

A Brief History of the Salesian Cooperators by Members of the World Consulting Body

INTRODUCTION

We offer you here a series of readings and topics we believe are very useful for the formation of the Salesian Cooperator.

We present the history of the foundation of the Association and the different problems that arose during this process until we reach what we have called the new portrait of the Salesian Cooperator. The historical perspective is fundamental to create a solid identity in the new Cooperator. Then we present the fundamental aspects of the Cooperator's life, ie. spirituality, ministry, apostolic life, etc. We finish touching a particular aspect: that of being a member of a public association of the faithful.

Why these topics?

1. Regarding the Cooperator Aspirant

- We believe that if the Salesian Cooperator candidate comes in contact with the history, the identity, the aspect of belonging and the main characteristics of the Cooperator's life, he will be able to understand easily the beauty and dignity of this vocation and the purpose for which the Association was founded. To a better understanding will correspond a greater apostolic commitment and participation in the life and mission of the Association.
- It has often been repeated: we can't love what we don't know. We won't have a loving and dynamic association if we don't know our own history. To ignore our history is to ignore our identity, is to feel uprooted. This is the reason why in the Association we lack sense of belonging.
- We believe the Cooperator should have profound roots. This set of themes will be like a seed which we hope will get deep roots. The candidate is in a stage of openness and everything sinks deeply in his soul. When deeply rooted, the candidate will feel motivated to pass to the stage of the initial formation to deepen his formation.

2. Regarding the "formation facilitator"

Our experience has shown that many persons in charge of formation are often not up-to date with some of these fundamental topics and therefore they are not in the position of properly guiding Cooperator candidates in their formation. We'd like to encourage everyone to pay attention to them and reflect on them, at least as a means of personal formation. But we wish to clarify that it is not compulsory to include all these themes in a single program. We hope, nevertheless, they will be of great use for all those responsible for formation.

Best wishes for a fruitful work!

DON BOSCO THINKS ABOUT AND FOUNDS THE SALESIAN COOPERATORS

A Founder not well known

The story of the Cooperators, though presented only in the main lines, I feel should be made because Don Bosco is still a founder not well known. An example of this is this small very significant fact. In the magnificent volume “Messale della Settimana” (Weekly Missal), published by Desclée in 1973, the priest Pierre Jounel dedicates some delightful notes to each saint. This is the way he presents Don Bosco on January 31:

“Don Bosco’s strong personality acquires still greater relevance when we place it within the bigger picture of Piedmontese holiness of the 19th century.

Turin was in the last century, under the house of Savoy and Cavour, up in arms preparing to invade the Papal States and to bring about Italian unity. The city might have appeared to the eyes of many Catholics as the cave of Devil. In God’s eyes it was the city of saints. Four of its priests, Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo (+ 1842), Giuseppe Cafasso (+ 1860, Giovanni Bosco (+ 1888) and Leonardo Murialdo (+ 1900) have in fact shined there with a kind of modern holiness. All of them were concerned with the young working class, thrown into the furnace of the massive rising industry without any preparation or protection. Giovanni (John) Bosco is the most famous of the four. Born an educator, a matchless organizer, a prolific writer, a sensitive man to every detail, a visionary, a man with such confidence in the Providence that took him beyond the limits of prudence and common sense, he touched with his life the sentiment of the people. When he died, two religious families, the Salesian Society and the Congregation (Daughters) of Mary Help of Christians, had already begun to expand his spirit into “Tierra del Fuego” (Patagonia, Argentina). However his biggest delight was certainly that of having seen the blossoming of holiness among his own young people, like Dominic Savio” (pp. 1448-49).

A magnificent synthesis ... nonetheless it has left a huge vacuum: it does not mention the third foundation, I’m sorry, my mistake, this is a severe vacuum: it does not mention the first foundation, that of the Salesian Cooperators.

If we only look superficially at the historical data we believe that Don Bosco founded in succession the Salesians in 1859, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in 1872 and the Cooperators in 1876. However 1876 is the date of the canonical foundation of the Cooperators and of the publication of their Regulations. As a matter of fact, they were born first, giving them a very flexible organization. Where and when? In many of his writings, specially in the one entitled “Cooperatori Salesiani” (1877), Don Bosco himself answers: “The history of the Cooperators goes back to in 1841 when I begun to gather young people, left abandoned in the city of Turin” (MB XI 84). For Don Bosco, the Salesian work and the Cooperators started at the same time.

Don Bosco promotes and gathers in Turin the “Salesian” collaborators of his “oratory” work (1841-1859)

A. Three basic convictions

In effect, what we call “Salesian Family” was born from the strong and realistic belief and from the burning pastoral charity of a Turin priest sent by God, inspired by his Spirit, guided by Mary: Don Bosco. Don Bosco created it in his mind, developed it, and launched it little by little at the service of the young and the poor classes, obeying to three profound convictions:

1. The uncountable number of young people in need of help and of a concrete and integral salvation that required the intervention of extremely large number of hands with varied and complementary qualities and capacities.
2. These helping hands were to be sought everywhere, from all social classes, from all ecclesial sectors: priests, lay people, men and women, wealthy and poor (Don Bosco received the grace of understanding that he could and should appeal to the competence of lay people).
3. These helping hands, in order to be effective, should try to avoid activities in isolation; they should unite, sharing the same ideal, the same spirit, the same method, collaborating with each other as much as possible and fraternally sustaining each other. This required a minimum of a communication structure and the sense of a healthy apostolic discipline. Don Bosco never tired of repeating: “Union is strength”.

B. Indispensable helpers for the good functioning of the three Oratories in Turin: Valdocco (1844), Porta Nuova (1847) and Vanchiglia (1849).

Don Bosco founded the Society of Salesian religious only in December 1859. From 1841 to 1859, that is eighteen years, how did he manage to maintain the functioning of his three Oratories in Turin where he gathered every Sunday hundreds of young boys that needed everything, and his boarding house in Valdocco that from 1847 received as boarders apprentices and students?

The answer is simple. Don Bosco himself writes: “Many convinced priests and lay faithful associated with Don Bosco, to help him in the development of his important ministry” (History of the Salesian Cooperators, Catholic Library 1877).

The priests collaborated with their priestly services. Lay people, the majority of the upper classes (they had time and resources), taught Catechism, helped the young boys in the Church and during the recreational breaks. They made sure that the boys of the evening classes were supplied with material goods, helped them to get a job in the city, and visited them at their workplaces during the week. There were also women: they looked after the laundry, the boy’s clothing (there was much need!), they begun the work of educating those rough boys to good behaviour. Don Bosco was pleased to acknowledge the generosity, the spirit of sacrifice, enthusiasm, holy rivalry, the continuity with which these people offered their services.

He quotes the entire list of names (some famous, others not) (his prodigious memory and his gratitude did allow him to forget anyone). It is important to remember at least a few: the theologian Borel, adviser, friend, support, who kept Valdocco functioning during four months while Don Bosco was recovering from illness in 1846; the members of the family of Count De Maistre; a fancy goods merchant, Giuseppe Gagliardi, who dedicated all his free time and all his savings to the young boys at Valdocco; Mrs. Margaret Gastaldi, mother of the future archbishop of Turin; we should not forget Mamma Margaret, the most committed woman Cooperator, continuously helping in the work of his son during ten years (1846-1856) and giving her irreplaceable contribution to the formation of the Salesian spirit and system.

C. Gathered around Don Bosco, in the service of the “Oratory activities” in Turin (1850-1852)

Don Bosco, very soon, thought that if he were able to form an structured association with his collaborators, their effectiveness would be greater and the continuity of their apostolic work would be better secured. Without any doubt, experience and his mysterious dreams were leading him, little by little, to the conviction that the future of his work would be secured if he had collaborators entirely available, and that he would have to get them from among his own young boys. However this did not lead him to renounce to the project of organizing all those persons of good will.

The year 1850 is marked from this point of view by two interesting facts. First, in a request to Pope Pious IX for special spiritual favours, “Don Bosco speaks for the first time of the “Congregation of St Francis of Sales” (“Congregation” here is to be taken in the wider sense of association). Under this name, as explained by Don Lemoyne, were included all those persons who were directing the Oratories, priests and lay people, that is, all those persons who were giving support and help to young people who attended the Oratories. “Most Holy Father, John Bosco, a priest from Turin, informs Your Holiness that a congregation has been established in this city under the protection of St Francis of Sales, of which I am the director, and that has no other aim than that of educating abandoned youth in religion and piety” (BM IV 93; cf XI 85). What was the exact organization of this association? It is not easy to guess. In fact, Don Bosco was interpreting in a vary wide way his real juridical dimension.

