

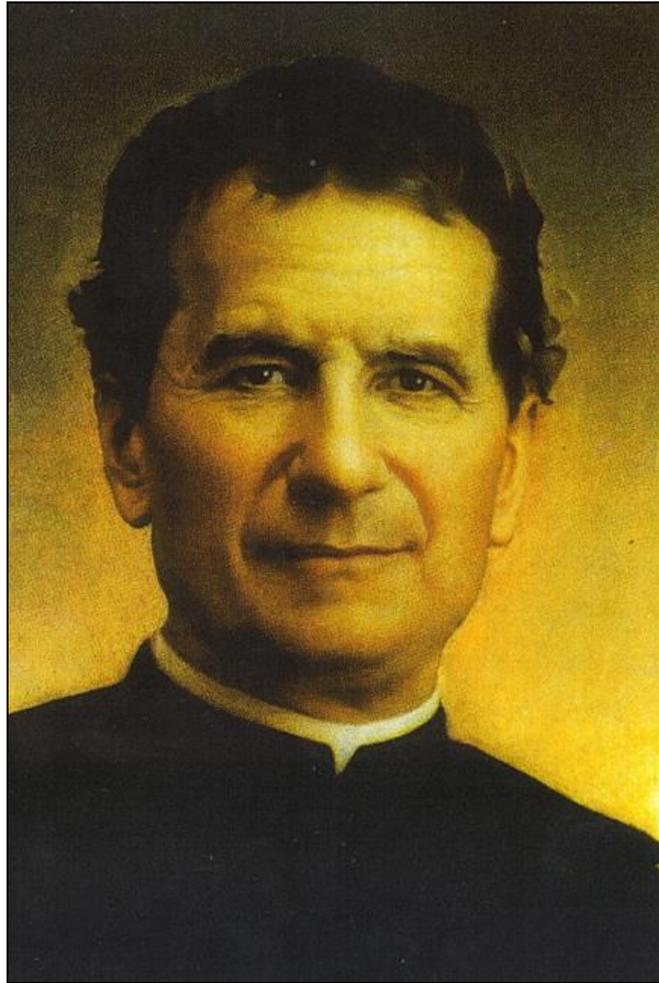
# Salesian Cooperators

## *Discerning the Call*

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### Initial Formation Program





*Lord, thank you for the holy life of St. John Bosco and the saintly family he inspired. Help me to discern whether I am called to follow in his footsteps, growing in holiness by opening my heart to Jesus Christ present in the young and the poor. Amen*

***Mary Help of Christians: Pray for us.***

## ***Introduction to the Salesian Cooperators***

*And Jesus said to him, "Follow me" (John 1:43).*

It is not by coincidence that you have been drawn to this initial formation program. All of us are called to follow Jesus Christ. Exactly how we should do so is not always clear. Certainly, we must strive to make all our thoughts and actions resemble those of our Lord: by listening to His Word, partaking of the Eucharist, and countless other means. But when it comes to choosing particular paths in life, it is not always easy to know what God wishes us to do.

As a student in the seminary, St. John Bosco faced a similar dilemma. He knew he was called to the priesthood but was very uncertain about what type of ministry he should undertake. As it happened, God helped him out; He presented to John Bosco, in the concrete situations of everyday life, hundreds of boys who were deprived of countless spiritual and physical needs. His decision was almost made for him: he would work with youth, and in this way, he would become a saint.

For Don Bosco, working with young people was a means to follow Christ and work for Him in the building of His Kingdom. For those called to follow in the footsteps of St. John Bosco, working with the young and the poor is also the way in which we follow Jesus, our Savior, and strive toward the holiness that God desires for all His people. Perhaps you are one of them.

In the following pages, you will find twenty-four lessons prepared for the purpose of discernment to the Salesian Cooperators. The initial formation program includes an introduction to the Salesians, their spirit, their mission, the Cooperators' apostolic commitment, and their Promise. You will come to understand the organization of the Association, the Cooperators in the Church and in the world, the Preventive System, and finally, membership and formation.

The program also includes an Appendix which contains *In the Footsteps of Don Bosco, Project of Apostolic Life (PAL) Statutes and Regulations, Plenary and Partial Indulgences, Benefits, a Salesian Calendar, Devotions, Novenas and Prayers* and finally a *Concordance*.

With the blessings of our Lord Jesus Christ, Mary Help of Christians, St. John Bosco, and the entire Salesian Family, we pray:

God my Father,  
I want to be the best person I can be.  
I want to be a saint.  
I offer myself totally to you and I ask  
for the help of the Holy Spirit.  
I pledge to devote myself to the  
following plan of holiness and  
keep it faithfully.

