

Art. 17. Style of Action

Salesian Cooperators live as “good Christians and honest citizens,”¹ sanctifying their existence in everyday life and rooting their action in union with God. They believe in the value of life, of giving freely without seeking return, of fraternity, and of “being neighbor.” They cultivate those attitudes which foster education to the joys of daily life and they communicate this to others.

CONSIDERATIONS

Core themes

1. Style of Action
2. Concreteness, Civility, and Flexibility
3. Living as Good Christians and Honest, Upright Citizens: Civic and Political Commitments and Involvement

Keys to Understanding

A. This article is composed of three sentences: the first elaborates on the roots of the Salesian Cooperator’s action; the other two present some typical characteristics: flexible realism and the courage which is ready for sacrifice. It discusses the action of the Salesian Cooperator or, perhaps better, the active and operative aspects of his life in all fields and, in a particular way, in the field of the apostolate.

Among the ranks of the Saints, Don Bosco is one of those who worked the most for the Kingdom and who most exalted the work carried out for the Kingdom, that is, “*co-operating*” with God in the realization of His plan of salvation. In the seventy-two years of his life, he managed to realize: works for youth (oratories, academic and trade schools, and vocational centers); works for common folk (principally, good literature); missionary works (the organization of eleven Missionary Expeditions); the foundation of three apostolic Groups (in the midst of incomprehension on the part of many) and of one Archconfraternity whose apostolate is prayer and the spread of devotion to Mary Help of Christians; the construction of four churches (of which two are basilicas today); spiritual direction (especially through Confession); work as a writer for the people (about one hundred books and booklets); mediation between the Holy See and the new Italian State; and numerous travels (some very long: Paris, Barcelona). Moreover, he insisted with extraordinary energy about work to his Sons, promising them “bread, work, and Paradise.” “Behold the scandal for a Saint,” notes Don Caviglia: “He says many more times ‘we work,’ rather than ‘we pray.’” On his death bed, he said twice to Don Rua: “I recommend that you tell all the Salesians that they ought to work with zeal and ardor.” This work is *animated* by an uninterrupted and profound interior life. It is not a matter only of work carried out, materially-speaking, but of the work which has a “soul” – pastoral charity – with the knowledge that one is “cooperating” with God the Creator and Redeemer for His Kingdom.

The Salesian Cooperator is convinced of the value of action. He never says: there's nothing to do! The Salesian Cooperator makes himself concretely aware of the needs of the Church, of the world, of the young, of his country, of his city, and of his neighborhood. The invitation to each Salesian Cooperator personally and to the Salesian Cooperators as Association is to “cooperate” with Christ for the success of

¹*Salesian Cooperators: A Practical Way...* Introduction: “To the Reader”.

His plan of salvation. If this is so, then how can he not be “decided, available, and generous” in his various tasks? Or, with a word which is perhaps even more typically Salesian and one already applied to St. Francis de Sales – How can he not be "zealous"? This "zeal" is burning and impassioned activity. It suffices to note that such activity is *motivated and animated* interiorly and “rooted in union with God”, for Whom it is done, in the final analysis. Don Rinaldi found yet once again the perfect summary formula: one must acquire "that untiring activity sanctified by prayer and by union with God, which must be *the* characteristic of the Sons of Don Bosco."

B. This activity has some characteristics which are decidedly Salesian:

1. *Attentiveness to reality*: Anyone who reads the life of Don Bosco realizes that all the works which were successively launched had been decided upon through contact with lived reality, after having recognized some need or some urgency in some time and place, and in which a call from God was discerned: "I have always gone forward as the Lord has inspired me and circumstances have demanded." Thus, the Salesian Cooperator makes himself sensitive to the development of ideas and to the concrete immediacy of persons and events.

2. *Creative initiative*: Don Bosco was "creative" and full of pastoral imagination – not for the pleasure of launching out into new realities – but to test *efficacious* solutions which responded to those needs and urgencies. More than once he had to risk and to brave the criticism and the incomprehension of others. One day, he wrote to a Salesian Cooperator to encourage him in the foundation of a Salesian work: "In those things which turn to the advantage of youth-at-risk or which serve to gain souls to God, *I push ahead with temerity!*"

3. *Functional flexibility*: or, rather, fidelity to life and to its movements more than to certain rules and structures. People and environments evolve, above all, among the young, who are the most sensitive to the future. To do this, two tasks need to be accomplished: 1) the periodic verification of one's personal action so as to evaluate its true efficacy; and 2) the continual re-adapting of it so as to maintain its efficacy according to the rhythms of life.