The other fact is not less interesting, because it shows that Don Bosco was thinking in something bigger than just the welfare of the youth. On the 17th of November 1850, he gathered seven lay convinced Catholics, and proposed to them the creation of a “Provisional Pious Union” under the protection of St Francis of Sales. Its aim was the promotion of “all forms of charity works” geared to “stop the progress of ungodliness, and to eradicate it where it had already taken roots (MB IV 171-175). The difficult political environment prevented this project to become a reality, but this shows how Don Bosco was already preoccupied with the idea of organizing the apostolate of lay people.

Two years later, on the 31st March 1852, the archbishop of Turin, Mons. Fransoni officially nominated Don Bosco as the “Chief Spiritual Director” of three oratories of Turin, giving him “all faculties deemed

necessary and appropriate” to conduct to good end the pastoral work for the young (MB IV 378). Among these faculties there was for sure that of securing unity of spirit and action among all those who were working in favour of the young, an essential condition for the success of the educative work as he intended it to be.

There was therefore since then a kind of association of all men and women cooperators, but with a very flexible structure. The key element was the common reference to Don Bosco, and, from this fact, the acceptance of his pastoral and spiritual directives (in particular the acceptance of the Rules of his Oratories), under the protection of St Francis of Sales. Priority in this apostolic structure, known as “The work of the Oratories”, was given to service. Meanwhile we should not forget the developments taking place in the complex work of Valdocco, where other structures were coming up. Don Bosco was offering to his “Promoters or Salesian Cooperators” (as he called them) spiritual favours obtained from the Holy Father in exchange and thanksgiving for the benefits of their generosity. A much more redefined project of association will take off from 1860, since he founded the Salesian Society.

Don Bosco conceives and sustains the project (“a bit crazy”) of a Salesian Society made up by religious and non-religious members (1860-1874)

A. The audacious project of “unity” (1860, 1864)

The 18th of December 1859, Don Bosco, after patient efforts, and in particularly difficult political-religious circumstances, had set the basis of a religious society officially called “Pious Society of St Francis of Sales”, and its members, then all very young, were to follow a life in common, and were to feel bonded through the classic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. However there was still a long way to go (fifteen years) before the approval of the Constitutions and the new congregation be definitely established.

It’s in this period that flares up in the spirit of Don Bosco a project of a particular audacity: to make part of the Congregation, just founded, his Cooperators, priests and lay people, allowing them to live in it and work there in their own way but in close union with the religious members and depending from the same superior, Don Bosco, thus giving them an official ecclesial and Salesian status. Towards the end of 1860, the project of the Constitutions for the new Congregation had been enriched with Chapter XVI, entitled “De externis” (on the external members). The text had been reviewed in the version sent to Rome in 1864 for its examination and approval. This famous chapter read:

- “1. Anyone, even if he is living with his family at home, may belong to our Society.
2. The applicant will not take vows, but will strive to carry out those Rules of ours which suit his age and state of life. He will teach or promote catechism classes for poor children, organize the spreading of good literature, promote the organization of novenas, tridiums, retreats, and any other works of charity that are aimed specially at the spiritual welfare of young and ordinary people.
3. To share in the spiritual treasury of the Salesian Society, the applicant should at least promise the Rector to employ both material goods and all necessary efforts in things that the superior will judge conducive to God’s greater glory.
4. The promise, however, does not bind under any penalty of sin, not even venial.
5. A member of our Society that leaves the religious life for a valid reason, will be considered as an external member, and he could continue to participate in the spiritual goods of the whole Society.

B. Don Bosco struggles for 10 years (1864-1874) to have his project approved

When Don Bosco’s project of a Congregation including externs reached Rome, it was not accepted. Don Bosco was requested to eliminate the famous chapter XVI. He tried by all means to keep it because otherwise the Congregation he had in mind would not materialized. Seeing that the approval would not come if this chapter were no eliminated, he put it in the appendix. But even there it was not accepted.

Trusting in Divine Providence, after ten years of struggle with the canonists, he finally eliminated it to have the Constitutions of his Congregation approved.

Don Bosco finally organizes his Cooperators, making them “associates” of the Salesian congregation (1874-1876)

1. Three preparatory drafts (1874-1875)

After returning from Rome (April 1874) where his project had not been approved, Don Bosco set himself to work to give to his project a new juridical formulation: to create an association clearly different from the Salesian congregation, but firmly linked to it, a kind of “Salesian third order”, with its own Rule of life.

Before arriving to the definite formula in 1876, Don Bosco spent not less than two and half years reflecting, consulting and making successive drafts and revisions. All this attests not only to the dynamism of his ideas, but also to the extreme importance he was giving to the Association. The first text (manuscript, 1874) was entitled the Associates to the Congregation of St Francis of Sales. This text is still very close to the famous Chapter XVI and even to the Salesian Constitutions. Two more simplified texts followed, published one in 1874 and the other in 1875. The title of the first was: Christian Union (or Salesian Association). It was presented in this way: “it is a kind of a traditional third order, but with this difference: for the older Third Orders, Christian perfection was proposed in the exercise of piety, while this has for its principal end an active life, specially in favour of the youth in danger” (Chapter II). This text once reviewed became, at the beginning of 1875, the Association of good works.

2. The definitive text, the Pope’s approval, the publication of the Regulations (1876).

In April 1876, Don Bosco made his eleventh trip to Rome to request from the Pope Pious IX spiritual favours for his Cooperators and to present to him the definitive text entitled “Salesian Cooperators, or a practical way of leading a good life and being a good citizen” In the audience of April 15th, the Pope was surprised to find in the text not a single reference to women Cooperators (in fact Don Bosco was thinking of founding another association for them, attached to the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, who had been founded in 1872). “Women, said the Pope, have always played an important part in doing good works, in the Church, in the conversion of peoples. They are effective and enterprising even by natural inclination, more than men. In excluding them, you are depriving yourself of a most precious help” (MB XI 73-74). Don Bosco accepted willingly the Pope’s suggestion and enriched the text accordingly.

Finally, Don Bosco obtained on the 9th of May 1876, the famous *Breve Cum sicuti* in which Pious IX manifested his extreme favour by granting to the “Society or Union of the Salesian Cooperators” the indulgences granted to the secular Third Order of the Franciscans (MB XI 545-547), and with this he was implicitly approving the Association in its juridical form.

When returning to Turin, Don Bosco took care of the publication of the definitive Rules, inserting an important preface, addressed “To the reader”, with the date of 12th of July 1876, the Papal brief and the long list of indulgences granted to the Cooperators. With this fact, the controversy with the archbishop Mons. Gastaldi reached its climax. He prohibited the publication of the Rules in Turin. It was therefore published in Albenga, Liguria, with the consent of the bishop of that place. The following year the French edition was published in Turin. It was very clear that Don Bosco wanted a world wide extension of his Cooperators!

An interesting detail to note (it is a bit more than a detail): the editions published in Albenga and Turin in 1876 carried a fill in sheet of personal commitment which read as follows: “All associates will fill in the following sheet and after signing it, they will send it to the superior: “I, the undersigned, living in(locality), have read the Rules of the Salesian Association and with the divine grace I hope to faithfully observe them, for the benefit of my soul. Place, name and profession”. This was accompanied by a formal declaration of acceptance by the superior: “The undersigned declares that on ... of 187.., has been accepted as Salesian Cooperator (name) ... and consequently he/she from now on can enjoy all the spiritual favours of the Association ... “. Fortunately, since 1877, every formula of personal commitment (that corresponds to the current promise) disappeared and the only thing left was the Declaration of the superior. This system facilitated the inscription of Cooperators who were becoming ever more numerous, but it was detrimental from the point of view of the conscious option of the person concerned.

(...)

HOW DID DON BOSCO SEE THE COOPERATORS?

We find the answer in some texts extracted from Don Bosco's writings and speeches.

The history of the Salesian Cooperators

"The history of the Salesian Cooperators goes back to 1841 when the work of gathering poor and abandoned young people started in the city of Turin ..."

(The Biographical Memoirs vol. XI, p. 84-86)

"As soon as the work of the Oratories began in 1841, there were very enthusiastic and keen priests and lay people who came forward to help - for there was a great harvest which at that moment looked abundant among the young boys at risk, in danger of losing both faith and morals. These collaborators, or Cooperators, were at all times throughout our history the support and sustain of the works that the Divine Providence disposed at our hands. All endeavoured to work and fit into our way of life and customs, but there was a general request for a set of Regulations that would serve as a basis and a bond to help preserve uniformity and the spirit that prevailed in our institutes. We hope that this desire will now be satisfied by the present booklet ("The Regulations for the Cooperators"). These are not rules for the Festive Oratories or for educational institutes, which can be found elsewhere); they are a bond by which Catholics who so wish may join the Salesians and work according to a uniform and stable pattern ...