I will be cheerful.  
I will do my duties well.  
I will stay close to Jesus in the Eucharist.  
I will honor and love Mary as my Mother and Helper.  
I will choose to be kind.  
I want to serve rather than be served.

Father, may your grace,  
the intercession of Mary Help of Christians  
and of St. John Bosco,  
together with the assistance of my fellow Christians  
keep me faithful to this plan  
day by day  
Amen.

## ***What Is Formation? The Aim***

### **Introduction to Formation**

Formation is not a goal at which a Salesian arrives. Rather, it is the beginning of a life long journey within the Salesian formation experience: reflection, learning, prayer and action.

Formation is the work of God in our lives. We are continually being formed by God. Thus, when we “do” formation, we are merely assistants to God in the work of formation.

We participate in this formation and cooperate with it, but it is God who forms us. This formation program aims to cooperate with the work of God in the formation of Salesian Cooperators.

Ideally, we are all continuously undergoing formation in as much as we are open to the working of the spirit of God in our lives.

As we go through life, we are involved in “formation.” We gather experiences; these experiences lead us in our relationships in our families, at work, in society and with God. Formation is a process of guided reflection which helps us to understand how we meet God in our daily lives. As you progress through a formation program, your reflections should begin to take on the viewpoint and spirit contained within that program. *For the Salesian Cooperator, that viewpoint is the Salesian spirit. Father Egidio Viganò SDB, a Rector Major, stated in his 1984 Strenna communication, “We know that what distinguishes our spiritual family in the Church from any other is not Christianity but a special way of translating into its life Christianity’s message and mission. Thus the Salesian Family reads the Gospel through the eyes of Don Bosco and his distinctive holiness.”* **DA MIHI ANIMAS** (Give me souls, take away the rest).

The Salesian sees the world as God’s dwelling place and desires to understand the immanence of God in the world. So the Salesian spirit is first and foremost a way of looking at life and of integrating the Gospel into life. From that will flow the Salesian style of action and apostolate.

### **The Goals of Formation**

Formation as a Salesian Cooperator should give you tools to continue this reflective process through the whole of life. This reflection should lead to a reference to the sources of our faith: Scripture, Tradition, the Church’s teachings. These sources, as well as reading of the “signs of the times” called for by Vatican II, support the reflection of the Cooperator. At the same time, reflection helps the Cooperator to integrate these sources into his/her life; it deepens the Cooperator’s understanding of his/her faith. This increased understanding is then translated into prayer. Prayer becomes the means whereby all of the things that are learned are integrated into the relationship with God. Prayer leads to action in that the Cooperator wants to spread to others the relationship which he/she has established with God. This action leads to further experiences, reflection, understanding, prayer and then more action in a never-ending cycle of formation.

Salesians have a specific way of reflecting on experience; they reflect on it from the point of view of the young and the poor. Salesians strive in every situation to answer the questions, “How does this situation/action effect young people and those who are abandoned? Does this situation/action proclaim the Kingdom of God? If not, how can I/we make it reflect God’s Kingdom?” *Formation provides the Cooperator the tools to ask and answer these questions and should call the Cooperator to “pray always” as St. Paul admonishes.*

This reflective process leads to an integration of life and faith. The Cooperator realizes that there is no split between what is celebrated at the Eucharist and what is lived throughout the week. Reflection allows the Cooperator to make the Eucharist alive throughout all of life’s experiences. The fundamental call of all Christians is to live the challenge of the Beatitudes in daily life. The Cooperator strives to live this call in a Salesian context. *Formation helps the Cooperator learn to reflect on all of life in light of faith and to do this within the Salesian youth spirituality.*

Prayer is an essential part of the lifestyle of the Cooperator. Through prayer, he/she experiences the joy and optimism which were so characteristic of Don Bosco's approach to the young. Prayer then strengthens the Cooperator to carry this joy and optimism into the whole of life.

Salesian prayer has certain characteristics. These must be part of the formation experience.

- First and foremost, the prayer is youthful. This means that the prayer is joyful.
- Salesian prayer is of a simple kind and has its roots in life. It is open to new forms and styles which help it to meet the needs of daily life.
- Consistent with the experiences of Don Bosco that Mary was always present in Salesian houses and works, Salesian prayer has a Marian dimension which focuses on Mary as the Immaculate Mother of God who helps all Christians to meet and know her Son.

