

Art. 2. The Salesian Cooperators: A Specific Vocation in the Church

§1. *To commit oneself to be a Salesian Cooperator means to respond to the apostolic Salesian Vocation, gift of the Spirit, taking on a specific way of living the Gospel and participating in the mission of the Church. It is a free choice, defining one's existence.*

§2. *Catholics of whatever cultural or social circumstance can follow this path. They feel called to live their faith life fully involved in each day's concerns, characterized by two attitudes:*

- a) knowing God as Father and the Love which saves; encountering in the Only-begotten Son Jesus Christ the perfect Apostle of the Father; living in intimacy with the Holy Spirit, Who animates the People of God in the world;*
- b) feeling called and sent on a concrete mission: to contribute to the salvation of youth, committing themselves to Don Bosco's very mission to the young and to ordinary folk¹.*

CONSIDERATIONS

Core Theme

The "Salesian" Commitment as Vocation

Keys to Understanding

The adventure of God, Who, through His Presence, His Word, and His Love – whether to one person or to a people – involves Himself in the vicissitudes experienced by man is a Mystery which exceeds our human comprehension. The Church is thus the “Body of Christ” and the “Spouse of the Spirit”; it is an unusual reality, which cannot be comprehended or lived deeply except within the categories and capacities of intuition and of analysis proper and exclusive to faith. Vatican Council II pointed out that the Church is the bearer of a sovereign vocation and an indispensable mission, defining Her more historically as the “People of God”. This is a vision of the Church in which there is the fullness of co-responsibility and of equal dignity for all, without any individualism at any level, and where it is “communarily” faithful in one sole entity differentiated by multiple ministries and charisms.

A. When presenting the Salesian nature of the Cooperators' vocation, the article takes its inspiration from Biblical language close to human experience. In fact, it utilizes, besides the term "vocation", those connected with "mission," "way," and "gift." The Salesian Cooperator vocation, from the standpoint of being a “choice” on the part of our Lord Jesus, is presented as one of the possible "roads" offered to Christians. To understand the argument adequately, it is necessary to recall the significance which Holy Scripture attaches to the keywords above.

In Biblical thought, every *vocation* comes from God, is a fruit of Christ's Grace, and is a gift of the Holy Spirit: it is always God, or Christ, or the Holy Spirit, Who calls. Every vocation presupposes Divine election. God makes the Call heard by the one whom He has chosen. Every vocation has as its objective a mission to be accomplished: God calls to send – to those whom He has chosen and whom He has called,

¹Giovanni Bosco. “Salesian Cooperators: A Practical Way of Contributing to Public Morality and to the Good of Society.” Trans. Arthur J. Lenti, SDB, in *Project of Apostolic Life*. 121. Art. IV. n.d. Web. 3 July 2016. <https://donboscosalesianportal.org/official-family-groups/salesian-cooperators/>

He keeps repeating the same command: "Go!" Every vocation implies a road to be taken. One who has been called to accomplish a mission must recognize and follow the ways of God: the direct way of good, of virtue, of truth, of justice, of love, of peace, of the way that leads to life; not the tortuous way of evil which brings one to perdition and to death. To be a Christian means: to have been chosen by God; to have received a *vocation* born of the Holy Spirit so as to live a life in that same Spirit; to be sent to collaborate in the Divine plan of salvation; and to walk the *way* followed by Christ (the *sequela Christi*). This vocation to the apostolate and to sanctity, common to all Catholics owing to their Baptism and Confirmation, is put into action by following different specific vocations. Vatican Council II speaks expressly of the vocation that is proper to the laity, to Catholic spouses, to Priests, to Religious, and to laity who are members of an Institute approved by the Church. One can love God and his neighbor in different forms of *service* or *commitment* or *ministry*: those proper to the members of the Hierarchy; those tied to family, social, and political life; and those connected with the work of evangelization and of responding to the urgent needs of the historical moment.

In light of the above, it is clear that it is the task of every Catholic to respond to the Divine Call, common to all the Faithful, in a way that is both *concrete and personal*. This means that everyone must say to him or herself with great honesty: "God *calls* me to love Him and my neighbor. He calls *me*, with my natural gifts and with the gifts that I have received from the Holy Spirit. He calls me *here and now, today*, within the context of my personal, family, social, and ecclesial circumstances."