May the Lord, so rich in grace and blessings grant many favours to all those who help to win souls for our Divine Saviour, doing good to young people so much in danger, prepare good Christians for the Church and honest citizens for society, so that all may one day find themselves eternally happy in heaven. Amen.

(Preface to the Regulations published in Albenga, 12 July 1876)

A definition

"Cooperators are called those who wish to carry out works of charity, not in a general sense, but in concrete ways, according and following the spirit of the Congregation of St. Francis of Sales. One single Cooperator on his own can do a lot of good, however the fruit is very much limited and at the most of little duration. On the other hand, when united with others, obtains support, advice, courage, and often with little effort obtains much, because forces, even if they're weak, become stronger when they're united. Hence the famous say "Union makes us strong ...", therefore our Cooperators, following the purpose of the Salesian Congregation will take on the mission, according to their abilities, of taking care of young people in danger and abandoned, in streets and parks, of teaching them catechism, entertaining them during holidays or feast days, placing them with decent jobs and honest bosses, guiding, counseling and helping them as much as possible to make them good Christians and honest citizens. The norms to follow in the works, which we will propose to Cooperators, will be part of the content of the Salesian Bulletin."

(Don Bosco, in the first Salesian Bulletin edition, August 1877).

"Cooperators are no more than good Christians, who while living in the midst of their own families, maintain in the midst of the world the spirit of the Congregation of St. Francis of Sales, and help her with moral and material means to the aim of helping her specially in the Christian education of the youth. They are a kind of third order, whose purpose is the exercise of works of charity towards their neighbour, primarily towards the young people in danger"

(1st General Chapter).

The purpose of this Association

"The purpose of this Association is to unite the laity and priests in undertaking whatever will be considered conducive to God's greater glory and the welfare of souls. The means will be zeal for God's glory and energetic charity to employ whatever may spiritually and materially contribute toward such a purpose without selfish interests or vainglory. Every good Christian may join this Association as long as he is determined to work in accordance with its goal and means".

(The Biographical Memoirs vol. X, p. 1309)

"It is imperative that you thoroughly grasp the aims of the Association of Salesian Cooperators. Its purpose is not only to support our works, but also for its members to do all they possibly can to join forces for the salvation of their fellow Christians, especially the young. Let them strive to promote children's catechism

classes and volunteer to help their parish priests with them. Let them prepare children for Holy Communion and provide them with proper clothing. Let them spread wholesome literature and forcefully oppose all irreligious, immoral publications. All these things are part of the Salesian Cooperators' commitment".

(The Biographical Memoirs vol. XV, p. 500)

The purpose of this Association is to bring good Christians together so that they may benefit civil society and foster good moral living, especially among youth in danger... Not only is the Association of Cooperators not in conflict with the tradition of tertiaries, but it complements it. Pope Pious IX himself, in addressing this question, stated: "The world is material minded and so we must show it something visible". In our case, this refers to our Cooperators. The primary aim of the tertiaries of St. Francis of Assisi is to sanctify themselves through practices of piety, and the basic principle of the Cooperators is the practice of charity. Both of these aims are directed to God's glory and the good of souls.

(The Biographical Memoirs vol. XVI, p. 21)

"I have studied very much about the way of founding the Salesian Cooperators. Their true and main purpose is not that of helping the Salesians, but of helping the Church, the bishops, parish priests, under the "high" direction of the Salesians in the works of charity, catechism, education of poor children. Helping Salesians is just one of the many ways of helping the Catholic Church. It's true that we can appeal to them in our urgencies, but they are an instrument in the hands of the bishop. The only one who until now has understood this properly is the bishop of Padova who said clearly that nobody should feel any jealousy towards the Salesian Cooperators, because they belong to the dioceses and that every parish priest and every parishioner should become a Cooperator.

(The Biographical Memoirs vol. XVII, p. 25)

The Union of Cooperators, the Work of the Pope has been found to shake up Christians from the apathy in which so many of them live and to spread the driving force of charity ... a work that today appears exceptionally relevant ... The Cooperators will extend to every country, it will spread throughout Christianity. There will come a day when the name of Cooperator will be the same as true Christian. The hand of God sustains it. The Cooperators will be the ones who foster the Catholic spirit.

(The Biographical Memoirs vol. XVIII, 1 61)

Commitment and Activity

From the conference of women cooperators in Turin.

"First, make great efforts kindly to instill love of virtue and horror for sin into your children's hearts and those of your neighbours, relatives, friends and acquaintances. If you come to know that some young girls morals are being threatened, promptly strive to save her and put her beyond the reach of rapacious wolves. Should you know or hear that some family has boys or girls of school or work age, be quick enough to suggest, advice and exhort their parents or family to place them in schools or shops where, as they learn knowledge and skills, they may also absorb the holy fear of <god in a morally safe environment. Make every effort to introduce in your homes good Catholic literature, books, magazines, and when you have read them, pass them on to as many people as you can. Give them as gifts to boys and girls who faithfully attend catechism classes. But above all when you know that a girl can be saved from moral dangers only by placing her in a boarding school, make every effort to do so

I most earnestly recommend to your care well beloved, pious boys who give signs of priestly vocation. Yes, esteemed ladies, take these hopes of the Church to your heart and do all you can - even the impossible, I'd say - to cherish and bring to blossom the precious seed of a vocation in their young hearts. Direct them to a place where they can continue their studies and, if they don't have the economic resources, help them with whatever means Divine Providence has put into your own hands, or as your own piety and love for souls suggest to you. How fortunate you will be if you provide the Church with priests in these times when they are so scarce that some of our own villages have no Sunday mass or worship service.

(From the Conference of Women Cooperators in Turin, on the vigil of the feast of Mary Help of Christians, 1879. The Biographical Memoirs vol. XIV, 132-134).

From the first Conference in Borgo San Martino

I have stated that a good Cooperator is one who practices a deed of charity as the occasion arises. This is not difficult a task for any good Christian. See how many great opportunities come up - a word of good

advice to youngsters to guide them in virtue and save them away from vicious things, a suggestion to parents on how they can give their children a Christian upbringing, a reminder to them to church, to choose a school or a job where they will have upright teachers and honest employers. You can see to it that schools hire only reputable teachers . you can help out in teaching catechism in your parish. You can give or lend good books, spread good literature, and offer a Catholic paper to replace a bad one. You can help one complete his work, donate clothing, seek jobs for the unemployed, or support a homeless or abandoned boy or girl by paying for that child's tuition. You can cut down on your own expenses and put aside money for alms. You can promote undertakings which will glorify God, honor the Church and benefit souls. At the very last, you can exhort others to do these things. There is never any lack of opportunity to do good or prevent evil. Let us not be wanting in good will or courage, in love for God and neighbour. Without becoming aware of it, as fathers, mothers, teachers, priests, lay people, rich and poor, we shall be true Cooperators, thwarting evil and accomplishing much good".

You might remark, "as long as it's a matter of helping others by speaking, I can do that, but I am poor and my material means are limited". Let the poor do just what they can, but regardless of one's poverty, any Cooperator who so wishes will always be able to contribute also financially...

(From the first Conference in Borgo San Martino, The Biographical Memoirs vol. XIV, 542-547).
Identity of the Association in the Salesian Family

"This is for us a very important Association, it is the soul of our Congregation. In doing good, it is our linkage with good faithful living in the world, as are the Salesian Cooperators ... Now it is necessary that we have friends, benefactors, people that, while practicing fully the spirit of the Salesians, live in their families, as Salesian Cooperators do. They are our help in our need, our support in our difficulty, our collaborators in everything that we should do for the greater glory of God, and for which we lack the material means or the persons.

These Cooperators should multiply as much as possible"

(1st General Chapter, Arch Chap S 04 (1:1877) 3 - n. 32 page 9).

When Don Bosco summarized his thoughts and vision of his Cooperators in a set of Regulations, what did he say?

We simply quote two fundamental passages:

"The fundamental scope of the Salesian Cooperators is to do good to themselves by leading a life similar to that which is observed by religious in the common life, in so far as they are able. Many would be willing to enter the Cloister but, because of age, health or condition, or through lack of opportunity, they are absolutely prevented. These people by becoming Salesian Cooperators can continue to remain in the midst of their ordinary occupations, in the bosom of their own families, and live as if they were in a Congregation. For that reason this Association is considered by the Holy Father as a Third Order with this difference, that in the older Third Orders, Christian perfection was proposed in the exercise of piety. This has for its main end an active life in the exercise of charity towards one's neighbour and specially to wards youth who are in moral danger".

