

We educate good Christians and honest citizens

Salesian Thursday 3 April 2025

1) Sr Martha

We extend warm greetings to all of you listening from various parts of Italy and around the world. This final meeting of the Salesian Thursdays of this 2024-2025 academic year features a multi-voiced dialogue on the Preventive System, continuing the exploration of specific aspects based on the results of research conducted to mark the 150th anniversary of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Today's discussion will center on the purpose of education, which Don Bosco summarized in the expression: "*We educate good Christians and honest citizens.*"

The first presentation is entrusted to Sr. Magna Martinez, Professor of General Didactics at the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences *Auxilium*. She will provide an in-depth analysis of the phrase (Binomial) *good Christians and honest citizens* frequently used by Don Bosco to refer to the purpose of education. She will discuss how Don Bosco used it and to whom he addressed it. This will be followed by a dialogue between Sr. Enrica Ottone, Full Professor of Social Pedagogy, and Sr. Martha Séide, Professor of Theology of Education. Recalling the research results, we will try, on one hand, to reread and interpret the data that emerged on the core issue in question, and on the other hand, to justify the unity of the binomial in the unified vision of the purpose of the educational method.

QUESTION

- *What does the expression "Good Christians and honest citizens" mean for Don Bosco?*
- *In what contexts did Don Bosco use this expression? For what purpose?*

2) Sr Magna

A Look at the Roots of the Binomial: Good Christians and Honest Citizens

The binomial "good Christians and honest citizens," although widely associated with Don Bosco, has historical and philosophical roots that predate his work, reflecting a tradition of pedagogical and social thought that has spanned centuries.

One of the first to formulate this pedagogical vision was Silvio Antoniano (1540-1603), an Italian cardinal and pedagogue. In his work "On the Christian and Political Education of Children," influenced by the Council of Trent, he emphasized that being a good Christian also meant being a responsible and active citizen. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the educational ideal evolved toward a humanistic approach in which Charles Rollin, rector of the University of Paris, promoted a comprehensive education that included science, morality, and religion, with the aim of forming complete individuals capable of being both good citizens and good Christians. This approach reflected the belief that education should prepare individuals not only for spiritual life but also for civic and social life.

In 1769, some documents from the House of Vienna examining the relationship between Church and State affirmed that good Christians were also the best citizens. They emphasized the need for harmonious collaboration between the two powers for the common good, highlighting the indissoluble link between religion and reason. Religious education, in this context, was seen as an essential contribution to the formation of virtuous and responsible citizens. During the reign of Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II (1740-1790), a series of reforms were implemented aimed at

consolidating imperial power and strengthening the administration, economy, and society of the empire. Among these reforms, the Suppression Patent of 1782 had a significant impact, suppressing numerous contemplative monasteries and religious orders deemed useless to society, as they were not engaged in teaching or caring for the sick.

In response to the challenges of the time, new congregations arose dedicated primarily to education, with the goal of forming good Christians and honest citizens. These initiatives reflected the importance attributed to education as a tool to promote both spiritual growth and civic well-being.

In 1797, Scipione Bonifacio, in his pamphlet "The Rights of Man, the Rights of the Citizen, and the Rights and Duties of the Christian and the Citizen," emphasized the inseparability of the roles of man, citizen, and Christian. He maintained that religion is inseparable from reason and social laws, and that a Christian must necessarily also be a good citizen. In the nineteenth century, the Italian Risorgimento led to new reflections on how to reconcile the role of the Christian with that of the citizen. In a period of political and social fervor, there was discussion on how to combine religious identity with patriotic and civic values. Figures such as Pietro Gioia, Minister of Grace and Justice, underscored the importance for the clergy to understand the duties of subject and citizen, rooted in Christian law.

Don Bosco, a child of his time and endowed with a remarkable ability to understand the reality in which young people lived, devised strategies to foster their growth. He adopted and promoted the principle of forming "good Christians and honest citizens" as the foundation of his educational work, in a context where the Industrial Revolution and other revolutions were profoundly transforming principles and culture. Society and education were no longer those of the Ancien Régime, nor the radical ones of laïcité, but reflected a clear separation between Church and State characteristic of a liberalism that was sometimes anticlerical but not anti-Christian, which believed that education and religion should support each other.

