

Heart & Mind



A RESOURCE FOR CATHOLIC HOMESCHOOLERS



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Christlike Discipline: *A Look at St. Don Bosco's Preventive System*

By Katherine O'Brien-Johnston

Effective discipline is absolutely critical in a homeschooling family. And it is not easy, especially as the babies keep arriving. Just the basics can be very tough. But it is impossible to school the children if outbursts are happening, everyone is talking all at once, people are getting up and moving around willy nilly, etc. So, what can we do? Do we punish in order to strictly enforce our rules and customs? Or is there another way, a more Christ-like way?

Saint Don Bosco started schools for boys, rough boys. He never struck one of his boys, yet their behavior was excellent. He used what has come to be known as the "Preventive System," a discipline system designed to prevent problems rather than punish them, although this is outlined as well. Children learn what they see; they are excellent mimics. If we yell and strike when things do not go our way (the child's view) and when they disobey, they learn to yell and hit in order to get their way, also. If we stay calm and find ways to lovingly induce the desired response, they will do likewise. Let us explore the preventive system and its three foundations: reason, religion, and kindness.

First, rather than laying down rules and then watching to catch and punish the little "culprits," the preventive system puts forth the rules, then is vigilant. The teacher is there to help the students follow the rules. Reason, religion, and above all, kindness are the tools employed to gain the students' adherence to the prescribed customs. In this



Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. (2223)... parents have the right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own conviction. This right is fundamental. (2229)

—Catechism of the Catholic Church

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P. O. Box 787
Montrose, AL 36559
www.heart-and-mind.com



EDITOR

Lesley Payne Rice
editor1@heart-and-mind.com

MANAGING EDITOR

Karen Horton
editor2@heart-and-mind.com

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Laura Berquist
LauraB@heart-and-mind.com
Nancy Carpentier Brown
NancyB@heart-and-mind.com
Cay Gibson
CayG@heart-and-mind.com
Pattie Kelley-Huff
PattieK-H@heart-and-mind.com
Maureen Wittmann
MaureenW@heart-and-mind.com

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way, the student does not lose heart or feel bad about himself for his failures. Rather, he is encouraged that he can succeed and be supported until he does so. We must remember that the young can be rather thoughtless. So, when they are kindly reminded of the way to go, they often will go. They are not left with memories of punishments and their failures, but with memories of love and a focus on doing good. The teacher becomes a benefactor to the student, rather than the law enforcement. So also the teacher does well to ask the student why he was behaving so badly. It may be that the behavior was provoked and we can help the child learn to handle such situations better. That opportunity to teach and minister to the child would be lost if we stepped in with harsh punishments rather than kindness and patience. This key of listening to the children is crucial to our success. We can be of so much better service in guiding our children if we understand their inner motives, feelings, and struggles. So, we must listen.

In this way, the Salesians teach us, the heart of the pupil is won over and then is open to hear counsel and advice as the years go on. As Don Bosco wrote in "The use of Punishments in Salesian Houses" (4 October 1883, reprinted in *Keys to the Hearts of Youth* by Paul Avallone, SDB): "The preventive system aims at motivating our pupils to do what we ask of them with no external force on our part. In other words, this system means that we must never use *coercive means*."

The practice of this system is entirely based upon St. Paul's teaching in the first letter to the Corinthians: "Love is patient, kind, bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things..." The preventive system, consequently, is a uniquely Christian system of training. The teacher must teach and live this Scripture. The teacher must be present to the student regularly in order to do this. This is pretty easy for homeschooling parents! Actually, the Salesians insist that the teachers be present to the students at all times; that they never be unattended or idle. As St. Philip Neri says, "Do anything you like as long as you do not sin." So, the activities of the students may be quite varied and even quite boisterous (especially for the boys,) yet, they are chaperoned. This can be impossible for a parent to do. Yet, the principle of knowing what the children are doing at all times, and visiting each periodically to offer love, encouragement, and whatever else may be needed is important. This minimizes occasions of sin.