B. What does it mean to have this Salesian vocation to be a Cooperator? Before all else, it means feeling attracted by the Gospel figure of Don Bosco and realizing that his personality, his work, his realistic and dynamic spirit, and his method of education all correspond to certain traits of the Christian experience. It means feeling at home with Don Bosco and desiring to work with him in the Family which continues his mission to the young and to common folk. It means being sensitive to and concerned about the problems of the young and of common people, understanding these problems as perhaps decisive ones in today's world and of the proximal future; and, therefore, sympathizing with the little ones and the poor, wanting to help them in a concrete manner so as to assure their human advancement and Christian salvation. In short, it means feeling a great desire to offer one's personal contribution – whether modest or tremendous – to the realization of Don Bosco's apostolic project while remaining in one's state as a lay Catholic involved in the apostolate, or as a Deacon, or as a Diocesan Priest. To have a Salesian Cooperator vocation means to be convinced that God's Spirit is Love and Freedom. He calls every good Catholic to find his original place among God's People and to complete a particular task within the mission of the Church.

C. The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity of Vatican Council II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, in no. 4, takes up again and gives life to the above:

For the exercise of this apostolate, the Holy Spirit Who sanctifies the people of God through ministry and the sacraments gives the faithful special gifts also (see I Cor. 12:7), 'allotting them to everyone according as He wills' (1 Cor. 12:11) in order that individuals, administering grace to others just as they have received it, may also be 'good stewards of the manifold grace of God' (I Pt. 4:10), to build up the whole body in charity (see Eph. 4:16). From the acceptance of these charisms, including those which are more elementary, there arise for each believer the right and duty to use them in the Church and in the world for the good of men and the building up of the

Church, in the freedom of the Holy Spirit who 'breathes where He wills.'
(Jn. 3:8) This should be done by the laity in communion with their brothers
in Christ, especially with their Pastors.

When stating that the Salesian Cooperator vocation "is a gift", the text of the Statutes does nothing other than apply this Biblical and Conciliar doctrine to the particular case of the Salesian Cooperator. More precisely, the Salesian Cooperator vocation is a charism of the Holy Spirit, Who is Love. It has been given to each individual in view of the human promotion of his or her person, not to lord it over others, but to put oneself at their service in a manner that is most suitable to one's abilities and circumstances. Every personal Call from God is made to the most profound depths of a person's awareness; it changes one's existence, not only in one's external circumstances but in his or her heart. The Christian vocation is a call to follow Christ along a new way which entails *conversion*. Every specific vocation defines the person who welcomes it in a variety of ways, inasmuch as it gives definite goals to his or her apostolic activities and carries with it the assimilation of precise spiritual attitudes, behaviors, and actions. The Salesian vocation to be a Cooperator is *a free choice, which qualifies one's existence*. In effect, it calls forth responsibility from each person; asks for his or her free response; implies his or her participation in Don Bosco's apostolic project and the assimilation of his spirit.

D. The Cooperator Salesian vocation is not offered to a restricted élite, nor is it a gift reserved for a fortunate few. *Catholics of whatever cultural and social condition can follow this path*. When seeking Salesian Cooperators, Don Bosco turned to the vast public of *good Catholics* of his time. His prospects regarding this Institute were not narrow, but rather vast: he foresaw a numerous membership in the Association, open to Catholics belonging to all social strata and one that would spread far and wide. In fact, the Association numbered (and numbers) among its members persons who belonged to the aristocracy, to the middle class, or were common folk from the city or backwoods, professionals, professors and teachers, laborers, farmers, manual laborers, Deacons, and Diocesan Priests. In short, the vocation of the Salesian Cooperator fits every cultural and social situation conceivable, from the most elevated to the most modest. Today there are many valid ways of "working with Don Bosco."