C. A perspective emerges from this article into which a reflection must be inserted. It was proposed by Vatican Council II in *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 75, where it is stated:

All Christians must be aware of their own specific vocation within the political community. It is for them to give an example by their sense of responsibility and their service of the common good. In this way they are to demonstrate concretely how authority can be compatible with freedom, personal initiative with the solidarity of the whole social organism, and the advantages of unity with fruitful diversity. They must recognize the legitimacy of different opinions with regard to temporal solutions, and respect citizens, who, even as a group, defend their points of view by honest methods... Great care must be taken about civic and political formation, which is of the utmost necessity today for the population as a whole, and especially for youth, so that all citizens can play their part in the life of the political community.

If we take these words of the Council Fathers into serious consideration, then the challenge is to show that in the relationship between faith and life, between the worship we celebrate and the life which unfolds in the course of every day, there is no need to produce rifts within a social context which cannot remain indifferent to the believer, and in which every Christian is called upon to spend himself with all his faith. In such a sense, then, one understands why "each Christian must become aware of his or her special personal vocation within the political community". The *Polis*, the City of Man characterized by a sense of community, is the principal place where the believer in the Salesian Cooperator also emerges. Therefore, it also ought to be the task of the Association at the various levels to take on the responsibility of forming all the Salesian Cooperators, right from the period of initial formation, to this attentiveness to society so that no one should feel extraneous to what happens where he or she lives.

Being realistic, we must say that unfortunately this is not something that can be taken for granted and that one does not always find attention paid to the impact of faith on life and that some discussions are not broached, sometimes simply due to a lack of preparation. People don't speak about them because they don't know what to say or they lack the cultural tools to confront topics such as liberty, democracy, social justice, work, economic life, safeguarding of the environment, and all the other themes so well-presented in the *Compendium of the Social Justice Doctrines of the Church*, without falling into generalities.

The Salesian Cooperator is convinced, then, that greater space must be given in formation initiatives and programs, including the self-initiated and personal ones of individual Cooperators, to the study of the Social Justice Doctrines, as is stated in an explicit way in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, in no. 41, where we find this written about the Social Justice Doctrines: "Its main aim is to interpret these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to guide Christian behavior."

The Word of God and the Social Justice Doctrines of the Church constitute a binomial which offers the content for an authentic formation to socio-political commitment. The Word of God is not always known despite its great relaunching by Vatican Council II through the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*. And yet, in the Bible we find the ethical foundations of social and political commitment on the part of each person. In different contexts and languages, the various Books of the Old and New Testaments demonstrate a personal and social ethic which was assumed by Jesus. The Word made Flesh shows the way of love and invites every man and woman to do as He did. The Commandment of Love finds concrete expression in the way in which Jesus accepts the Cross and dies forgiving His persecutors and taking upon Himself the sins of the world.

Jesus' Gospel is applied to the modern day in the Social Justice Doctrines of the Church which the Popes present to us in historical time so as to confront and respond to the needs which rise up within the social reality. Social Justice Doctrines are to be inserted into the history of Christian thought, which is made up of both men and facts and deeds. In this sense, formative itineraries ought to foresee some moments in which to present earlier witnesses and also some contemporary men and women who have incarnated in their lives the values of the Gospel and have been examples of it. These personages tell us that it is truly possible to live as Christians within society. Some references to the Magisterium are rather opportune here:

In order to achieve their task directed to the Christian animation of the temporal order, in the sense of serving persons and society, the lay faithful are never to relinquish their participation in "public life", that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good. (*Christifideles Laici* no. 42)

Also: "young people are and ought to be encouraged to be active on behalf of the Church as leading characters in evangelization and participants in the renewal of society." (*ibid.*, n. 46). And "An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. ... All Christians, their pastors included, are called to show concern for the building of a better world." (*Evangelii Gaudium* no. 183).