The students should be encouraged but not forced, the Salesians teach us, to frequent the Sacrament of Confession and daily Mass. These support their education. By our encouragement, the children will take to their frequent use joyfully and obtain much benefit from them. Don Bosco was a strong supporter of the early reception of Holy Communion so that the King of Heaven may come to reign in the children's hearts and they not be lost to the Devil while they wait. Frequent Confession and Communion help the children keep their focus on gaining Heaven and serving God. This provides the motivation for their efforts to refine their characters. Moreover, the Bread of Life both strengthens them and us on the journey and is the goal, the source and summit of our faith, as Vatican II teaches us. We must use our reason here. Daily Mass with lots of toddlers may not be the best choice for our family today. St. John wasn't dealing with the little children, as we must.

St. John makes a few concrete suggestions to help provide a good environment. Bad books and companions are to be avoided. These influences can undermine what we are trying to teach, a holy Catholic lifestyle. So, be a vigilant gatekeeper at your telephone, computer, television, and door. It is assuredly worth the effort. Don Bosco further suggests that, after night prayers, a short moral teaching be given. It is best if it stems from the events of the day. This gives information to the children about the way they should go—and the ways they should not go. And it helps everyone to be mindful of the rules and disciplinary measures.

St. John encourages us: "Be firm in pursuing good and averting evil, but always with gentleness and prudence. Be perseverant and loveable, and you will see that God will give you mastery over even the least docile hearts."

This system is difficult for the teacher to implement but the fruit for the children who live in such an environment! Fr. Avallone, SDB teaches us, "An educator is one who is consecrated to the welfare of his pupils, and therefore he should be ready to face every difficulty and fatigue in order to attain his object, which is the civic, moral and intellectual education of his pupils." Additionally, he repeatedly calls the Salesians to imitate the parents in their solicitude for the students. Our role is the model; call on the graces of your marriage to help you parent well.

Don Bosco does teach us a little about punishments, for the rare occasions when they are necessary. He, like Pope John Paul II, strongly guards the dignity of the students.

First, since the love of the parent/teacher is so valuable, the withholding of some token of kindness which does not degrade the child but encourages growth can be employed. Second, praise of good work and blame in the case of carelessness are in themselves a reward or punishment. Corrections should be given privately, in order to protect the dignity of the child. Use great patience to bring the child to the recognition of his fault. Do not condemn him or his behavior! Remember 1 Cor. 13. Corporal punishments, Don Bosco teaches, are to be absolutely avoided because they are against God's law of love and they degrade the teacher. Prayer for the child and the situation should always happen before the punishment is meted out. Remember that it is far easier to lose our temper than to patiently love.

St. John Bosco also admonishes his teachers to choose an opportune moment to handle difficult situations. And, very importantly, he calls us to act with a fatherly heart, not in spite or anger when we must punish or correct. He wrote, "Thus did Jesus act toward His apostles, tolerating their ignorance,

**Love is patient,
kind, bears all
things, hopes all
things, endures all
things...**

—St. Paul

rudeness, and shaky fidelity, reaching out to sinners with such ease and friendliness as to astonish some people, practically to scandalize others, and to kindle in many the blessed hope of receiving pardon. Hence he tells us to learn from Him to be ‘meek and humble of heart.’...let us banish all anger when we must correct their failings, or at least so restrain it as to make it seem to disappear. Let there be no vexation in our souls, no contempt in our eyes, no cutting remarks on our lips. Rather, let us show compassion for the present and hope for the future. In this manner you will prove to be true fathers, and your correction will be genuine.”