References

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from the *Original Rule of 1876* by St. John Bosco

Article IV. Finally there is the exercise of charity in behalf of children at risk. [This includes] taking them in, instructing them in the faith, introducing them to church services, counseling them when in moral danger and taking them where they may receive religious instruction. These activities are another field for Salesian Cooperators [to exercise their zeal]. Those who cannot personally be engaged in such activities might do so through others, for example by involving a relative or friend. Then one may cooperate by prayer, or by helping financially if needs be. The early Christians used to bring their goods to the Apostles, to be used to help widows and orphans, and for other [charitable] purposes.

from *The Identity of the Salesian Cooperator*

1. Among those who cooperate with God: the “Salesian Cooperator” (*Project of Apostolic Life Statutes*, 2)

At this point we have understood that, among the most eminent of God’s co-workers all along the history of the Church, there are, raised up by God Himself, great Saints, who carry out the task of specialized workers, in an appointed section of God’s “work site”: Benedict, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola,... and also Don Bosco.

Don Bosco’s specialty was that of being, with extraordinary intensity, precisely “the saint of the young.” He perceived, with a unique sensitivity, that the young are not only the “most delicate and precious part of human society” (as he was wont to say), but also that they are an important part of God’s field: “In the mystic field of the human race,” said St. Philip Neri in one of his panegyrics, “there is a great hidden treasure, that is to say, the souls of so many young people, who are, for the most part, innocent, and often corrupted without their knowing it.” (*Memorie Biografiche* – MB – IX, p. 217) Their fragility, vulnerability, and insecurity recommends them in a very special way to the fatherly love of God, to the saving love of Christ the Good Shepherd, and to the maternal love of Mary and of the Church. The educative emergency of the problem of youth in society and in the contemporary Church is certainly one of the “signs of the times,” in which a special saving will of God is manifest.

Now Don Bosco felt he was sent by God and by Mary for two things: first, to dedicate his entire life to the salvation and integral development of adolescents and the young, above all the poor, by means of a typical method of education and typical educational institutions; second, to raise up numerous apostolic forces and to found a Salesian Family which would also be dedicated to the young in time and in space: a Family which included not only Religious men and women, but also a group of laity who were

co-responsible in the mission and in spirit: the Salesian Cooperators, co-workers of God, of Don Bosco, of their brothers and sisters in the entire Family.

This, therefore, is the vocation of the Salesian Cooperator: to be a “co-worker of God” in the style of Don Bosco, in a lay and secular form, in the Salesian Family and in the Church.

from *Discerning the Call 2015*

Please see *Lesson 2 – A True Vocation (Session 1)*

from the “Address of the Rector Major Pascual Chavez to the Fourth World Congress of the Salesian Cooperators”

The Project of Apostolic Life.

Coming directly now to the subject which is that of the *Project of Apostolic Life*, I would presume to say that it is not in the first place a project that we have thought up, as though we ourselves were proposing our own way of carrying out the Salesian apostolate, but it is the heartfelt and grateful taking up of God's plan to put into effect His work of Salvation. Making it our own and taking it up fervently, we become God's Cooperators and companions of Jesus, at the school of St. John Bosco. This point of view is not insignificant since it means taking as our living Rule the person of Jesus Himself and His Gospel. Only in this way does the Project of Apostolic Life of an Association of the lay faithful - that of the Salesian Cooperators - become a Salesian way of reading the Gospel. Its validity is confirmed by the official recognition of the Holy See, which declares the evangelical authenticity of the text and therefore considers it a way that leads to holiness for those who take it up and live it as a "Rule of Life" since it starts from love and leads to love. In addition, it is a way of being faithful to Don Bosco, to his charism, and to his mission. The PAL has a three-fold aim: to ensure the identity of the Association through a dynamic fidelity, one which always refers back to the original intuition and motivation of the Founder and at the same time tries to remain up-to-date according to the changing historical circumstances; to strengthen the unity of its members in the variety of their backgrounds, ages, formation, sensitivities, languages, and cultures, but united by Love, by Faith, by Hope and by a common charism and a shared project; and promoting their vitality bearing in mind that behind every vocation there is always a mission to be carried out, in the name of the Church and on behalf of the people, so that personal growth and the development of the Association become the criteria for authenticity and for assessment.

from *Christifideles Laici*

You Go Into My Vineyard Too

2. "And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and to them he said, "You go into the vineyard too" (*Mt 20:3-4*).

From that distant day the call of the Lord Jesus "You go into my vineyard too" never fails to resound in the course of history: it is addressed to every person who comes into this world.

“And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too’ (MT 20:3-4).