(The Regulations of Don Bosco, no. 3, 1876)

"The same work is proposed for the Salesian Cooperators as is done by the Society of St. Frances of Sales, with which they intend to associate".

(The Regulations of Don Bosco, no. 4, 1876)

How many have ignored these texts, and therefore they continue to propagate mistaken ideas about the Salesian Cooperator.

Jose Reinoso

THE SALESIAN COOPERATORS IN THE SDBs GENERAL CHAPTERS

Time and time again the General Chapters of the SDBs have discussed the Cooperators or one of their particular aspects. Indeed the Congregation, as the discussion will show, paid special attention to them along history. In this article we present to our readers a summary of what the Chapters stated about them. We hope that this will help in understanding better the identity of the Cooperators and the role that the SDBs should take on their behalf.

The first Councillor for the Salesian Family, *Don Giovanni Raineri*, a meticulous and sharp historian, studied how the intuition of Don Bosco developed in the first 21 SDB General Chapters while the editor did the same for Chapters 22 and 23.

Here we highlight the most significant events concerning the development of the Association, without giving too many details.

I. Notable Moments in the Early Years of the History of the Cooperators.

In the first General Chapter (1877), which took place a year after the publication of the “Rules” which Don Bosco himself gave to the Cooperators (1876), the Chapter deliberations repeated to the letter Don Bosco’s definition of the Cooperator. Almost all the succeeding Chapters that discussed somehow the Salesian Cooperators remained faithful to the “Rules” of Don Bosco: to his view of discernment, formation, apostolate, help to the Congregation “when in serious need.”

Following the GC III (1883), there was the publication of the “General Norms for the Decurions (Leaders) of the Pious Union.” It urged every superior to choose the benefactors and laudable friends of the community and make them Cooperators; the superior should see to it that these persons would receive the SALESIAN BULLETIN, which was the official communication organ of the Cooperators. Thus, the period began when the reader of the SALESIAN BULLETIN, the Cooperators and the benefactors were “officially” identified as one.

The GC IX (1901) introduced the “provincial correspondents” and “in charge of the local centers”; the same Chapter also created a “Central Office” for which the Prefect General, Don Rinaldi, was responsible together with three advisers: the director of the SALESIAN BULLETIN, the General Secretary, Don Trione, and the person in charge of promotion and correspondence. From this Chapter on, the person directly responsible for the Cooperators in front of the Superior Council has been the Prefect General. This continued till 1947 when it was decided to give such responsibility to one of the Councillors of the Superior Council.

In 1947 Don Ricaldone thought that the time had come to relaunch the Association of the Cooperators. On the one hand, the remarkable progress of the works of the Salesians, especially after the disasters of the war, needed financial help; on the other hand, the increasing interest of the Church and of the Pope towards the apostolate of the laity and towards the Catholic Action were creating problems; these caught the attention of Don Ricaldone. The Chapter accepted his proposal to give to a member of the Superior Council the responsibility of the Cooperators and the print media. He chose Don Albino Fedrigotti. And the relaunching of the Association saw light in a Convention in September 1962. This resumed the series of previous conventions which was interrupted since 1930.

On 25 November 1951, Don Ricaldone died and the GC XVII elected Don Zigiotti as Rector Major and Don Resende Costa as Councillor for the Cooperators; Don Riccerri succeeded him in 1953.

The “Second Golden Age” of the renewal started when the Cooperators took part in the World Congress of the Apostolate of the Laity (1951); it continued in the Convention of 1952, then with the “Magna Carta” of Pius XII and a circular letter of Don Zigiotti in 1955.

II. GC XVIII (1958): Some Clarifications

1. The Genuine Figure of the Salesian Cooperator

To understand well the genuine figure of the Salesian Cooperator and to avoid “dangerous misconceptions,” a clear distinction was proposed between “benefactors” (those persons who in some way help in the Salesian works) and “Cooperators” (true active Christians who live according to a certain method of spiritual life and who carry out an apostolic program according to the Salesian spirit).

Some very concrete norms and directives were issued; they were meant “to make the confreres grasp correct ideas regarding the Pious Union through books and printed matter, study meetings, conferences given to students, alumni, friends and benefactors.

2. The Commitment of the Provincials

After providing a clear picture of the Organization at all levels, the Chapter specified the duties of the Provincial Superiors “to whom is entrusted the Pious Union.” They were to carry “the full weight of this responsibility” and they were to take the required steps designed for organization and promotion as well as those referring to the linkage that should be created with the Central Councillor, to whom they should report every year.

Through his delegate, the Provincial must promote the Pious Union, even in places where there were no Salesian houses; he should stress “on the advantages that the Pious Union could bring to the parishes and dioceses, to the education of the young and to all those involved in social action.” Centers of which the Salesians could not take care should be entrusted to a decurion (leader). The superior of the house, was responsible at the local level; a local delegate, assigned by the Provincial, would help him.

3. The Care for Formation

Emphasis was given to the Christian and Salesian formation, to the “Catholic mission of the Pious Union which is at the service of the Church”; this should have been explained to the clergy to facilitate its promotion in the parishes, starting from the Salesian parishes.

The commitment of the Cooperators was not limited to spread and practice the Preventive System in various places; their commitment was much greater, though it would be good that the Cooperators would have an adequate knowledge of the educative method of Don Bosco.

III. *GCXIX (1965): A Necessary Transition*

This chapter studied the issue on the Cooperators through the third Commission headed by Don Ricceri; it was known as “Apostolate other than the Apostolate with the Young.” Its second sub-commission dealt with the Cooperators and Past Pupils. The reporter was Don Antonio Marrone. The minutes reported that “the document on the Cooperators was unanimously approved as a homage to Don Ricceri who until then had been the General Councillor for the Cooperators.” This detail is important for several reasons.

The document was thought of in line with Chapter 4 of LUMEN GENTIUM; the decree APOSTOLICAM ACTUOSITATEM was not yet published by then. The document affirmed that Don Bosco thought of the Cooperators in terms of being eminently apostolic; that Don Bosco foresaw, as Pius XII stated, “with the intuition of his genius and holiness, what was to be later known as the mobilization of the lay people against the action of the world, the enemy of the Church”; that Don Bosco gave origin to a movement which “while being under the auspices of the Salesian institution, has the characteristics of the Catholic Action.”

The following aspects were highlighted:

1. *The Meaning of the Association*

For this Chapter, the Cooperators were ... “an irreplaceable force integrated in the mission that the Church has entrusted to the Salesians;” this force would multiply the possibilities of the ecclesial services of the Congregation; “a workfield that requires a sense of duty and commitment”; “a responsibility in the Church,” besides being a matter of interest for the Salesians. To support these assertions, quotations from Don Bosco, from “all the General Chapters,” and from the speeches of Pius XII and of John XXIII during the Pilgrimage of the Cooperators on 31 May 1962 were used.

2. *The Contribution of the Salesians*

The Chapter requested for delegates with capabilities, time and means to animate the Cooperators. The communities were to become centers radiating Salesian action and should carry out activities capable of supporting the educative communities. Finally, it also asked that “a section be established for members who were youth,” capable of offering forms and styles of life adapted to the mentality of the young.

THE TURNING-POINT: THE SPECIAL GENERAL CHAPTER

The long work of this Chapter, that also underwent moments of strained dialogue, was rewarded at the end with the production of two declarations (one to the Salesians, the other to the Cooperators); these became the source of the new awareness of the Congregation regarding the Cooperators and they are found in Document 18 of SGC. Their attentive reading will be a great help to the Salesians as well as to the Cooperators. They contain the **Rediscovery of Don Bosco's Project on the Cooperators**.

We will underscore here only the most significant thoughts.

1. The definition of the Cooperator

The SGC XX defines the Cooperator as one who:

according to Don Bosco's original idea is

- a true Salesian-in-the world,
- namely a Christian who follows his vocation to holiness by involving himself, - even without religious vows,
- in working for youth or ordinary working people
- in the spirit of Don Bosco
- for the service of the local Church and
- in communion with the Salesian Congregation.