Prayer in the case of the Cooperator brings about a desire to proclaim the Gospel to the young and the poor. While the young face many problems in today's society, there is, at the same time, a great optimism among the young; they have a joy within them that looks for fulfillment in society. All Salesians have gifts that can be used to better the situation of the young and the poor. These gifts are expressed in many ways. Formation should help the Cooperator discover his/her gifts and how they can be used to proclaim the Gospel to those who are in most need. Coming to an understanding of this style of action is an integral part of any Salesian formation program. It involves the active presence of the Salesian in the midst of those with whom the Salesian works.

This movement to action is characteristic of the Salesian Cooperator. Cooperators are animated to apostolate in the same way that all other Salesians are: *by a keen awareness of the signs of the times, particularly as they affect the young and the poor. They also go about doing the apostolate in the mode of the Salesian style of action.*

### **What Formation Is**

“A prudent system of training will ... develop ... human maturity. This will be chiefly attested by a certain stability of character, the ability to make carefully weighed decisions, a sound judgment of events and people. [The candidates] should learn self-control, develop strength of character, and in general value those good qualities which are esteemed by men ... such as sincerity, a certain love of justice, fidelity to one's promises, courtesy in deed, modesty and charity in speech.

“The gospel image of the vine and the branches reveals to us another fundamental aspect of the lay faithful's life and mission: the call to growth and a continual process of maturation, of always bearing much fruit.”

*St. John Paul II, Christifideles Laici, n. 57*

## ***Lesson 1 – A Call to Holiness***

### **Objectives**

1. To understand that holiness is for everyone.
2. To understand that this holiness consists in love, in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.
3. To understand that holiness and love are made real in the fulfillment of a mission in line with God's design.
4. To understand that God is love, and he invites us to respond to his love with love in the call to holiness

*Reference: The Salesian Cooperator, Joseph Aubry, SDB*

Salesian Cooperators have existed in the Church for a hundred years. To be a Cooperator is a practical and up-to-date way of living the love of Christ and of participating in the unique mission of his Church.

If we are to set our examination of this vocation on a basis that is solid and clear, it will help to recall the teaching of the Council, viz., that every baptized Christian has a vocation and that the Holy Spirit invites each and every one to make this vocation real in a way that is both personal and practical.

### **Every Baptized Christian Has a Vocation**

We can never ponder sufficiently these three fundamental truths of the Gospel; the Council has given them special prominence.

**Holiness Is for Everyone** – God “calls” us: this is the very meaning of the word “vocation.” We must not be tempted to think that he calls some to sanctity and allows others to live in mediocrity. What sort of a father would resign himself to the mediocrity of even one of his children? God our Father is infinite and has an immense ambition for each of us: “You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5: 48). Our human vocation is to increase our humanity; our Christian vocation is to grow more and more as sons of God, other Christs. In view of our selfishness and weakness, this is a foolish aim; but the task becomes magnificent when the better part of our nature, hungering for the infinite, refuses to rest in the toiling ascent to find God at the summit. “In the Church everyone is called to holiness.... It is evident that all the faithful of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life.”

**Holiness Consists in Love, in the Footsteps of Christ** – God calls us because he is Absolute Love; he invites us to respond with love to his love (cf. 1 John 4: 11, 16, 19).

Nothing is simpler than the definition of Christian sanctity: it is the practice of the one great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbor” (Matt 22:36, 40), in the footsteps of Jesus, who alone is holy: “This is my commandment, that you love one another *as I have loved you*. Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12, 13). The way of Christian holiness is clearly traced out, but it never comes to an end, for we must never cease loving and imitating Jesus. And since there is one commandment, to love, so there is for Christians one sin, not to love, or not to love more, to halt in the way of filial and fraternal love. In order that the faithful may reach this perfection of charity, they must use their strength according as they have received it, as a gift from Christ. In this way they can follow his image, seeking the will of the Father in all things, devoting themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbor.”

**Holiness and Love Are Made Real in the Fulfillment of a Mission** – This third statement is essential if we wish to get down to practicalities. How was Christ the “Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24) and our greatest example of love for his Father and his brothers? The answer lies in his fidelity to the mission that was given him; in fulfilling to perfection his tasks of Prophet (he revealed to the world God's true name and his design for mankind), King (he labored to establish his kingdom and to draw all men to his divine will) and Priest (his whole life was an oblation of love to his Father, and for his glory he established “the holy nation of the

Covenant”). And in these labors for man’s salvation he expects the help of the Church and all its members, be they ministers or laity.