“And you go too”. The call is a concern not only of pastors, clergy and men and women religions. The call is addressed to everyone – lay people as well are personally called by the Lord, from whom they received a mission on behalf of the Church and the world. In preaching to the people of Saint Gregory the Great recalls this fact and comments on the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. “Keep watch over your manner of life, dear people, and make sure that you are indeed the Lord’s labourers. Each person should take into account what he does and consider if he is labouring in the vineyard of the Lord.

The Life of Holiness in the World

17. The vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their *involvement in temporal affairs* and in their *participation in earthly activities*. Once again the apostle admonishes us: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (*Col 3:17*). Applying the apostle's words to the lay faithful, the Council categorically affirms: "Neither family concerns nor other secular affairs should be excluded from their religious programme of life. Likewise the Synod Fathers have said: "The unity of life of the lay faithful is of the greatest importance: indeed they must be sanctified in everyday professional and social life. Therefore, to respond to their vocation, the lay faithful must see their daily activities as an occasion to join themselves to God, fulfill his will, serve other people and lead them to communion with God in Christ".

The vocation to holiness must be recognized and lived by the lay faithful, first of all as an undeniable and demanding obligation and as a shining example of the infinite love of the Father that has regenerated them in his own life of holiness. Such a vocation, then, ought to be called an *essential and inseparable element of the new life of Baptism*, and therefore an element which determines their dignity. At the same time the vocation to holiness is *intimately connected to mission* and to the responsibility entrusted to the lay faithful in the Church and in the world. In fact, that same holiness which is derived simply from their participation in the Church's holiness, represents their first and fundamental contribution to the building of the Church herself, who is the "Communion of Saints". The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world's great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring labourers who work in the Lord's vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God's grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history.

Holiness, then, must be called a fundamental presupposition and an irreplaceable condition for everyone in fulfilling the mission of salvation within the Church. The Church's holiness is the hidden source and the infallible measure of the works of the apostolate and of the missionary effort. Only in the measure that the Church, Christ's Spouse, is loved by him and she, in turn, loves him, does she become a mother fruitful in the Spirit.

Again we take up the image from the gospel: the fruitfulness and the growth of the branches depends on their remaining united to the vine. "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (*Jn 15:4-5*).

It is appropriate to recall here the solemn proclamation of beatification and canonization of lay men and women which took place during the month of the Synod. The entire People of God, and the lay faithful in particular, can find at this moment new models of holiness and new witnesses of heroic virtue lived in the ordinary everyday circumstances of human existence. The Synod Fathers have said: "Particular Churches especially should be attentive to recognizing among their members the younger men and women of those Churches who have given witness to holiness in such conditions (everyday secular conditions and the conjugal state) and who can be an example for others, so that, if the case calls for it, they (the Churches) might propose them to be beatified and canonized.

At the end of these reflections intended to define the lay faithful's position in the Church, the celebrated admonition of Saint Leo the Great comes to mind: "Acknowledge, O Christian, your dignity!" Saint Maximus, Bishop of Turin, in addressing those who had received the holy anointing of Baptism, repeats the same sentiments: "Ponder the honor that has made you sharers in this mystery!". All the baptized are invited to hear once again the words of Saint Augustine: "Let us rejoice and give thanks: we have not only become Christians, but Christ himself... Stand in awe and rejoice: We have become Christ".

The dignity as a Christian, the source of equality for all members of the Church, guarantees and fosters the spirit of *communion* and fellowship, and, at the same time, becomes the hidden dynamic force in the lay faithful's apostolate and mission. It is a *dignity*, however, *which brings demands*, the dignity of labourers called by the Lord to work in his vineyard: "Upon all the lay faithful, then, rests the exalted duty of working to assure that each day the divine plan of salvation is further extended to every person, of every era, in every part of the earth".

The Forms of Participation in the Life of the Church

28. The lay faithful together with the clergy and women and men religious, make up the one People of God and the Body of Christ.

Being "members" of the Church takes nothing away from the fact that each Christian as an individual is "unique and irrepeatable". On the contrary, this belonging guarantees and fosters the profound sense of that uniqueness and irrepeatability, in so far as these very qualities are the source of variety and richness for the whole Church. Therefore, God calls the individual in Jesus Christ, each one personally by name. In this sense, the Lord's words "You go into my vineyard too", directed to the Church as a whole, come specially addressed to each member individually.