Many are the curricula that can be created for this content. The topics for such curricula are given to us in "grid form" in the index to the *Compendium of the Social Justice Doctrines of the Church*. The principles of putting the person at the center and of a solidarity connected with subsidiarity in the search for the common good find their application in the big questions concerning social life which are treated of in the Compendium: the family, work, economic life, the political community, the international community, the safeguarding of creation, and peace. The content is vast and each curriculum can be adjusted with freedom and begin with those aspects which one feels are the most urgent.

In the proposed curricula, the Salesian Cooperator must be made aware of how the Theological and Cardinal Virtues are involved. The purpose of such formation is to help the one who is studying have those criteria necessary to discern about the times in which he or she lives. The formation of one's conscience remains the true foundational and underlying objective and for this reason we are called to pay particular attention to the method proposed: "Political institutions and various other social groups are also entrusted with helping to raise people's awareness" [forming consciences, lit.]. (*Laudato si* no. 214) It is a matter of becoming aware of what is happening and of "discover[ing] what each of us can do about it." [recognizing what is the contribution that each person can give, literally] (*Laudato si* no. 19).

The Salesian Cooperator will follow the method of experience in seeking a path which opens up the heart and the mind. The purpose is to form persons who are free and able to think about the present time utilizing as their foundational criteria those suggested by the Church, both in the Word and in the Social Justice Doctrines. The goal is to help raise up men and women who are not only knowledgeable but who also desire with a passion to get involved in society and to be protagonists in the "City of Man". This does not mean that all must be directly involved in political life or Political Parties. Some will choose to put themselves at the service of public administration; others, however, will animate the Association from within. Along with this objective, there is another fundamental one: to form persons who cultivate the difficult art of listening and of working with others. In fact, one of the characteristics of postmodernity is precisely that fragmentation that has generated great individualistic lifestyles and excessive protagonism. The *Polis*, on the other hand, is something that needs to be created together, in collaboration. For this reason, forming people to work together is an urgent task of every area of the Church, as well as of the socio-political sphere.

The first great challenges are to introduce the Social Justice Doctrines of the Church in such a way as to render them interesting and to find a way to present them to the young which will rouse their interest in them so that they set about reading the Magisterial texts on their own. Max Weber states: “For nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion.”

In the area of education, the Salesian Cooperator realizes that educational passion is the fundamental characteristic for transmitting values; the same can be said for the socio-political realm: we need people who are passionate so they can transmit, even by the timbre of their voice, their great zeal for what they are recounting. “Passion” also means accepting pain and suffering when we see that things are not as they ought to be, along with a profound desire for them to be improved, and believing that it is possible to build the city more to the measure of Man – where the poor and the least are not forgotten.

A second element emerges from a writing of Norberto Bobbio, from the 1950s: “What matters today is to debunk the enchantment of magic formulae which nourish hope for what will come and put to sleep any urgent searching”. It takes much to comprehend socio-political dynamics. Intellectual honesty and uprightness, which are devoid of pre-fabricated, pat answers, are required of one who accompanies others. The Social Justice Doctrines of the Church themselves point out the paths which can be traveled and the things that can be put into effect in everyday life. We must not be content with superficial answers for we know that the method to follow is that of the farmer who sows the seed and waits patiently while the crop grows and who knows that every attempt to hasten its growth by pulling on it is useless because the result will be precisely the opposite: the shoot will break.

Finally, a third element is evoked by a poem of Padre David Maria Turollo. This Religious and poet of the 1900s expressed himself thus:

I am a wanderer like the wind
Freedom is my temple and my home.
Let others accumulate treasures
That thieves will steal.
For me the joy of singing is enough.
At least the poor man will be a sure friend
Every gypsy a long-time brother
Every lost woman a sign
And every child
The certainty that life...

This poem expresses very well the style of one who continues to place persons at the center of his action and his prayer. It says that accumulating treasures serves for naught and that the Gospel calls us at all levels always to have our eyes focused on the poor. Whoever forms himself for socio-political engagement, if he is a Christian, must always have his gaze fixed on Jesus, following His Way of loving right to the last, of His detachment from material goods, and of His carefulness to look beyond appearances. It would be a sad thing to form politicians who only take care of those who vote for them and of those who "count" while forgetting the poor and the excluded of the Earth.