Starting from his youth-centered approach, Don Bosco created a network of relationships with various entities to promote and ensure their formation. This allowed him to communicate effectively with different interlocutors, to guarantee his main objective: to form people of integrity, capable of living their faith and actively contributing to the common good.

Let's examine some aspects of how Don Bosco employed the phrase "good Christians and honest citizens" with a variety of nuances, demonstrating a remarkable ability to root his educational purpose.

When addressing "educator" collaborators, he highlighted the importance of forming good Christians and honest citizens, using verbs such as make, educate, prepare, render, teach, instruct, and form, all indicative of a continuous commitment to the educational process. "To return them to the family, to society, to the Church as good children, wise citizens, exemplary Christians." Don Bosco encouraged educators to instill Christian and civic virtues in young people, considering them indispensable for the formation of complete and responsible individuals. He emphasized that education must also include social life, since a good Christian must also be a good citizen. He exhorted the importance of constant and dedicated educational action by educators in an era of great transformations, marked by the spread of liberal and secular ideals. In this context, it was fundamental to train educators capable of transmitting to young people not only knowledge, but also Christian and civil values, countering the influence of harmful ideologies. Faced with the Casati Law of 1859, which reformed the school system and reflected the tension between secular and religious education, Don Bosco insisted on the importance of qualified and committed educators, capable of guiding young people on a path of integral growth.

Addressing benefactors, Don Bosco expressed deep gratitude for their vital support of his educational mission. He recognized how their contribution was crucial not only for the subsistence of young people, but especially for their good instruction and Christian and civil education. He stated: "From

your charity I expect bread and necessities of life and good Christian and civil instruction and education for the sheltered youth...". In an era of political and social uncertainty, private support was essential to finance his educational and welfare works. This allowed for the formation of good Christians and honest citizens, in line with his preventive system, removing young people from marginalization and offering them comprehensive formation. The generosity of benefactors was seen as essential cooperation for the good of souls and civil society. Furthermore, Don Bosco believed that their involvement in charity not only fostered the growth of young people but also promoted the personal development of the benefactors themselves, strengthening moral and social values within the community.

Addressing civil authorities, Don Bosco highlighted the crucial importance of youth education for the well-being of society, stating that "society will be good if you provide good education to youth." [3] This conviction guided his actions and interactions with institutions. He did not limit himself to stating this principle but demonstrated it concretely through his oratories, which removed young people from the streets, offering them moral, religious, and professional instruction. Don Bosco presented his initiatives as a contribution to public utility, capable of reducing delinquency and forming honest and industrious citizens. His educational action aimed to form excellent Christians, good family fathers, faithful subjects, and individuals useful to society, highlighting how the integral formation of young people, rooted in Christian principles, was essential for a healthy and prosperous society. While maintaining his autonomy and the priority of spiritual salvation, he sought collaboration with civil authorities, aware that education was a common interest for the good of young people and the community.

Addressing the Church, Don Bosco stated: "My politics are those of the Our Father." In this response to Pius IX, he summarized his vision of the relationship between faith and social commitment. For Don Bosco, educational and pastoral action was intrinsically political, as it aimed to transform society according to Gospel values. The 19th century Church was facing the challenge of modernity, with the spread of secular and anticlerical ideologies and the loss of temporal power. In this context, it was essential to renew the Church's commitment in the field of education and social assistance, offering a concrete response to the needs of young people and families. With his charisma and capacity for innovation, he represented an important reference point for the Church, demonstrating the possibility of reconciling faith and modernity and announcing the Gospel in a new and accessible language.