So when God calls us (our vocation) and asks us to become holy and ever to increase our love, he does not withdraw us from the world or from the Church. On the contrary, he sends us forth (our mission) to be more deeply immersed in them; he asks us to enter their enormous and forceful growth, to be indeed the “cooperators” of his salvation plan (1 Cor 3:9). In practical terms, then, to strive toward holiness and charity we must be builders (each according to his or her own talents) of a Church and a world where God will be loved and our neighbor loved for God’s sake. It is not to be wondered at that the Church should make this statement:

“By its very nature the Christian vocation is also a vocation to the apostolate.... The laity derive the right and duty with respect to the apostolate from their union with Christ their head. Incorporated into Christ’s Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself. They are consecrated into a royal priesthood and a holy people (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-10) in order that they may offer spiritual sacrifices throughout the world.... The law of love, which is the Lord’s greatest commandment, impels all the faithful to promote God’s glory through the spread of his kingdom and to obtain for all men eternal life.”

### **All Have a Vocation, Practical and Historical**

Everyone has the duty of working out his vocation in a way that is personal and practical at this particular moment in the history of the Church and the world. “God calls me to holiness: he calls me this very day. How shall I express my love? What task am I to fulfill? What service can I render God and my brothers and sisters?” This means we have to do some *investigation*, for the practical ways are infinite in number and all valid in themselves.

**Numerous Ways** – We have to consider different methods and our attitude to them. We can attain holiness, love, and service in *different forms of life*: religious life, lay-celibate life, lay-conjugal and family life; and from another point of view, contemplative life, active life, and passive life of suffering (at least at certain times). We are capable of holiness, love, and service in various *careers and responsibilities*: those of the hierarchical priesthood, of the family, of professional, social, and political life; and those related to the more important functions of the Church and the greater requirements of its mission: such are the tasks of atonement, bearing witness, preaching, teaching, education, maintaining and increasing unity, helping those in wretchedness and need.... *Lumen Gentium* explains this at length in one of its most beautiful passages which ends thus: “All of Christ’s faithful, therefore, whatever be the conditions, duties, and circumstances of their lives, will grow in holiness day by day *through these very situations*, if they accept all of them with faith from the hand of their heavenly Father, and if they cooperate with the divine will by showing every man through their earthly activities the love with which God has loved the world.”

**What Choice to Make** – How shall I make my choice? In what form of life and in what responsibility will I find my own vocation? Here again the Council helps us with certain pointers. God gives each of us various indications through “the signs of the times,” i.e., those special situations and appeals made by individuals or groups who call urgently for our help. But above all, and most decisively, God gives us his signs through the natural and supernatural gifts he accords us and through inspirations within the *deep recesses of our hearts*; sometimes these inspirations are strong and urgent, at other times they are a mere whisper. Sometimes they take the form of vivid realizations of Gospel values; a sensitivity to certain needs here and now or in this or that particular place: a deep desire or enthusiasm; an impulse or an act of generosity in the direction of a particular form of love and service. Here is a precious excerpt from the conciliar decree on the apostolate of the laity: “For the exercise of this apostolate, the Holy Spirit gives to the faithful special gifts as well (cf. 1 Cor 12:7), ‘allotting to everyone according as he will’ (1 Cor 12:11). Thus may individuals, ‘according to the gift that each had received, administer it to one another’ and become ‘good stewards of the manifold grace of God’ (1 Pet 4:10) and build up thereby the whole body in charity (cf. Eph. 4:16). From the reception of these charisms or gifts, including those which are less dramatic, there arise *for each believer the right and duty to use them* in the Church and in the world for the good of mankind and for the upbuilding of the Church. In so doing, believers need to enjoy the freedom of the Holy Spirit, who ‘breathes where he wills’ (John 3:8). At the same time, they must act in communion with their brothers in Christ, especially with their pastors.”

So it comes about that a Christian is inspired by the circumstances of his life, the signs of the times, and the Spirit of Christ and thus discovers the call of God to holiness, love, and service in the Church: he becomes an integral part of the great apostolate and spiritual movement set afoot by Don Bosco, and very much alive today; in this is his vocation: to live as a Salesian who is a Cooperator.

*Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter 6, Article 41*

### **A Way to Sanctity**

Salesian Cooperators choose to share the Gospel way traced out by the present *Project of Apostolic Life*.

They commit themselves in a responsible manner to this way which brings one to sanctity: the Association of the Cooperators “is designed to shake many Christians from the languor in which they lie, and to spread the energy of charity.”

The Lord accompanies with the abundance of his grace all those who work in the spirit of the “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*,” doing good to youth and to ordinary folk.