2. Contents of the Definition

We can say that the definition contains the principal features of the renewed Cooperator:

2.1 His/her vocation is "an authentic apostolic Salesian vocation," specific of the Salesian Cooperator, of "a true Salesian-in-the world," of a secular Salesian, "a lay person or a priest" called and enlightened by the Holy Spirit;

2.2 It is a call to holiness that is achieved according to the rule of the Salesian spiritual life.

2.3 It is a call to the apostolate that is carried out in the Salesian style but adapted to the secular life, that is qualified by the following:

- adeptness and freedom, shown in rapid and convincing interventions, sensitivity to the needs and intuition regarding the means to be used;
- the presence of the Salesian among the young and among the working class; this is mandatory for the Cooperators, but as lay persons they are present among them in the concrete situation in which they find themselves;
- the apostolate belongs to "a unique family" joined by links of fraternal charity, starting with the choice of goals on to the means to be used to obtain them.

2.4 It is a service to the local Church even when it is carried out in works of the SDBs because the Congregation itself is at the service of the local Church.

2.5 It is done in communion with the Salesian Congregation and this includes many and profound elements which are supernatural, spiritual, and human, such as baptism, vocation, mission, spirit, apostolic fraternity; consequently, co-responsibility, dialogue, exchanging and sharing of experiences, togetherness in pastoral presences, the family style characteristic of Don Bosco.

Even the figure of the Rector Major, while keeping his position as superior, is seen in the light of the one who fulfills a service of mission and of communion with the Cooperators among themselves and among the other groups of the Salesian Family.

3. Principles underlying the invitation to change in mentality

To give a global idea of the change in mentality that the SGC XX called for so as to have a more accurate idea of what the concept of Cooperator stands for, the document accentuated other important elements, particularly in the relationship between the Cooperators and the Congregation.

3.1 The socialization and the promotion of the laity were seen in the co-responsibility among priests, lay people and religious. When this would take place in the Salesian Family, the Cooperators would feel that they are not just recipients and docile doers of orders that they have received but that they have had an irreplaceable and necessary contribution to make to help the Family in building up the Church and in carrying out the mission.

Consequently, it is necessary to have a clear idea of their identity as lay persons, of their complementarity within the Salesian vocation, their unique presence so that the Salesians might be really what Don Bosco wanted them to be, that is, bond of unity, a center of the movement, stimuli to fidelity, witnesses to the spirit of the Council. All these have been necessary so that the Cooperators might animate the earthly reality with the gospel and Salesian values, as they would uphold in the world the same values that the Salesians are living in their community life.

3.2 Parting from this, one may understand the expression attributed to the Cooperators as the “first and necessary collaborators of the Salesians, specifically different from all the other lay collaborators. The fact of the Cooperators being irreplaceable would explain why without them the Salesians would not be the Salesians that Don Bosco wanted them to be.

3.3 Regarding the commitments in connection with the mission, the SGC XX recommended those wanted by Don Bosco, but along the line of dynamic fidelity to “the sign of the times”; it underscored some new perspectives such as “catechesis in a secularized society, the family within a pluralistic point of view, the religious and lay vocations, the mission and the lay missionaries, the collaboration in the educational works of the Congregation.

Other proposed tasks were new: commitment to world justice, assuming works and activities as Cooperators, Christian influence on means of social communications.

(N.B. We insist on the fact that what is said here does not dispense us from an attentive re-reading of the document, especially for those among us who truly want to be well acquainted with the renewed vision of the figure of the Cooperator.)

CONCLUSIONS ON THE FIRST CENTURY OF THE ASSOCIATION'S LIFE

The first century of the Association's life (1876-1976), seen through the SDBs General Chapters, brought light to the following ideas.

Four Periods

The life of the Association in this first century can be divided into four distinct periods:

1.1. From the Rules for the Cooperators written by Don Bosco till 1920

The Pious Union spread and saw the Salesian Cooperators in terms of going along and helping in the Salesian works, especially in their economic aspect; but gradually, because of the linkage with the hierarchy through the directors and the decurions (leaders), particularly where there were no Salesians, the apostolic involvement in the Church, specifically at the local levels, developed.

1.2. From the Congress of Turin (1920) till the GC XVII (1947)

There prevailed during this period the collaboration with the Congregation, especially at the economic level, notably due to the extraordinary flourishing of the Salesian works; as a consequence, a certain aloofness on the part of the Pious Union crept in regarding involvement in the lay apostolate, which during this period became stronger in the Church. Because of the war, the Association experienced a certain standstill.

1.3. From 1947 to the SGC XX

Stimulated by the lay apostolic movements, the new theology and the Conciliar impetus, the Pious Union renewed itself and took the shape of an international apostolic movement in the Salesian style. Following some papal interventions and the spirit of pluralism recognized by the Council, the Pious Union obtained full recognition in the Church. The new vision encouraged the Cooperators to ask --- and they actually obtained --- greater autonomy, co-responsibility, and decentralization in relation with the Congregation, at the level of the provincial and national councils.

1.4. From the SGC XX onwards

The on-going relaunching of the Association and the perspectives of the Salesian Family at the service of the local Church has renewed the rapport between the Pious Union (the Association) and the Congregation. Though not renouncing the traditional, constitutional, and juridical bases of their relationship, this relationship has also been seen as rooted in communion, in the specificity of the common vocation, in the spirit and mission, in view of a fraternal exchange of spiritual goods and services, aimed at a more incisive spiritual renewal and at a more fruitful and efficacious common work.

2. Important Considerations Resulting from a Comparison between the Cooperator of the SGC XX and that of Don Bosco

2.1. One's commitment to personal holiness stands out and is reinforced not only through the various practices designed to help attain it (days of recollection, spiritual retreats, reflection, revision of life) but above all through a keen sense of vocation, a reality that should be well-known and closely followed, a keen sense of a spirit to be deepened and lived, a keen sense of commitment that should be accepted. Schools for forming candidate applying to make "the promise" have come up, which was an evident attempt to return to the idea of Don Bosco. The program for lay Salesian formation and the literature, requested by the SGC, has further developed this trend which has already been codified in the New Regulations for Apostolic Life (RAL).

2.2. "Secularity" enriches the one who makes of his life in the world and of his ordinary occupations a specific commitment and lives his vocation as a true Salesian-in-the world. Here are also included the priests Cooperators; this also opens up new avenues for secular Salesian institutes, considering that the Don Bosco Volunteers were an offshoot of a branch of Cooperators called "zelatrici" at the time of Don Rinaldi. In short, there has been a transition from the committed secularity to the consecrated one.

2.3. Decentralization, pluralism, flexibility, greater autonomy, co-responsibility, the quality of being representational, beside responding to the demands of socialization and permitting an active insertion in the Salesian Family, as a bigger "union of good people" and likening the Association of the Cooperators to the new image of the Church and to the demands for communion --- all these do not go against unity but

reinforce it by means of more felt and lasting values, giving birth to the urgency of searching for the institutional unity of the Family.

2.4. Union with the Congregation is the result of having the same Founder, of upholding the Founder's intention, of the unity of spirit, of having the same mission and of belonging to the Salesian Family, of becoming aware that it is impossible to be completely by ourselves if there are no others with whom to confront ourselves, to dialogue, communicate and to collaborate. In this perspective, a new emphasis is given even to the recognition of the Rector Major as the superior who represents Don Bosco and is the heart of the Salesian Family. A clear distinction and integration of roles increases the need to be united so that each one is able to realize himself fully.

2.5. Don Bosco's will to serve the Church is reinforced with new theological and Salesian insights. The Cooperator not only works in the Church; he enriches it with the secular dimension of the charism which he carries in himself, thus contributing to the birth of a Salesian spirituality, a new possibility offered to souls; he enriches it with a special service --- for the youth and the ordinary people --- within the mission of the Church and according to the pastoral style inspired by Don Bosco.

2.6. The Cooperators offer themselves to the Church for a specialized mission towards the young and the poor, who have a special place in the heart of Don Bosco and whom Don Bosco considered as his "harvest"; the young and the poor are the two sectors in society towards whom the Church looks with renewed interest: the young because they are the future; the poor because they are the first to whom the gospel is addressed.

Secondly, they carry out their mission with a style that is theirs, the Christian humanism of Don Bosco that highly respects human values which is a mark of the missionary church of Vatican II.

2.7. The direct cooperation with the Congregation is realized in different forms: prayer, reciprocal encouragement aimed at renewal and fidelity, and exchange of spiritual goods - which goes further than the simple granting of spiritual favors; without underestimating its value, one who has received the diploma can claim such favors. The distinction between benefactors and Cooperators does not exclude economic help in the Salesian projects which may become an act of solidarity between the groups of the same Family; however, co-responsibility in the various activities even to the point of assuming management of the SDBs works is added.