Because of each member's unique and irrepeatable character, that is, one's identity and actions as a person, each individual is placed at the service of the growth of the ecclesial community while, at the same time, singularly receiving and sharing in the common richness of all the Church. This is the "Communion of Saints" which we profess in the Creed. *The good of all becomes the good of each one and the good of each one becomes the good of all*. "In the Holy Church", writes Saint Gregory the Great, "all are nourished by each one and each one is nourished by all".

Individual Forms of Participation

Above all, each member of the lay faithful should always be *fully aware of being a "member of the Church"* yet entrusted with a unique task which cannot be done by another and which is to be fulfilled for the good of all. From this perspective the Council's insistence on the *absolute necessity of an apostolate exercised by the individual* takes on its full meaning: "The apostolate exercised by the individual – which flows abundantly from a truly Christian life (cf. Jn. 4:11) – is the origin and condition of the whole lay apostolate, even in its organized expression, and admits no substitute. Regardless of circumstance, all lay persons (including those who have no opportunity or possibility for collaboration in associations) are called to this type of apostolate and obliged to engage in it. Such an apostolate is useful at all times and places, but in certain circumstances it is the only one available and feasible".

In the apostolate exercised by the individual, great riches are waiting to be discovered through an intensification of the missionary effort of each of the lay faithful. Such an individual form of apostolate can contribute greatly to a *more extensive* spreading of the Gospel, indeed it can reach as many places as there are daily lives of individual members of the lay faithful. Furthermore, the spread of the gospel will be *continual*, since a person's life and faith will be one. Likewise the spread of the gospel will be particularly *incisive*, because in sharing fully in the unique conditions of the life, work, difficulties and hopes of their sisters and brothers, the lay faithful will be able to reach the hearts of their neighbors, friends, and colleagues, opening them to a full sense of human existence, that is, to communion with God and with all people.

from A Prophecy's Journey

2. An Idea's Journey Don Giuseppe Buccellato, SDB

In every age, the union of good people has been deemed necessary so as to help each other *in doing good and in keeping far from evil (FROM THE RULE OF 1876)*.

Pius IX's Brief of May 9, 1876, would mark both the point of arrival and that of beginning anew in the history of the Salesian Cooperators; but by what paths and what intermediate stages did the awareness of giving life to a separate Association (which had been thought of as a living and active part of the Society of St. Francis de Sales) mature in Don Bosco?

Actually, we can state that the birth of the idea of an association of laity is antecedent in Don Bosco to the idea of founding a Religious Congregation.

The first plan, which the Chronicles record under the name of the "Provisory Pious Union of St. Francis de Sales", dates back, in fact, to 1850. It is not surprising that an element of mystery surrounded this first plan for a lay association, given that it was the time of the secret societies. The objective, in perfect harmony with the purposes of Diessbach's and Lanteri's lay associations, was that of "keeping impiety from progressing further." (*Biographical Memoirs*, vol. IV, p. 120) This concerned the abuse on the part of the press in religious matters. In fact, in 1848, Charles Albert, King of Sardegna, had issued an edict on "Religious Liberty," which was seen as a threat in many Catholic environments.

The tone of this fundamental document is rather bellicose; Don Bosco's name does not even appear, probably for reasons of prudence. The Salesian Fr. Morand Wirth does not hesitate in defining this "Pious Union," composed of seven men, "a type of Catholic masonry." The document wishes:

May the Provisory Pious Society be the start of a huge consortium, which, with the contribution of all its members and by all other licit, legal, and morally correct means which can be found and may it attend to all those works of moral, material, and instructional beneficence which shall be judged the most apt and expeditious in impeding impiety from making further progress and, if possible, in uprooting it from there where it has already planted itself.

In this "Provisory Pious Union", one of the first historians of the Society, Don Eugenio Ceria, foresees the remote preparation for the future Union of Cooperators.

From the "Pious Union" to the Chapter on the "Extern Members"

In the 1850s, the future Salesian Society began to take shape. In Don Bosco's mind, the origins of the Society of St. Francis de Sales are understood as a gradual evolution whose beginning coincides, practically, with some decisive events of his life and, in particular, as we know, with the catechesis begun in a place adjacent to the sacristy of the Church of St. Francis of Assisi which is connected to the Convitto Ecclesiastico in Torino.

