to making imprudent and inconsiderate choices. It is for this reason that St. Thomas, in his study on the virtue of prudence, explains that good decisions are informed by a few factors. He explains that first, one must recall past experiences, good or bad, and carefully acknowledge how that can inform present events and circumstances. Second, one must remain docile in learning from others and practice a form of sagacity (*sound in judgment*) in the discovery of new data. Third, he stresses the importance of forming good reasoning and good judgment, with foresight, circumspection, and precaution.



The sacraments, a good prayer life, and the love and practice of virtue are among the most efficient tools we have at hand to strengthen our willpower and to enlighten our intelligence in order to correspond more and more to the will of God and to the vocation He has chosen for us. And this is where the second pillar mentioned in the introduction, comes into play.

II) Love for the Truth:

A great Catholic educator of the twentieth century once said, the “Truth spreads like fire, but it only spreads in a heart that desires it”. Today’s ambient relativism is probably the first enemy of the Truth. There are two ways to counterattack these errors and false ideologies. First, in a negative way, by refuting these errors, by forming our youth in the understanding and defense of the truth. Second, in a positive way, by fostering and encouraging in them a certain wonder and attraction to the truth, which they are called to discover, contemplate, and serve. Why would the right to contemplation, inscribed

in our very nature, be denied to those seeking the truth in a culture and society that present themselves as the forerunners and defenders of freedom? Echoes in our hearts the words of Our Lord: And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. With truth comes freedom, and one cannot be dissociated from the other. Therefore, for the defenders of human freedom, the imperative duty must be the quest and contemplation of the Truth. We must actively combat relativism and modernist errors that negate and destroy truth and reality, enslaving man to the whims of transient and fleeting opinions and ideologies.

Truth spreads like fire, but it only spreads in a heart that desires it.

This famous adage, *Age quod agis*, attributed to St. Augustine, means to do what you are doing, and concentrate on the task at hand, but also to be who you are supposed to be. It means being true to oneself, and the foundation of this form of integrity is to be found in the fact that we have been created in the *likeness and image of God*. Integrity, or wholeness, could be synonymous with truth, inasmuch as it implies a conformity of my whole being, body, soul, reason, and will to the providential designs of God for me.

The inner inclination in us for the true, the one (integrity), the good and the beautiful (as the visible reflection of the good) should be developed in our youth by means of presenting them with things that reflect these interchangeable essential qualities of being. Our speech, our actions, our habits, and our thoughts all should model to the youth that we are striving to attain the true, good, and beautiful. This can be modeled in little ways, such as a clean and neat home, teaching the simple values of respect and politeness. And on the other hand, we ought to protect them



from a culture of deceit, death, ugliness, hatred, falsehood, and duplicity.

“Our first duty,” wrote a Dominican priest, “then must be to make contemplatives: to help the young see the real world, to see the real world in itself, which implies seeing the world in God and God in the world.”

III) Practice of Firmness:

Saint Paul told his fellow brethren, the Ephesians: *Fathers, provoke not your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and correction of the Lord and elsewhere, reprove, entreat, rebuke with all patience and teaching.* Excessive leniency will lead children to forget the consequences of original sin and of their own sins and mistakes, which will have terrible consequences in life and from a deep incapacity to recognize their failures, to be accountable for their actions, and to amend their lives. It is therefore of utmost importance to discipline with charity and gentleness.



Giovanni Paolo Pannini, *Sermon of St Paul amidst the Ruins*, 1744

This general attitude of indulging in excessive mercy with no relation to justice, punishment, rebuke, and correction will end in profound failures in education. It is important to not only enforce wholesome principles in the home but to lead by example as well, always acting in obedience to our Lord, with generosity and humility, so as to show the youth that there is no hypocrisy in your words. How many young people today rebel against any form of authority because they have not found in their homes, particularly at an early age, that necessary form of authority and submission? Children need the

example of paternal authority, not as a dictatorship, but with due measure, wisdom, and compassion. Children also need an example of maternal submission and love for her husband. Love should show reciprocity but also a conformity of the wills to one another.