GENERAL CHAPTERS XXI, XXII, XXIII

The three General Chapters following SGC XX contain no new doctrinal statements on the Cooperators. On the contrary, they tried to bring at the practical level the implications emerging from the previous chapters. They came out with a clearer vision of the Cooperator and they asked that the doctrinal principles regarding the Association be realized.

1. GC XXI

Don Ricceri remarked in 1978 in his report to the GC XXI: "One notices an increasing interest on the Salesian Cooperator and his renewal in the whole Salesian world and even outside our own walls; it is a question of justice, however, to pinpoint some situations which, if unrecognized, can hinder this process.

1.1. There is still an inadequate awareness on the part of individuals as well as on the part of the communities regarding the nature of this branch of the Salesian Family. In many places there is fear that this reorganization may bring the Salesians to lose a great number of benefactors, who at present are considered Cooperators (In short, the SGC has not yet been understood on this matter.)

1.2. Sometimes the choice of delegates is poorly done, neglecting the human, salesian and religious qualities that are needed to be able to animate groups (particularly groups of young people). The same can be said regarding the means, influence, time, authority entailed in this work.

1.3. The information given to the Salesians in formation regarding the Salesian Cooperators and the priorities given to Cooperators in relation with other apostolic movements is still scanty.

1.4. An adequate presentation to the young people in the youth centers, oratories, parishes, colleges and hostels regarding the apostolic commitment of the laity is not done. This also applies to the situation of the Past Pupils, leaders of our activities and lay collaborators.

1.5. The Salesian community is not very sensitive regarding its duty over the Cooperators; a duty entrusted to it by the Constitutions and the Regulations to take care of them and make them co-responsible for the Salesian activities. This refers specially to the collaboration that the young Cooperators offered in this aspect.

To this is added the insufficient knowledge that the bishops and parish priest have of the Cooperators which resulted in the limited presence of the Cooperators in the organizations and apostolic activities in the local Churches, as it was noted in the conclusions of the Congress.

The GC XXI, reflecting further on the theme “The Salesians, evangelizers of the young,” saw the need of speaking about the Salesian Family, as bearer of the charism and mission of Don Bosco; it points in a special way to the Cooperators and Past Pupils who have made “the choice of the gospel.”

Consequently, the Chapter affirmed that greater efforts would be exerted for the formation of these lay persons; it also expressed the desire that these persons be present in the most significant moments of the Salesian life of the SDBs and in the organizing bodies charged with educative and pastoral responsibility.

It proposed some practical directives regarding the involvement of Cooperators and Past Pupils in educational and pastoral work:

- at the provincial and local levels, provincial superiors and local superiors should restore spiritual and apostolic vigor to the communities, making them dynamic centers of activity. To accomplish this they should appoint as delegates those confreres with the adequate preparation and capabilities;
- according to a plan drawn up by the respective Councils (the Salesian, Cooperators, Past Pupils) during the next six years the provincial superior should make known to the communities the measures to be taken regarding the formative and vocational pastoral work of the Cooperators and the Past Pupils. Let norms and concrete forms be established through which they could be co-responsible with our apostolic activities.
- Let the Salesians accept the responsibility for the formation of animators for the Salesian Family, promoting from the initial stages of formation knowledge about the Salesian Family and communicating its sense of value and importance (n. 79).

2. GC XXII

The specific scope of GC XXII was the revision of the Constitutions and Regulations in view of its definitive approval.

The theme of the Salesian Family and its groups was treated only in view of the texts in the Constitutions and Regulations; the Chapter was concerned of what should be institutionalized or what should be included in the Salesian Constitutions and Regulations regarding the Cooperators. This was carried out “with passionate research and serious effort for clarification.”

The following are the articles of the Salesian Constitutions and Regulations on the Cooperators:

Don Bosco inspired the start of a vast movement of persons who in different ways work for the salvation of the young.

He himself founded not only the Society of St. Francis of Sales but also the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Association of Salesian Cooperators. They live in communion with each other, share the same spirit and, with specifically distinct vocations, continue the mission he began. Together with these groups and with others born later we make up the Salesian Family.

Within this family, by the will of the Founder, we have particular responsibilities: to preserve unity of spirit and to foster dialogue and fraternal collaboration for our mutual enrichment and greater apostolic effectiveness. (Const. 5)

The Councillor for the Salesian Family and social communication has the duty of animating the Congregation in both sectors.

In accordance with article 5 of the Constitutions he promotes communion between the different groups, respecting the specific nature and autonomy of each. In addition he directs and assists the provinces so

that both the association of salesian cooperators and the movement of the past pupils may develop according to their own statutes in the territory of the province. (Const. 137)

Every community should feel it its duty to increase and support the Association of Salesian Cooperators for the good of the Church. It should help in the formation of its members, promote and spread knowledge of this particular vocation, especially among our more committed young people and among our lay collaborators. (Reg. 38)

... (The community) should help those (Past Pupils) who are more sensitive to Salesian values to develop in themselves the vocation of a cooperator. (Reg. 39)

3. GC XXIII

When dealing with the theme on the education to the faith, this Chapter saw the need of inviting the Salesians to live “in an active and updated form, the communion of orientation and initiatives that belong to the Church.” One of the pastoral priorities of the Church has been the animation and the involvement of the laity. The Chapter underlined two contexts of animation and involvement of the laity: that of the educative pastoral community and that of the Salesian Family. In the guidelines it asked for a program of formation at the provincial level for the laity, which would give special attention to the formation of the members of the Salesian Family. It requested the Rector Major, through the respective departments of his Council, to give guidelines for the “Project Laity” in the Congregation.

HISTORY AS A TEACHER OF LIFE

This presentation of the development of Don Bosco's intuition is not intended to be a meticulous and historical critique done by the historian. It is an attempt to focus our attention on certain points that can guide our decisions and help organize our future projects. By way of conclusion, we summarize the most significant ideas from this simple historical presentation of the Association.

1. Primary and Charismatic Responsibilities of the SDBs

The care for the Cooperators is not an optional task for the SDBs. To animate the Association and each Cooperator is one of their primary responsibilities. Provincial and local superiors are the direct addressees of the recommendations that filled up the history of the Association. This is made concrete as their attention is called regarding the choice of the local and provincial delegates.

The commitment of the Congregation regarding salesian and spiritual formation of the Cooperators is often repeated. To verify the fulfillment of such commitment will help the Salesians keep the charism alive and the Cooperators respond to their vocation better.

2. The presence of Cooperators and the other lay people

A second element that frequently comes up when reading the rich documentation of the General Chapters on the Cooperators is this: the Cooperators are to be considered the first and necessary collaborators of and with the Salesians. This means that they are to occupy a particular position in relation with the other lay collaborators in the different activities. This explains why it is pointed out that the collaborators should preferably and possibly be chosen from among the Cooperators. This explains further why it is requested that greater care be given to the formation of the lay faithful who belong to the Salesian Family. An important fact should not be undervalued: the complementariness of the vocational and apostolic presence of the Cooperators.

When the Cooperators fully carry out Don Bosco's project, their presence becomes even necessary for the Salesian mission.

At this level, the need to distinguish well between collaborator and Cooperator is reaffirmed.

3. A Change of mentality first among the Salesians, then among the Cooperators

A distorted vision, in some moments of history of the Association, has presented the Cooperators as having little relevance for the Salesian mission and as something unattractive for the believers, particularly the young. The fear on the part of some Salesians of giving to the committed laity what is theirs has not facilitated the needed change at the level of mentality as well as at the level of action. The process of clarifying the identity of the Cooperators has not been an easy task and it cost the Chapters time and effort. The growth of the Association, whose responsibility falls on the SDB (FMA) but most of all on the confreres themselves, depends on the capacity to reinterpret Don Bosco's intuition without confining it within the same historical conditions of his time.

4. Rapport between the Salesian Congregation and the Cooperators

If one wants to express clearly the type of relationship that should exist between the Salesians and the Cooperators, one has to remember three key concepts:

- *COMMUNION* - the fact of belonging to the same spiritual and missionary Family demands that the links of communion and fraternity be intensified;
- *JUST AUTONOMY* - the lay Association needs to express itself responsibly before its members and the ecclesial community; autonomy can be called just if and when it recognizes the charismatic ties with and the specific function of the Congregation within the Salesian Family;
- *COLLABORATION* - Don Bosco's project for the salvation of the young needs the convergent presence of many apostolic forces. To work together responsibly is a duty of the whole Family.

SHORT NOTES ON THE RAPPORT BETWEEN THE FMAs AND THE LAY FAITHFUL: AN ON-GOING DIALOGUE

In the FMA the issue on the “laity” found its way when two other issues were discussed: the modality of belonging to the Salesian Family and the pastoral value of co-education.

