The role of recreation in the Salesian system

For a boy to be cheerful he must be active and agile. He forgets his surroundings when he is cheerful and happy. As an educator, Don Bosco had to deal with the problem of how the young people spend their spare time. He found a solution to this problem by keeping his own boyhood in mind, because he realized the importance of being cheerful in life from his younger age. So, in order to facilitate cheerfulness in a boy’s life, he introduced recreation. Through recreation he promoted games, music, theaters, hikes, excursions etc. He not only promoted it, but he himself participated in them. He gave ample freedom during the recreation because he considered that it is during this time, they express themselves and free them from all their worries. They were free to do anything but they should not harm God in their words or deeds and do no harm to oneself and to the other. At the time of recreation, they were allowed to run, jump and amuse themselves as much as they want, without committing sin.

By being loved in the things they like, through taking part in their youthful interests, they are led to see love in those things which they find less attractive, such as discipline, study and self-denial. The better boys like Dominic Savio and Mickey Magone used this time of recreation to do good to souls. During recreation Don Bosco studied the character of the boys. It was something edifying to see the boys enjoying his pleasant conversation. They not only loved him but revered him as a saint.

Don Bosco believed that one of the areas in which the educator’s presence is most effective is the area of recreation. His concept of recreation as an educational tool was innovative. He found recreation as a means to educate the boys and to foster cheerfulness. In order to educate and to bring cheerfulness in the boys, he used different means in recreation.

The first means he used to bring cheerfulness in the boys was games. From his own experience, he developed a real passion for games and physical exercise. As a young boy he could do difficult somersaults and various other stunts. During his days of his merry makers, his talents enabled him to win over a professional acrobat. In 1868 Fr. Lemoyne witnessed an event that Don Bosco challenged 800 boys to a race in the oratory playground and although he was already 53 years old, he won. In all sorts of races, jumping and organized team games, he became a moving spirit amidst them. Don Bosco considered games as a means for the physical and moral development of the boys. In his opinion, mind and body derived benefit from them and among other advantage, he felt that games could cleanse their minds. Experience had taught him that, games prevented boredom which is never a good state of mind. One of the favorite sayings of Don Bosco was “keep smiling”, but often it was an invitation to go and play. He also appreciated the educational value of games and as an educator he realized the importance of physical exercise. Therefore, he preferred those games with plenty of movement that demand a great amount of physical energy. He liked to see the boys actively playing. He did not encourage games like cards, chess and checkers. By doing all these, the only goal of Don Bosco was to make the boys cheerful and relaxed.

The second means he used to make boys busy was music. In many of his dreams, he speaks of heavenly voices of melodious choirs and of heavenly harmony. Like every good Italian he loved singing. Moreover, he himself possessed a fine tenor voice. As a young student at Castelnuovo, he learned to play violin, piano and organ which enabled him to compose hymns for the first boys of the oratory. In 1845, with the help of two priests, Fr. Michael Chiatellino, who were musicians and organists, he began to teach vocal music and plain chant. Later the instrumental music joined singing at the oratory. When the boys of the oratory used to play in the Fillippi meadow, the roll of drum and the blast of a trumpet were a good way to get attention from the boys when he wanted to speak to them. In 1855, Don Bosco organized a band among the artisans. He demanded good conduct from them and did not hesitate to suspend it temporarily in 1859 because of disobedience. In 1876, the band was invited to take part in the inauguration of the railway at Lanzo. The famous photograph taken in 1870, gives us the clear picture of the oratory band. For Don Bosco, music was a means for attracting boys towards him

The third means that he used was the kittle theatre. This was initiated. In order to keep the boys occupied on Sunday morning, while Don Bosco was hearing confessions, he encouraged Carl Tomatis to entertain the boys with his talent for comedy. It began with puppet show and later in 1851, short comedies were performed. This began to develop until it became an essential part of all celebrations of the oratory. The shows were often composed by Don Bosco himself and Fr. Lemoyne. The plays that the boys performed were highly esteemed by the people of Turin. The aims of these little theatres were to interpret, instruct and to educate the boys. Don Bosco preferred light comedy and he did not like plays with vulgarity and violence. According to Don Bosco theatre was a means to improve pronunciations and to learn declamation. There were intermissions between the plays. During which poems of hood authors were recited. Finally, it became an integral part of his methods of teaching.

The fourth means that he used was hikes and excursions. Don Bosco considered walking as an important part of recreation. He used to take his boys to the Superga, a place of pilgrimage and it remained a traditional feature till 1864. He also obtained permission from minister Ratazzi and took the young prisoners for a day of relaxation to Stupinigi. He took up all the responsibilities of the boys and it made the officers astounded. The boys lived him enough not to run away. These hikes brought in enthusiasm among the youngsters and Don Bosco shared in their joy.

The fifth means that he used were the autumn excursions. It took place for about 3-4 weeks from September to October between 1847 and 1864. They were festive occasions like holidays. In order to participate in those excursions, the boys had to be merited by good conduct. Preparations began several weeks before for this particular day, the parish priests were contacted by Don Bosco, would provide them the accommodation. By doing this, the spiritual aspects were not forgotten. On the feast day of our lady of rosary, they would stay at Becchi in the house of Joseph Bosco. This program was comprised of joy and piety. Don Bosco considered that these popular excursions kept the youngsters away from the perils of holiday time. They also gave the boys an opportunity for apostolic work.

When we analyze all these aspects of recreation, we find that fun and service to God go hand in hand. This is what Don Bosco wanted his boys to acquire: the spirit of being connected to God by being cheerful. Here sanctity consists in being cheerful. Through these words Don Bosco tried to impart the spirituality of being cheerful. To acquire this spirituality, the means that he used was recreation. He not only introduced one or two means, rather he brought variety in it. It helped the boys to be active and it never bored them

In the preventive system, recreation plays a vital role in getting the discipline from the boys. It also encouraged good living and good health. On June 25 1876, Don Bosco said to the boys of the sodality of St. Aloysius: ‘’I am glad to see you amuse yourselves, play games and be merry. This is a way to become holy like saint Aloysius.’’

So, as sons of Don Bosco, it is our responsibility to promote and encourage recreation among the youngsters. It brings lot of joy and enthusiasm among them. It relaxes a boy from all his worries and anxieties. It also creates an ambience of a family in which the boys feel one with the other. By instigating this among the youngsters, we make them know that they are loved and cared by all.