St. Augustine places obedience at the top of all the other moral virtues, affirming that it is the mother and guardian of them all. He further explains that obedience becomes one with charity since it fosters the union of wills between the one who commands and the one who is commanded. This union of wills is the foundation of love. “I always do the things that are pleasing to Him,” should be our motto and guideline in the practice of obedience.

This communion of the wills of the parents is necessary for a holy and healthy family dynamic. The head of the family tries to protect and defend the common good with justice and compassion, not just for his own selfish interests. In doing so, he inspires the mother and wife, who is the heart of the family, to be willing to follow his lead and authority, after the method of St. Francis de Sales, according to which *it is better to love obedience more than to fear disobedience.* And that love of obedience, a theme particularly dear to St. Benedict, will be the source of and support of the virtue of meekness or gentleness, the fourth pillar for good Catholic education.

IV) Practice of Gentleness:

“Love has neither convicts nor slaves, but brings all things under its obedience with a force so delightful, that as nothing is so strong as love nothing also is so sweet as its strength.” - St. Francis de Sales.

This is what is known as the Salesian Preventive Method of Educating, as opposed to the repressive method. It is essential to make our children love and cherish the practice of virtue, by encouraging them to practice it daily with perseverance and courage. This, once again, does not mean that our saint is opposed to discipline and correction; far from that, since he wrote about it quite regularly. To help in the practice of the method, Don Bosco recommends taking children, as much as possible, away from the things of the world that cause near occasions of sin, such as bad media, bad friends,



bad books, and harmful conversations.

“We do not force human wills,” says Don Bosco, “We win them by gentle insinuations: we gently knock on the doors of hearts, we gently press the opening.”



One might argue: is this gentle method realistic? First, I want to make sure it is well understood that this method does not suppress all forms of corrections, rebukes, and punishments. This is not so, and the aforementioned point makes it clear. However, once again our saint gives the answer:

“Go to young people with all your heart, show them that you love them. Without trust, no education, and without affection, no confidence.”

Don Bosco noticed that his children lacked role models who exhibited virtue, and so our saint educator promises them all of that! We have to remember here what kind of children were entrusted to our saint during his earthly ministry: orphans, children born of broken families, renegades, poorly educated teens... He seems to tell them: do what is necessary to be faithful to what I teach you, in order to receive in return my trust and affection.

“The educator must strive to make himself loved by his students, he says, if he wants to be feared. When he has arrived to that point, the suppression of the slightest sign of benevolence and affection is, for them, a punishment. Make yourself loved, so that the heaviest punishment for your disciples is the suspension of this friendship to which they value so much.”

This may seem like quite a demanding call for parents, priests, teachers, and educators in general because it

seems to imply that one must be perfect at all times. The pressure builds, then, to be exemplary, courageous, and diligent enough to avoid all errors, to have perfect judgment when it comes to discipline, build trust with students in order to entrust them with responsibilities, and so on. One of my personal principles in the art of governing and commanding is that delegation is necessary for success. This can be challenging at times because to delegate means to form the right subordinates, to entrust them with responsibilities, and to expect accountability. The hardest task is then in the hands of the one in command and not in the hands of the subordinate as we would like to think sometimes, in a moment of anger or impatience. Now transpose this principle to the family and you shall have a new perspective in your role as educator.



And so, my dear parents and friends, with these tools in hand, following in the footsteps of the teaching of these great saints, we can accomplish two things: first, our own sanctification, and from there the sanctification of the family and society at large. By reforming our own lives, and by developing good qualities and virtues in our children, slowly but surely, we can expect to reform our families and to restore peace and order in our homes in a subtle and yet powerful way. From an overflow of beauty, goodness, and integrity, we can change a godless culture into a truly Christian culture. And St Francis concludes for us;

“Humble goodness is the virtue of virtues, very highly recommended by Our Lord. Hence, we should practice it always and everywhere. Evil must be avoided, but calmly. Good must be done, but always serenely. Follow this rule: that which you see can be done in charity, do; what cannot be done without dispute, do not do. In other words, peace and tranquility of soul must always take preference over all our actions.”