1. The Salesian Family

The 1965 GC has amply treated this issue on the Salesian Family. Further studies on the “permanent charism” of the Founder followed. The 1981 GC ratified that the FMA belongs to the Salesian Family.

Article 3 of the Constitutions, referring to this identity, states: “Our Institution is a living part of the Salesian Family, which makes actual in history, in different forms, the spirit and mission of Don Bosco, by expressing its perennial newness ... Within the Salesian Family we share in the spiritual heritage of the Founder and we provide, as it happened at Mornese, the original contribution of our vocation.”

Other texts of the same Constitution bring out specific issues related with this theme.

2. Rapport with the Laity

Regarding the pastoral rapport with the laity, the attitude of the institute can be expressed this way: a continuous growth towards a convinced acceptance of the laity. Communion is not only at the level of activities but also at the level of the vocation of both groups; this is based on having received the same unique baptism and sharing the same unique call to the sanctifying missionary action capable of building up the Church.

3. Educational Community

The 1969 SGC clarified the concept of the “educating community”; it emphasized the unity of goals that must exist among its various segments, recognizing however the leading role and ultimate responsibility of the FMA communities.

The next Chapters developed and further reflected on the vocational and pastoral sense of the educating community, the task of animation corresponding to the FMA within the educating community. They went further than just giving directives; they considered the task of animation as evangelical, ecclesial and Salesian that respects the competencies and specific responsibilities.

“The other collaborators ---one reads from the XVII GC—do not just carry out a supporting role; they share in the educative responsibilities. They provide a specific contribution for the wider and updated dialogue concerning the problems of the family and the profession.” The XVIII GC in turn recommended: “To accept and to give value to the complementarity of skills and roles ... to give importance to what the lay people can contribute particularly regarding the knowledge of the young, the means of social communication, and the representation at the civic and church levels; to involve the Cooperators in a special way because of their lay and Salesian vocation and the Past Pupils who have already shared with us the living experience of the Preventive System.”

Officially the expression that is used with preference is that of “lay collaborators.” However, it is not difficult to see in this term the sense of sharing and communion.

4. The Cooperators

The relationship between the FMAs and these brothers and sisters has gradually been intensified, particularly since the identity of the Association has been clarified. There still exists the need to grow at the local level for a wider and more attentive involvement in the life of the Association. At the provincial level the sensitivity towards the Cooperators is more vivid and it is still growing.

5. Co-education

The Acts of the FMA General Chapters from XV to XVIII revealed the long journey taken by the Institute towards co-education, passing from an attitude of reluctance to a clear sense of giving it a pastoral value. This process has always been accompanied by a strong demand for formation and for clear educational goals. Neither has the reluctance been a symptom of being closed nor has the fact of giving value to coeducation been a sign of giving in to the environment. Both attitudes are realistic answers to different historical periods. It has been a constant preoccupation of the General Chapters and of the different Mother Generals to keep abreast with the Church, in dynamic fidelity to Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.

Sr. Maria Collino

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROMISE

A. VARIOUS DIFFICULTIES AND THEIR ORIGINS

Art.36, §3, of the RAL states: "Official entry into the Association takes place by the making of a personal 'Promise', by which they (the Cooperators) express their will to live their baptismal call in accordance with the present Regulations. They then receive their certificate of membership of the Association". And art.39 says very clearly: "The commitment to be a Cooperator lasts all through life".

Now it happens in some countries that this Promise raises problems. One person may say: "I do not feel able to make such an undertaking for my whole life". Another: "My husband does not agree with my making such a promise, and I think it only right to respect his opinion". And still another: "Salesian life is so simple! Why complicate it with a promise? Did Don Bosco really want that?" It is well therefore to recall the significance of this important act by which a Christian takes on publicly and in full awareness the obligation to live as a Cooperator this obligation accepted before God, before the Church, and before the Association and the Salesian Family!

- The origins of the difficulties.

Perhaps the first thing we should do is see whence the difficulty arises. It may be caused simply by the fact that the Promise is usually made with a certain publicity and solemnity before a group of Cooperators, or more frequently in some church with many people present. One may feel ill at ease in such a "demonstration", and prefer that the commitment be not blazed abroad to the whole neighbourhood and even in newspapers but kept discreetly within the knowledge of the local group. This is a perfectly legitimate desire, and the Promise can very well be made in the presence of a restricted number of people.

An aspiring Cooperator who says: "I do not feel able..". shows an awareness of the commitments to be assumed. This is indeed a noble attitude. Such a one should continue to reflect, to take part in the group activities and to pray a great deal. If the Lord is really calling him, he will give him the strength one day to take on the full obligations of the Cooperator, and fellow-members will not fail to let him feel their active, helping and sustaining presence. In the meantime let him already behave as a real Cooperator, sharing in all aspects of the group's life: this is essential. When the time is ripe and if it be God's will, he will become officially and publicly a member of the Association.

The same can be said of the candidate who says: "My husband does not want me to make the Promise". In this case it is not that she is unable to do so, but that making the Promise would cause a rift between husband and wife and one must not compromise the great good that is represented by peace in married life. For the moment therefore let her make the Promise before God in her heart and live externally as a good Cooperator. The hope is that one fine day the husband will change his mind and end up by being happy to let his wife enter the Association officially. The fact that her name does not yet appear on the Cooperators' register is of secondary importance.

As regards the candidate whose reaction is: "The Promise complicates matters; let us just take things as they come!", certainly has a great practical good will, but he shows that he has not reflected very deeply on the real significance of the Promise, and probably not on the significance of the RAL itself (which is not something just informal); maybe too he has not thought much about what it means to be a Cooperator. In this case it is well to recall the precise sense of the Promise, which goes back to Don Bosco himself.

B. WHAT WAS DON BOSCO'S MIND ABOUT THE PROMISE?

- Before the Regulations of 1876

Anyone who undertakes a serious study of the relationship of Don Bosco with his Cooperators - (and let us remember that they were the first and even the only ones to help him during the first eighteen years of his apostolate, given that the Salesian Society was founded only on 18 December 1859) - are surprised at the strictness with which he always wanted to bind them to himself personally and to his works. He never looked on them as mere occasional helpers, but as cooperators who shared in his charisma, and whom God himself had sent to form part of his movement for the salvation of the young and for the faith of the common people.

His bold and daring plan to found a single complex Salesian Society is well known. It was to consist of two kinds of members: those who bound themselves by religious vows, and "aggregate members" who

remained in the world but committed themselves to a way of life as close as possible to that of their religious brothers and sisters. All were to have the same Rule, because all had the same ideal: their common sanctification by working together for the salvation of the young. The famous "Chapter XVI" of the plan presented to Rome in 1864 ran as follows (cf. MB 7, 885):

1. Any person, even living without vows and in his own home and with his own family, can belong to our Society.
2. He does not take vows, but must practise those Rules which are compatible with his age, state and condition - teaching or promoting catechetics among poor children, helping to spread good books, promote triduums, novenas, retreats and other works of charity especially directed to the good of youth and the working classes.
3. To share in the spiritual benefits of the Society the member must make at least a promise to the Rector to engage himself in matters that in his judgement will tend to the greater glory of God.
4. This promise however does not oblige under pain of even venial sin".

We may note that the promise, expressed in these terms, is not made before God as is the present practice. But the important thing is the manifestation of a free and personal commitment in the hands of the major superior. Salesian religious made vows; Salesian cooperators made the promise.

Don Bosco struggled for ten long years between 1864 and 1874 to try to win the approval of the Congregation of Bishops and Religious for his plan to keep Salesian religious and cooperators closely united in the same Society and in the same apostolic work. That in itself is a clear indication of how much importance he attached to the plan and how much he had it at heart!

- The Regulations of 1876

The canonists did not give way and so Don Bosco, without further delay, set about organizing the Cooperators as an autonomous group, even though they would no longer be "aggregated" to the Salesian Society but only "associated" with it. Between 1874 and 1875 he wrote three different sets of draft regulations; they were entitled respectively: "Associates of the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales", "The Christian Union", and "The Association for Good Works". Already at the end of the second draft (1874) we find a formula by which a new associate commits himself to the observance of the Regulations by a signed declaration:

"The undersigned has read the regulations (note the expression) of the Salesian Association, and willingly adheres to them, both for the good of his own soul (note also this phrase - it is not only a matter of external activity), and also so as to join with others in procuring for his brothers and sisters those spiritual and temporal advantages that are compatible with his condition" (cf. G.Favini, *Il cammino di una grande idea*, LDC, Turin 1962, p.56).