Don Bosco's repeated allusions to 1841's being the year in which the Society takes its beginning makes us understand that, in his mind, the movement to which he gave life, and which brings together both clergy and laity, has its own autonomous life and its own clear identity, even before being "institutionalized" and regulated by a Constitutional statement.

When, around 1858, Don Bosco wrote in his first draft of the Constitutions that "the purpose of this Congregation is to unite its members together – Priests, Clerics, and even laity – for the purpose of perfecting themselves by imitating, as much as possible, the virtues of our Divine Savior", he did not make any effort to come up with some theoretical project, but limited himself to "painting a picture" of what already existed, of the reality which was already being lived for seventeen years - both inside and around him.

The fact remains, however, that those years marked, in an obvious way, the beginning of that process of institutionalization which would give life to the Salesian Congregation and the Cooperator Association, through a fecund, if not always easy, dialogue with the ecclesiastical authorities. On the evening of December 18, 1859, in Don Bosco's room at the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, a few of his "boys" gathered together for the purpose of "promoting and preserving the spirit of true charity which is necessary for the work of the Oratories for the abandoned and at-risk youth". In reality, in the history of

the origins, this date was not celebrated as the beginning of the Work and of the founding of the Salesians for Don Bosco loved to date it to the year of that first catechism.

When Don Bosco, in the following year, prepared a draft of the Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales to submit to the Archbishop of Torino, Luigi Fransoni, a chapter of four articles was dedicated to the laity who were, in all effects, part of the Society even while living in their own home and not being tied by vows. The chapter on these "externs" would be enhanced four years later by a fifth article. This text would obtain a first seal of approval with the Decretum Laudis. (Decree of Praise - Pontifical decree whereby a Diocesan Congregation is considered to have reached a point of development where it is granted to become a Congregation of Pontifical Right)

On account of the great historical interest and importance, we place here these articles in their entirety, as written in the 1864 edition of the Constitutions:

1. Whatever person, even while living in the world, in his own home, in the heart of his own family, can belong to our Society.
2. He does not make any vow but will seek to put into practice that part of the Rule which is compatible with his age, state, and condition as is possible or to promote catechism for poor children, and see to the spread of good literature; and to work so that tridua, novenas, spiritual exercises and other such works of charity that will be especially directed to the spiritual good of the young and of common folk.
3. In order to participate in the spiritual benefits of the Society, it is necessary that he make at least a promise to the Rector to employ himself in those things which he will deem as giving greater glory to God.
4. Said promise, however, will not bind him under any pain of sin, not even venial.
5. Any member of the Society, who for a reasonable motive, should leave from it, shall be considered an "extern member" and can still participate in the spiritual benefits of the entire Society, provided he practice that part of the Rule prescribed for the externs.

Something analogous can be found in Pio Brunone Lanteri's Congregation of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, as we have already stated, as well as in the figures of the "affiliates" and of the "enrolled," as described in the Constitutions of the Institute of Charity of Antonio Rosmini.

The Oppositions of the Congregation for Religious

The text of the Constitutions which Don Bosco presented in Rome in 1864 would not be approved by the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, one reason being precisely because of the presence of this chapter on "extern members."

In fact, in his report dated April 6, 1864, the Consultor of the Congregation would write the following in its regard: "I think it would be a good thing to strike all those articles... which present a

novelty in the affiliation of 'external persons' to the Institute, and a true danger, given the times we live in and those places which are little secure." The observations of Pro-secretary Svegliati are along the same lines: "You cannot permit persons extraneous to the Pious Institute to be enrolled by affiliation."

Don Bosco defended himself. He tried to save "his" idea. In his response to the Consultors, he made reference to the history of other ancient Orders and to the tertiaries who would promote the life of their Institute in the world. "If this chapter cannot be annexed to the Constitutions," he stated, "may it at least be placed at the end and approved as an appendix to the corrected text of the Constitutions." He made some changes, returning, in substance, to the 1860 text and submitted it all again to the Roman authorities in 1873, placing the chapter on the externs in an appendix to the corrected text.

But it was useless. In order to obtain a definitive approval of the Constitutions in 1874, he had to resign himself to suppress the contested articles.

Here begins the road which will bring him, two years later, to the founding of the Association of the Salesian Cooperators which, because of all that has been said, was born precisely due to the failure of the Founder's original plan. The Church of Rome was not ready to understand or to approve that which today, in the light of the victories made by Vatican Council II, has become a true and recognized reality in the Statutes of some new Religious Institutes.