One who must be punished needs to know of his family’s disappointment in his behavior. He also needs some hope of reward, of growth or progress so that he not lose heart. Always reassure him that we have not lost hope in him but are ready at any time to let bygones be bygones once the child shows signs of im-

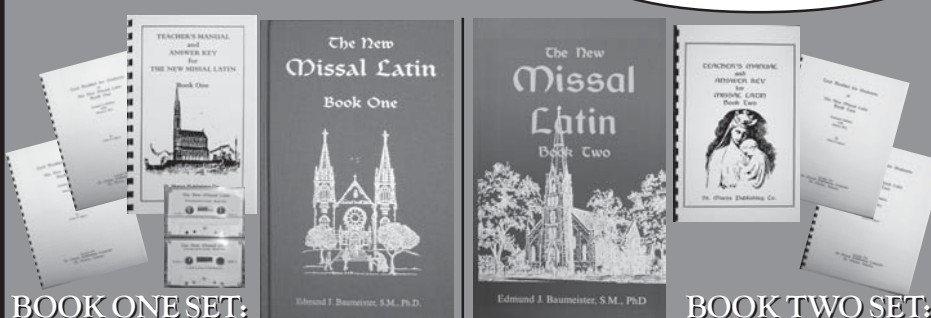
provement. It may be helpful to point out the difference between the way he is acting and the way he is being treated. We are, don’t forget, teaching by word and example.

He encourages us to forget and help the student forget the “dark hours of his mistakes.” This is to do well as a teacher. Help the student along, to repair his reputation, to grow beyond the place of his fall. The Christian life is full of falls. We must learn to get up again, and again, and again. And so we must teach our children to do the same. What a help we can be to our children as they pass through difficult periods of growth. What a privilege it is to school our children.

Some more severe punishments Don Bosco suggests include standing in one’s place to eat supper, eating by the door, or some other place, but, eating the same food as the rest of the family. A grave punishment is to deprive the child of his playtime. To ignore the child in the classroom for a single

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day is also put forth as a serious punishment. In the meantime, always, encourage the culprit to mend his ways and behave properly. St. John does not advocate extra chores as punishment; he sees this as humiliating for the offender. St. John teaches that we should never use the “reflection room.” This sounds like some sort of isolation or severe time out. Don Bosco warns us that this punishment can thrust the child into all sorts of troubles and leaves him resentful and open to attack by the Devil.

Don Bosco’s guidelines are for his schools run by groups of religious. He calls for the Director to mete out punishments. In the homeschool arena, a parallel would be for the parents to consult regarding the situation and the father to determine the appropriate punishment. The parents together can determine who would be most effective applying it.

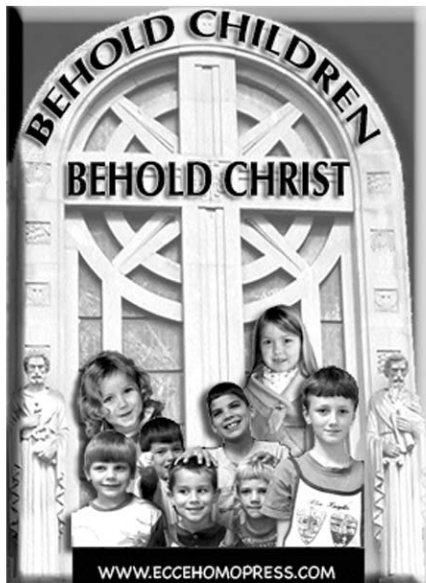
He finishes his letter:

“Remember that education is a matter of the heart, of which God alone is the master, and that we can achieve nothing unless God

teaches us the art and hands us the key. Hence let us use all means, including out entire and humble dependence upon Him, to become masters of that fortress which locks itself off from all severity and harshness. Let us strive to make ourselves loved, to instill a sense of duty and of holy fear of God, and we shall see hearts open to us with surprising ease; they will join us in singing the praises and blessing of Him who chose to make Himself our model, our way, our example in all things, especially in the education of the young.”

Katherine O’Brien-Johnston homeschooled her five children (and one on the way) in San Diego. She holds an MA in Theology from Franciscan University of Steubenville.

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