Addressing young people, Don Bosco encouraged them to "always live as good Christians and wise citizens." He employed active and reflexive verbs such as "make oneself," "render oneself," "live," and "show yourselves" to stimulate an intrinsic process of personal transformation. "Make oneself" and "render oneself" denoted an active construction of moral and civic identity; "live" emphasized the importance of internalizing and practically applying Christian and civic values in daily life; and "show yourselves" highlighted the social and behavioral dimension of such identity through exemplary conduct. This encouragement to embody Christian values aimed to develop moral internalization and prosocial behaviors, with young people considered active protagonists of their own educational journey. Don Bosco firmly believed in the potential of young people to "give themselves totally to God" and to aspire to holiness, a supreme educational objective proposed to all.

I have selected three significant moments when Don Bosco used the expression "good Christians and honest citizens."

The first, which commemorates the beginning of the Salesian work, is found in the Memoirs of the Oratory, at the end of the narration of the meeting with Bartolomeo Garelli. I quote directly: "To this first pupil several others were added, and during that winter I limited myself to some adults who needed special catechism, especially for those who were leaving prison. It was then that I touched with my hand, that young people released from the place of punishment, if they find a benevolent hand that takes care of them, assists them on feast days, studies to place them to work with some honest master, and visits them sometimes during the week, these young people gave themselves to an honorable life, forgot the past, became good Christians and honest citizens." This quote reflects Don Bosco's conviction that

comprehensive education and constant support can radically transform the lives of young people, even those from difficult backgrounds. His ability to see the potential in every young person and to offer them the necessary resources for a dignified and productive life is an example of how education can be a powerful tool for social change. Don Bosco always believed in young people.

The second quote is reported in the 1877 Booklet, where Don Bosco states: "Wherever these students go, they are mostly the consolation of the family, valid citizens and good Christians." In this reference, Don Bosco emphasizes to educators the multiplier effect of the good they do for the boys, thus expanding the educational mission that also has a positive impact on families and society as a whole. He recognized that educating young people also meant improving the social fabric, creating a network of morally and civically responsible people.

The third quote is found for the first time in the Biographical Memoirs and is used by Don Bosco in the context of the relocation of the oratory to the Mills of San Martino, in Turin, in July 1845. Don Bosco gives a speech to the young people, encouraging them not to worry about the continuous relocations and to trust in divine Providence. He emphasizes the importance of attending the oratory, getting educated, and living virtuously to become good Christians and upright citizens. This exhortation of Don Bosco still resonates today on every continent, inspiring generations of young people.

A relevant aspect of Don Bosco is the adoption of the plural whenever he refers to the binomial "good Christians and honest citizens." This choice is not coincidental. Although Don Bosco privileged the individual educational relationship, that is, the pedagogy of one-on-one, he promoted it within a community and family vision. For him, it was not sufficient to form the single individual; it was necessary to form the citizen within the community, the family, society.

The use of the plural reflected the idea that education should have an impact in both the earthly and heavenly communities, contributing to the construction of a cohesive society. This linguistic choice emphasized the importance of an education that welcomed all young people, promoting both spiritual and civic growth. The virtue of one strengthens that of others, creating a support network that facilitates the progress of the community, with the identity of the family spirit.

What is the opinion of contemporary educators on the formation of good Christians and honest citizens? Below, I share some extracts from the reflections of educators from different parts of the world.

The first educator states: "With society's changes, educating young people to be good Christians and honest citizens is becoming a challenge because today's educational system is not aligned with the purpose of the Preventive System, does not favor it, and sometimes opposes this purpose." The educator's response highlights a crucial challenge in the contemporary educational context. The Salesian mission of forming good Christians and honest citizens clashes with an educational system that often doesn't support and sometimes opposes these objectives. This requires an even greater commitment from educators and communities to find creative and resilient ways to transmit these fundamental values, despite the difficulties.

The second educator affirms: "Educating good Christians and honest citizens is the compass that guides my educational mission." This statement highlights the importance of developing personal skills to accompany young people. The educator demonstrates a clear direction and a strong sense of responsibility. This approach not only promotes moral and religious values but also encourages active and positive participation in society, forming complete and responsible individuals. Don Bosco emphasized that educators should be role models, capable of inspiring and guiding young people in their journey of personal and civic growth.