Laiety and clergy together for the salvation of the young...

Towards a Definitive Plan for an Association of Lay Salesians

After the definitive suppression of the chapter on the "externs," Don Bosco compiled, date unknown, a text entitled Associates of the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales. This text repeats, in substance, the contents of the suppressed chapter, notably developing them. For the first time one spoke of a Union, or distinct Association, even if it had strict ties to the Society. An excerpt from the original manuscript reveals to us the purposes of this first try at an Association:

How many would withdraw themselves most willingly from the world to avoid the perils of perdition and to enjoy peace of heart and, thus, spend their life in solitude, in the charity of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. But not all are called to that state of life. Many, because of age, or condition, or health, and very many for the lack of a vocation, are absolutely impeded from it. It is to satisfy this general desire that the Pious Association of St. Francis de Sales is proposed.

Its purpose is two-fold:

1° To propose a means of perfection to all those who are reasonably impeded from entering into the cloister of some Religious Institute.

2° To participate in the works of piety and of Religion which the members of the Salesian Congregation accomplish in public and in private, in whatever way for the greater glory of God and the benefit of souls. These two benefits can easily be obtained by observing the rules of this Congregation, in those parts which are compatible with each person's state in life.

Another motive, perhaps more essential than the others, is added here: the need to unite in doing good. It is a fact that secular individuals form associations for their temporal affairs; they get together to spread bad literature and, in order to spread evil maxims in the world, they form an association to propagate erroneous teachings and to put forth false principles to unwary youth. And they succeed marvelously! Shall the Catholics remain idle or separate from one another in such a way that their works be paralyzed by the bad? May it never be so! Let us all unite under the Rules of the Salesian Congregation; let us become one heart and one soul with the "extern members" and be true brothers (confreres). Let the good of one be the good of all and the evil of one pushed away as evil to all.

To propose a way of perfection... to participate in works of piety... Let it not surprise us that the spiritual and ascetical purposes behind this first plan are the same as those clearly proposed to the entire spiritual movement which drew its origin from Don Bosco. We are speaking of building a radical Christian life and, in more immediate and explicit terms, of becoming saints by sharing God's concerns for His People.

These texts show us the heart and the mind of the Founder.

Three printed documents, published, respectively, in 1874, 1875, and 1876, will follow this first manuscript:

*The first bears the title of Christian Union and precedes the official approval of the Salesian Congregation of April 3, 1874. Inserted for the first time is a formula for acceptance. (Biographical Memoirs, vol. X, pp. 565-567 – application and pledge omitted in the English edition)

**The second appears under the new title of Association for Good Works. Therein it is affirmed:

This [Association] can be considered as a kind of Third Order like those of ancient Orders, with the difference that, in those older ones, Christian perfection was based on the exercise of piety; here, the principal purpose is the exercise of charity towards one's neighbor, and, especially, towards at-risk youth. This constitutes the particular purpose of the Association. [*Memorie Biografiche*, vol. XI, pp. 536-540 (omitted in the English edition)]

This is an interesting text because apostolic charity emerges here with greater clarity as the essential slant of one's own personal path to perfection.

***The third document comes to light in 1876, with a title destined to last: Salesian Cooperators: A Practical Way of Contributing to Public Morality and to the Good of Civil Society. In this year, another two amplified volumes appeared which also included, besides an introduction by Don Bosco, Pius IX's

Brief, dated May 9, 1876, approving the Association. [Memorie Biografiche, vol. XI, pp. 540-545 (omitted in the English edition)]

The Rule of 1876

A booklet of sixteen pages, therefore, was printed in 1876 in the Salesian print shop in Torino. [This was a review copy for Archbishop Gastaldi; copies for distribution were actually printed in Liguria in 1876. – translator's note] It constitutes the first true Rule of the Association. It has eight "titles" or paragraphs and a word of advice and concludes with a formula for the Promise.

"Weak forces, when united, become strong and if a little cord taken by itself is easily broken, a three-ply one is rather difficult to break. This is what secular people are wont to do in their worldly affairs. Ought the children of the light be less prudent than the children of darkness?"