Rome, December 8, 2006

### **Lesson 1: A Way to Sanctity – Questions for Reflection**

1. Do you think that sermons and some Christian literature have sometimes given the idea that holiness was just for priests and religious? Explain.
2. Do you think that in the past it has been sufficiently well understood that the Heavenly Father of our Christian faith is also engaged in the saving of mankind? - and that we cannot claim to be his children in holiness and love without participating in his work of saving souls? Explain.
3. In what ways can you cooperate with the divine will in your love of neighbor?
4. When God calls us and asks us to become holy and increase our love he then sends us forth. In what ways do you see yourself being sent forth as a Salesian Cooperator?

### **Prayer Experience**

Spend time reading the gospel of 1 John 4: 7-21 and reflect on the love of God and neighbor.



## **The Dream of Don Bosco**

From the tender age of nine John Bosco was favored by God with dreams that indicated his future vocation. God revealed to John Bosco that he had been chosen to be a priest and the founder of a religious order. God announced that this order would become famous for its work with the young. This order now bears the name of the Salesians of John Bosco.

### **In His Own Words**

“When I was about nine years old I had a dream that left a profound impression on me for the rest of my life. I dreamed that I was near my home, in a very large playing field where a crowd of children were having fun. Some were laughing, others were playing and not a few were cursing. I was so shocked at their language that I jumped into their midst, swinging wildly and shouting at them to stop. At that moment a Man appeared, nobly attired, with a manly and imposing bearing. He was clad with a white flowing mantle and his face radiated such light that I could not look directly at him. He called me by my name and told me to place myself as leader over those boys, adding the words:

“‘You will have to win these friends of yours not with blows, but with gentleness and kindness. So begin right now to show them that sin is ugly and virtue beautiful.’

“‘Confused and afraid, I replied that I was only a boy and unable to talk to these youngsters about religion. At that moment the fighting, shouting and cursing stopped and the crowd of boys gathered about the Man who was now talking.

“‘Almost unconsciously I asked: ‘But how can you order me to do something that looks so impossible?’

“‘What seems so impossible you must achieve by being obedient and by acquiring knowledge.’

“‘But where, how?’

“‘I will give you a Teacher, under whose guidance you will learn and without whose help all knowledge becomes foolishness.’

“‘But who are you?’

“‘I am the Son of her whom your mother has taught you to greet three times a day.’

“‘My mother told me not to talk to people I don’t know, unless she gives me permission. So, please tell me your name.’

“‘Ask my mother.’

“‘At that moment I saw beside him a Lady of majestic appearance, wearing a beautiful mantle glowing as if bedecked with stars. She saw my confusion mount; so she beckoned me to her. Taking my hand with great kindness she said:

“‘Look!’

“‘I did so. All the children had vanished. In their place I saw many animals: goats, dogs, cats, bears and a variety of others.

“‘This is your field, this is where you must work’, the Lady told me. ‘Make yourself humble, steadfast and strong. And what you will see happen to these animals you will have to do for my children.’

“I looked again; the wild animals had turned into as many lambs, gently gamboling lambs, bleating a welcome for that Man and Lady.

“At this point of my dream I started to cry and begged the Lady to explain what it all meant because I was so utterly confused. She then placed her hand on me.

“‘In due time everything will be clear to you.’

“After she had spoken these words, some noise awoke me; everything had vanished. I was completely bewildered. Somehow my hands still seemed to ache, and my cheeks still stung because of all the fighting. Moreover, my conversation with that Man and Lady so disturbed my mind that I was unable to sleep any longer that night.

“In the morning I could barely wait to tell about my dream. When my brothers heard it, they burst out laughing. I then told my mother and grandmother. Each one who heard it gave it a different interpretation. My brother Joseph said:

“‘You’re going to become a shepherd and take care of goats, sheep and livestock.’

“My mother’s comment was: ‘Who knows? Maybe you will become a priest.’

“Dryly, Anthony muttered: ‘You might become the leader of a gang of robbers.’

“But my very religious, illiterate grandmother had the last word: ‘You mustn’t pay attention to dreams.’

“I felt the same way about it, yet I could never get that dream out of my head. What I am about to relate may give some new insight to it. I never brought up the matter and my relatives gave no importance to it. But in 1858, when I went to Rome to confer with the Pope about the Salesian Congregation, Pius IX asked me to tell him everything that might have even only the slightest bearing on the supernatural. Then for the first time I told him the dream that I had when I was nine. The Pope ordered me to write it in detail for the encouragement of the members of the Congregation, for whose sake I had gone to Rome.”