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from the *Identity of the Salesian Cooperator*

Communicating God’s passion for the life of Man (pp. 53&54)

The God of Israel is a “suffering” God (pathos). In direct contrast with the pagan divinities which remain distant, inaccessible, and indifferent, the God of the Bible is a God Who is near to men. The divine pathos is the attention that God has for the world, the interest that He has for the life of Man. All men of God, particularly the prophets, participate in this movement. They know God’s pathos. They live in “sympathy” – suffering – with the Lord.

We are in sympathy with someone when the same event, whether happy or painful, touches us, wounds us. Parents know the joy and the pain of their children. It is the same thing for the prophets and the martyrs, witnesses. They feel in their flesh that which vibrates in the God’s invisible heart. Prophets do not distribute theories or ideas about God. They speak of an encounter, a covenant. In the prophetic experience, God is never an object but a subject. The life of a prophet or of a witness, martyr, becomes a parable of God’s passion lived out in concrete deeds,

The Living God

A profound sense of life in all its forms cuts across the Bible. The Israelites perceived God as an active force rather than, according to Greek thought, some eternal principle. God is never a problem to be resolved, nor an answer to our questions. On the contrary, He is the one Who asks and the One from Whom all initiatives take their origin. Just as life is a mysterious reality which one cannot grasp, God is Someone who imposes Himself on Man and Who comes to meet him whether or not he is ready. Typical of this is the apparition to the prophet Elijah in which He justifies His “intrusion” with these few words: “As the Lord lives...” (I Kings 17:1)

The expression “the living God” states well the impression that biblical man had of the Lord: that of an active presence, of an intensity of life which cannot be understood except as a person; i.e., as a living

being. It evokes the power and the vitality of one Who “neither slumbers nor sleeps” (Ps. 121:4), “He shall not faint or labor” (Is. 40:28). It is to Him that the Israelite runs when he feels that his life is threatened. And when God Himself wishes to confirm by oath the strength of His threats or His promises, He introduces the statement with an affirmation of His Life: “As I live, says the Lord God, ... in the midst of Babylon he shall die” (Ezech. 17:16), but equally: “As I live, says the Lord God, I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way, and live.” (Ezech. 33:11)

God is living and calls to life. He is the source of life. (Ps. 36:10) The notion of a living God implies, in fact, that God is the One who gives life (Jer. 38:16), and because they see in the Living One the source of life, the faithful consider living in His presence to be the supreme good and they prefer the happiness of living in His temple to any other good. (Ps. 42:3 and 84:3). It is understood, then, that for the prophets, life is a search for the Lord: “Seek the Lord and live.” (Amos 5:6)

God manifests this overflowing life, this incomparable vitality, by exercising His power in Creation and in the great events of our world. God’s design dominates history. It is in the events of history that God is seen at work. Everything is willed by Him: “Who is he who commands something to be done, when the Lord does not command it?” asks the author of Lamentations (3:37). God is the Lord of history and manifests His sovereignty therein. While the people are in tumult and are agitated, while the very believers lose the thread and the meaning of the events, the prophet Isaiah, in a moment of crisis, recalls this sovereignty of God over the course of events (cf. Is. 18). God’s action is always timely. It never comes too early or too late despite how it seems to men (cf. Is. 5:19) because, as the Parable of the Vine testifies, only the Lord knows the right moment. (Is. 28: 23-29)

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CHAPTER III

THE SALESIAN SPIRIT OF THE SALESIAN COOPERATOR

Style of Action

Art 45. Each individual Salesian Cooperator, each Local Center, and the Provincial Council feel responsible for the growth and health of the Association and its fidelity to the mission left to it by Don Bosco. They shall approach their local Salesians and Salesian Sisters to discuss vocation animation both in their local reality and on the Province level. They shall also help broaden the vision so that “vocation animation” be understood in universal terms: helping every young person discover how he/she can best serve God and others and to what state of life he/she is called.

Art 46. In the case that the SDB or the FMA (or both) must withdraw from an area in which there are established Cooperator Centers, the Members of the Association realize that they are responsible to continue the Salesian presence in that area. They will support the Religious in this difficult time, being positive leaven among the others affected by this reality. They will also dialogue with the FMA and/or the SDB, the Local Church, and the Cooperator Provincial Council regarding the continuance of the Salesian mission and the animation of the Cooperators of that area. The FMA and SDB concerned will do their part in this, in a timely fashion, before they withdraw.

See also the Handbook references following Article 6 in this Compendium