The Association is a sign of the times, the reflection of an idea constantly present in the first plans, which mark the rise of the "Catholic Movement" in Italy. After the apparent failure of the Church of Rome on the path which ended in the unification of Italy, Don Bosco understood the importance of uniting Catholics to confront the forces of anticlerical liberalism. The second paragraph confirms the fact that the Salesian Congregation is the bond of union for the Association. In the third, the principal purpose of the Salesian Cooperators is articulated. Don Bosco writes:

It is to do good to one's self through a tenor of life, as much as is possible, similar to that which is lived in the common life [in Religious Communities]. Many would enter willingly into a cloister but due to age, health, or condition cannot – and very many others due to the lack of opportunity are absolutely impeded from doing so. These, even in the midst of their ordinary occupations, while living in their family, can live 'as if in truth they were living in a Congregation.

In the fourth paragraph are listed: practical means, apostolic characteristics, and the mission. The ones proposed for the Association are the same which Don Bosco specified as those of the Congregation "to which it is intended to associate." The fact that the first task which is assigned to the Members is to "foster and promote novenas, tridua, spiritual exercises, and catechism" can be surprising. In reality, here, as elsewhere, Don Bosco puts the commitment to evangelization in first place and considers it of primary importance - to the point of identifying it with the very nature of the Congregation. "Our society," he wrote elsewhere, "was a simple catechism at its beginning."

The second mandate which he gave to the Cooperators was to care for vocations to the ecclesiastical state; the third was to spread good literature; and, finally, "charity to at-risk children, by gathering them, instructing them in the Faith, steering them to the sacred functions, counseling them in dangers, and bringing them where they can be instructed in Religion." Prayer and making available one's personal material goods, as the first Christians did, are also ways to cooperate.

Following a paragraph dedicated to the governance of the Association, where the authority of the Rector Major is confirmed, in the sixth paragraph, reference is made to the relationships with the members of the Society of St. Francis de Sales. "These ought to consider the Salesian Cooperators as so many brothers [and sisters] in Jesus Christ and direct themselves to them every time their work can help in things which are for the greater glory of God and the benefit of souls." This article, in reality, should have been placed in the Salesian Constitutions, more than in the Rule of the Salesian Cooperators, given that it was an exhortation made to the Confreres.

After having listed the spiritual benefits which the members of the Association share in, Don Bosco concluded with a paragraph on the religious practices and the style of life which must characterize the Cooperators. "So that their life can be in some way similar to that of one who lives in a Religious Community," Don Bosco courageously states, "modesty in dress, frugality in eating, simplicity in decorating one's home, reserve in discourse, and the exact fulfillment of the duties proper to one's state in life are recommended to them." The annual practice of the spiritual exercises, frequenting the Sacraments, and the recitation of the rosary represent a sure way to nourish the flame of one's own vocation.

Journeying Forward

The development of the Association in those first years is difficult to evaluate in numerical terms. Don Eugenio Ceria writes about this in 1952 in his *The Salesian Cooperators: A Bit of History*:

The Salesian tree, having sprouted from humble roots, grew and became a 'robust trunk' bearing three large branches: the Society of St. Francis de Sales, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and the Pious Union of the Salesian Cooperators. The Salesians and the Sisters carry on a parallel action, which is shared, systematic, public, and progressive and, therefore, everyone sees or can see them. This is not so with the Salesian Cooperators. They act individually and rarely in common, so much so that outside their own offices, which keep the general and particular statistics up-to-date, no one would know how to say how many there are or what they are and what the Associates really do.

The Rule of 1876, which gathered the fruits of the previous experiences and of the chapter on the externs proposes an ideal of courageous and radical life which flanks that of Religious life. To the Salesian Cooperators, in fact, a way of "Christian perfection" is proposed through the "exercise of charity to one's neighbor and especially to youth at-risk."

The material aspect and that of making donations, which are also listed among the ways to cooperate, are not absent, but are considered and take their meaning from the Biblical reference to the Acts of the Apostles. It is possible that, in some way after the Founder's death, the confusion between benefactor and Cooperator harmed the identity of the Association; but we can state that this certainly was not Don Bosco's thought, which he continued to express throughout his entire life when presenting to the Cooperators the characteristic traits of an ideal Christian with a clear identity in all the many meetings and Conferences held in Italy and elsewhere.