The third educator notes: "For non-Christian youth: we educate them to live with justice, a righteous conscience, and the ability to distinguish and choose between good and evil." The educator finds a way to accompany non-Christian youth by promoting universal values that transcend religious differences, creating an educational environment that values each individual. Teaching these

fundamental principles helps form responsible and aware citizens capable of contributing positively to society.

The fourth educator states: "I like this phrase: 'if you play with five positive people, the sixth will be you, and vice versa.'" The educator highlights the importance of the social environment in shaping our behavior and attitude. Being surrounded by positive people inspires us to improve and contribute positively to society. By adopting a positive approach, we can also influence and help others change for the better.

Reflecting on the educators' responses, I think that to implement the formation of good Christians and honest citizens, today's educators need a series of key competencies. These include relational skills to build positive and trusting relationships with young people; emotional skills to understand the emotions and needs of youth; practical skills to apply concrete educational methods and develop activities that promote integral growth; pedagogical skills to adapt the educational approach to the specific needs of young people; spiritual skills to transmit Christian values and guide young people in their faith journey; and moral and ethical skills to promote ethical and moral behaviors, inspiring young people to live according to these principles.

To conclude, I would like to pose a question: How can we reinterpret "good Christians and honest citizens" in today's education, considering contemporary challenges?

I conclude by handing the floor to Sr. Enrica and Sr. Martha

QUESTION

- *In a context like the current one, characterized by pluralism and secularization, in multicultural and multireligious environments, **how is the binomial "good Christians and honest citizens" understood and lived by the educators who work in the houses of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in various parts of the world?***

3) Sr Enrica

- This question was posed in an international research study conducted between 2021 and 2022 by a research team coordinated by our Auxilium Faculty. The survey involved approximately 500 FMA members, laywomen, and laymen from 5 continents.
- One of the research objectives was to explore how the Salesian educational system is lived today in the works of the FMA. In particular, we focused on several aspects, including the integral and unitary vision of the person and the purpose of education, which consists of forming "good Christians and honest citizens." One of the hypotheses concerned precisely the realistic and optimistic conception of the person and education, and the unitary vision of the purpose, exploring how this purpose was understood and how it was promoted in practice across various educational environments.
- In this meeting, we don't have much time to delve into all the data we collected—imagine that we analyzed more than 500,000 words. We will present some of the results to better understand how this central aspect of our Salesian educational system is thought about and lived.
- A challenge that clearly emerges from reading the data is related to formation: in answering the question of what Don Bosco's expression "Good Christians and honest citizens" means to you, the interviewees explained certain aspects, often reiterating awareness of the unity of purpose, while expressing the need to deepen this meaning.
- In analyzing the responses referring to the second part of the question, "What do you do to educate good Christians and honest citizens," some felt the need to distinguish, revealing a certain dualism: to educate good Christians we do this... and to educate honest citizens we

propose these other experiences. This aspect could be explored further but leaves open the challenge of formation.

- The interviewees appear convinced and aware of the unity of the binomial but also highlight the challenges in implementing it today in various contexts, particularly in multi-religious and secularized contexts.
- This is reported very effectively by a Japanese educator who works in a context where Christianity is a minority religion. I read his words collected through the focus group: *"I've been thinking about it for some time. Are we forming honest citizens and good Christians? Or at least are you trying to form honest citizens? Do we really think that honest citizens will eventually appear as good Christians? But sometimes we cannot educate them to be honest citizens in order to be good Christians with everyone, so honest citizens who aim to be... good Christians. If you have a different religion, as I said before, or if these are the minimum aspects to make these people honest citizens, wouldn't there be a way to discover some seeds or things that can show being a good Christian from being an honest citizen?"* (G_34_AS_IT, Pos. 79)
- The concluding question is expressed so clearly by this educator, but it is implicit in the responses of many other interviewees. It already suggests a path: creating opportunities to reflect together on the competencies of the honest citizen who lives that set of human virtues and embodies evangelical values, and identifying some indicators that attest to this.
- It may be useful to consult with experts, and so now we ask you, Sr. Martha, to deepen the reasons, that is, to explain

QUESTION

- *How is the conviction justified that when we educate honest citizens, we also educate good Christians, and vice versa?*

4) Sr. Martha

This unitary vision finds its foundation in the theo-anthropological perspective of *Imago Dei* which refers to Genesis 1:26-27, meaning that the **human person is created in the image of the** Trinitarian God.

This perspective finds an illuminating explanation in the document of the International Theological Commission, entitled: *"Communion and Service: The Human Person Created in the Image of God"* (2004). Thus, the person created in God's image is a relational being called to an intrinsic vocation to **communion and service**.

Regarding **communion**, it implies the personal dimension that refers both to the irreducible unity, identity, and interiority of the individual, and to the fundamental relationship with others that forms the basis of human community. In the Christian perspective, this personal identity, which is also an orientation toward others, is essentially founded on the Trinity of divine Persons. God is not a solitary being, but a communion among three Persons (n. 41). If the Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - is a communion of persons, consequently, the person, created in its image, is called to reflect this model in all dimensions of existence from personal to community and social: unity of body and soul, man and woman, person and community, sin and salvation. Indeed, no one exists as an isolated individual but is fully realized only in relationship with others and with God. The community, therefore, is not an external addition to the person, but the place where one finds the deepest meaning of one's existence.

Similarly, the **dimension of service and responsible citizenship** is innate to the original vocation of the human being. Created in God's image, one is called to participate in the governance of creation,

not as a dominator, but as a **responsible administrator**. The task that God entrusts to the person is a form of **service**: to guide, protect, and improve the world, promoting justice and the common good. This orientation to service is not only a religious duty but also the basis for being an **honest citizen**, capable of building a just and supportive society. The good Christian, living according to one's vocation of service, inevitably becomes also a good citizen, because one contributes to the common good through ethical and social commitment.

We can affirm that this perspective of *Imago Dei* finds its concretization in the incarnation of the Son who makes God's image visible. The Second Vatican Council tells us, "In reality, it is only in the mystery of the incarnate Word that the mystery of man truly becomes clear" (GS n. 22). It is indeed Jesus Christ who reveals to humanity the fullness of its being, in its original nature, in its final fulfillment, and in its current reality. Therefore, the person who wants to concretely live the doctrine of *imago Dei* must learn from Jesus to live the Father's plan for humanity, conceived in Him before the creation of the world.

In summary, the unitary vision of the person emerges from the truth that the human being is *body and soul, individual and relationship, child of God and custodian of creation*. One's Christian identity is realized in communion and manifested in service, two inseparable aspects that provide the foundation for both personal spirituality and civic engagement, to live as good Christians and honest citizens.

QUESTION

- *But how do educators put this unity into practice today in various contexts around the world?*

5) Sr Enrica

- This purpose in the respondents' answers is realized in a varied and articulated set of educational objectives. The codes concerning this aspect are mainly related to the answers to the question: *What do you do to educate good Christians and honest citizens?*
- The analysis of the 541 sentences that we classified as responses to this specific question allowed us to identify a wide variety of objectives that we grouped into the following 4 dimensions:
- the *socio-political dimension* (education for active citizenship, care for the common good, solidarity, interculturality, peace, justice, human rights);
- The dimension that we coded as "cognitive," that is, concerning the need to promote the development of reflection ability, critical thinking, digital competence, today we would say to be able to face the challenges that open up with AI;
- the affective and motivational dimension (promoting the disposition to live and witness values such as coherence, honesty, and the ability to regulate emotions);
- and, finally, the moral, spiritual, and religious dimension, making explicit the aspects of openness to transcendence, existential meaning and perspective, faith, sacraments, and prayer.
- The interviewees describe a wide variety of strategies, activities, and educational experiences that allow the pursuit of these objectives in various contexts of formal, non-formal, and informal education and emphasize various aspects. We gather three that are central to our educational system:
- attention to making young people protagonists and capable of actively participating in the various activities of their formation;
- the awareness that educating is a continuous and circular process and implies networking;

- professionalism, which is recognized in the time dedicated to preparation and attention to details.
- A final aspect I would like to highlight is the witness of the educator. In achieving the goal and helping young people understand that the goal is unified, witness takes on a central role. We must first consciously assume the responsibility of self-formation to understand and know how to live this unity of purpose firsthand. Our consistency with gospel values on the model of the beatitudes and the commitment to live these values, this identity, must shine through, turning them into competencies, or better, virtues understood as habits, that is, stable dispositions that young people can recognize in us and learn to live from us and with us.
- Evidence of this, I think, can be recognized in a result we have collected in the interviews. More than 230 codes concern references to current situations, of which almost half focus on the Covid-19 pandemic. This aspect of attention to context emerged across the responses: we recognized in it the trait of rootedness in a space and time that is characteristic of the Salesian tradition. Educators moved to address and help face this global event with resilience. In this way too, we educated for citizenship. And we have repositioned the need to educate as a priority and central to our mission and vocation.
- *To you, Sr. Martha, the task of helping us to better deepen this unity between educating good Christians and honest citizens.*

6) sr MARTHA

Reorganizing the data emerging from the research, in reference to "good Christians," we can observe how the interviewees highlight the characteristic elements of Christian education as a process of human-Christian maturation. This means, first and foremost, an education that is authentically and integrally human, carried out within a horizon of faith, as part of a growth journey aimed at the fullness of Christian life. This journey includes within its dynamic's catechesis, liturgical-sacramental initiation, moral formation, initiation into ecclesial apostolate, and education for social engagement (cf. *Gravissimum Educationis*, n. 2; Groppo 1991, 423-425).

On one hand, some statements clearly illustrate this conviction; for example: *"This statement ('good Christians and honest citizens') reminds me to shape the conscience of young people..."*

"When we have a strong Christian foundation... it is at that very moment that we become honest..."

Or:

"What does it mean to educate good Christians and honest citizens? I would say it means guiding young people... to adopt good behavior, using the Word of God as their pillar..."

On the other hand, a certain regret is expressed when these aspects are neglected, as we can see in this statement:

"I want to add something that deeply moves me—I feel that we are somewhat forgetting the two pillars of Confession and the Eucharist..."

Moreover, educators' awareness of living in a multicultural and multi-religious world ensures that the education of good Christians and honest citizens is not an exclusionary task. On the contrary, in the name of Catholicity, it fosters openness, hospitality, and inclusion of young people from all cultures and beliefs. From this perspective, interreligious dialogue is encouraged in everyday life to educate for peaceful coexistence based on respect and solidarity.

Another aspect highlighted in the focus groups, in connection with being a good Christian, is the power of the educator's testimony. Educators are called to live their faith in a coherent and joyful way, ensuring guidance and a constant presence, especially during significant moments in young people's lives. This aligns with the typically Salesian style of joy, attentiveness, familiarity, and

kindness.

"To bear witness... to show that we are happy people... And I say, at the very least, they will remember this; they will remember that teacher..."

It is interesting to note that even when referring primarily to the education of good Christians, the interviewees emphasize the necessity of the Salesian method with Don Bosco's three interconnected pillars: **Loving-Kindness, Religion, and Reason** for a holistic education that is attentive to the individual. Educators affirm the need to propose a "high standard of ordinary Christian life," meaning that there should be no fear in offering strong experiences that engage both faith and social commitment.

These broad categories capture the fundamental elements that emerged from the focus groups, helping to grasp the unity and integrity of the educational journey encapsulated in the phrase "good Christians and honest citizens." These aspects outline not only the interweaving of different dimensions of the person in daily educational action but also the methodological unity and exemplary nature of educators, expressed through credible testimony.

CONCLUSION

We thank you for participating in this meeting, and we hope to continue "educating good Christians and honest citizens," keeping alive and relevant the transformative power of Salesian education in people's lives and in society.