In the third draft (1875) the personal commitment has become more precise: the previous formula of acceptance is now replaced by a signed declaration to be sent to the Rector Major.

"I, the undersigned, living at, have read the rules of the Salesian Association, and with the help of divine grace hope to observe them faithfully for the good of my soul (ibid. p.61; and MB 11, 540).

The same formula, with a detachable form, is found in the text presented to Pius IX in April 1876 and in the first two editions of the definitive Regulations of 12 July 1876, published at Albenga and Turin, with the addition of a declaration of acceptance on the part of the superior, which provides the official recognition of the commitment made by the new Cooperator (in Giovanni Bosco, *Opere edite*, XXVIII, 378); it corresponded to the certificate of membership issued at the present day.

Unfortunately, in the edition of Sampierdarena (January 1877) the statement of personal commitment has disappeared and the only thing remaining is the declaration of acceptance. One may wonder why this happened.

The reason is unknown. Probably the work involved in the organization of an Association which at the time was being deluged with applications from new Cooperators made the use of the forms too complicated. And Don Bosco himself, who was very much a realist, began distributing the Cooperator's certificate to many benefactors: in exchange for their collaboration he wanted to make them participants in

the spiritual advantages of the Association, to which he attached great importance; and he hoped to transform them gradually into convinced Cooperators who would be seriously committed and faithful to the Regulations. But as time went on, and especially after 1920, it became clear that this solution was not a good one: the true figure of the Cooperator became forgotten, and the corresponding apostolate became reduced to the making of financial contributions!

From all these historical facts, one conclusion is quite clear: there is no doubt at all that Don Bosco, according at least to the Regulations for Cooperators, which were so closely modeled on and inspired by the Constitutions of their Salesian “brothers”, took it for granted that the Cooperator made a serious commitment, analogous to that of the Salesian vows, and expressed personally and publicly in some way. The present rite of making the Promise is far from betraying Don Bosco’s thought, and in fact is a practical expression of his idea and desire.

C. THE REASON BEHIND THE PROMISE AND TO WHAT IT COMMITS THE COOPERATOR.

A proper understanding of the Promise is linked with the idea one has of the Cooperator’s identity. Anyone rejecting it out of hand would show that he had not understood what it means to be a Cooperator, and had not properly understood the import of the first six articles of the RAL (Chapter I).

In the first place, the Association is not merely a group of worthy and generous people, nor a simple private association of the faithful. As is made clear by art.6 of the RAL, it is a public association of the faithful, officially approved by the Apostolic See, whose members “collaborate actively in the Salesian mission in the name of the Church”, no less. It forms part of the concrete structure of the Church, in which it “has the status of an ecclesiastical public juridical person”. It is indispensable therefore for the Church and for the Association itself to know who is and who is not a true member, under what conditions, and when membership began. There must be some rite or visible sign of “entrance”, by which the candidate expresses his commitment and his official acceptance is made by the person responsible. Membership of the Association is an ecclesial fact, which cannot be left solely to interior feelings nor to the good will of the candidate and those in charge.

Secondly, the Association is not a structure of simple volunteering (“I’ll join for a couple of years and then we’ll see”), nor of a simple intention of helping Salesian works in some way, nor yet is it a simple group carrying out externally the Salesian apostolate with great perseverance and fidelity. It is something much deeper: that of being a Christian at a much more profound level, a freely made choice of an all-round living of baptismal and ecclesial faith “drawing inspiration from Don Bosco’s apostolic project” (RAL, art.3), “embracing a specific manner of living the Gospel and sharing in the Church’s mission... which affects one’s whole existence” (art.2), of “living the Gospel at the school of St. John Bosco” (Foreword), “a Gospel way of self-fulfillment” which sets the members “on a path that leads to holiness”, no less (RAL, art.50). In other words, it is a “Plan of life” (Foreword, §3) which of its nature must be expressed in “Regulations of apostolic life” which will be freely accepted. And so, “the commitment to be a Cooperator lasts all through life” (art.39).

Thirdly, becoming a Cooperator means more than just entering the Association. It means becoming at the same time officially a member of the Salesian Family, and thus “a bearer of the common Salesian vocation sharing responsibility for the vitality of Don Bosco’s project in the world” (art.5). The great Family needs to know who its members are and when they joined it to take up responsibility for the enrichment of the Family’s common good. All of its members enter their particular group by means of a more or less solemn rite: the Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and Don Bosco Volunteers by the profession of religious vows, the members of the Past-Pupils Association by their freely chosen inscription in a local group (cf. Statute of the World Confederation of the Past Pupils of Don Bosco, 1990, ch.IV, art.13 b.c.d.), and the Cooperators by the Promise. What could be more natural! Every group has its Constitutions or Statute or Regulations of Life, officially accepted at the moment of entry.

To what does the one making the Promise commit himself/herself? To answer this question, one has only to read carefully the formula of the Promise itself which is found in Art.40 of the RAL. It is made up of three parts:

The first is an act of thanksgiving to God the Father for the gifts of the past and in particular for the gift of the Salesian vocation, the “calling” by the Father through the Holy Spirit (cf.RAL art.2/1-2; 36/1; 38/1). These gifts are the fruit of the Father’s merciful love. The Promise is the expression of an exchange of love:

“I want to love you in return”. Note that the Promise is something so serious that it is made, not to God (in which case it would be a vow) but in the

presence of God and in the form of a prayer, in an atmosphere of grace and deep faith.

The second part is the expression of the Promise itself, of Salesian commitment for the future. In general it is a matter of “living the evangelical project of the Association”, and this is then spelled out in its four main aspects, which correspond respectively to Chapters I, II, III, and IV of the RAL:

- by being a faithful disciple of Christ and of the Church;
- by cooperating with God, especially for the salvation of the young;
- by living and spreading the Salesian spirit;
- by collaborating in Family communion and in collaboration with the local Church.

It is a synthesis which is clear, concentrated and complete.

The third part is the request for divine help so as to remain faithful. The strength of the Spirit is sought, in whom alone fidelity is possible (cf.RAL art.2/2). Here is recalled the beautiful biblical text which is placed at the head of the Promise: “I will run the way of your commands; you give freedom to my heart”, from Psalm 119. Further heavenly help is then asked for, that of Mary, Mother of the Church and Principal Patroness of the Association and the Salesian Family. There will also be, even though not specifically stated, the intercession of the other protectors of the Association (cf.art.35), and immediate and sustained help of fellow members (cf.art.39/1).

I take it for granted that the Cooperator will meditate frequently on this dense formula of commitment and renew it, particularly after confession and communion. And I would hope that the date of the commitment be kept in mind so as to celebrate the yearly anniversary.

D. RESPECT FOR CONSCIENCES AND BELIEF IN THE VALUE OF A PROGRESSIVE PROCESS.

“To commit oneself as a Cooperator ... is at one and the same time a gift and a free choice” (art.2/2). “The commitment to be a Salesian Cooperator is the result of a free choice, which has matured step by step under the action of the Holy Spirit” (art.36/1). This means that personal freedom in the face of a commitment so serious and all-embracing demands perfect respect, and any kind of pressure on the part of anyone at all must be avoided. Time must be allowed for progressive maturing to take place: “Whoever wishes to enter the Association accepts a programme of preparation which lasts as long as is necessary to verify that the calling really exists. It comprises ... “ (art.36/1). Hence there should be no haste to make the Promise so as to add solemnity to a coming Feast! All over the world in recent years the Association has extended and improved its formation programmes.

The fact remains that was pointed out earlier: a candidate may not feel comfortable about making the Promise, for psychological reasons in particular circumstances, or through fear of making a commitment that binds for life. This is a fact that must be fully respected. The candidate can go ahead in being part of the group and work with a full Salesian spirit, doing all that a Cooperator would do; this much is essential. But in all sincerity he or she must accept the fact of not being a Cooperator officially and publicly, not having received the certificate of membership that marks official entry in the Association. There are people who live a deeply Christian life, who nevertheless find difficulty and hold back from entering the Church by Baptism - we may recall the well known examples of the philosopher Bergson and of Simone Weil.

One can only hope that with time, prayer, and the experience of the progressive process, the difficulties will disappear. But even if they remain, each one’s conscience must still be respected, and the making of the Promise must not be made an absolute requirement for a person to do generous Salesian work as part of a group. There are many places in Don Bosco’s house!

Joseph Aubry

THE REASON FOR A PROMISE

Let us begin from a practical situation which occurs here and there in the Association: there are some who find it difficult to make a public declaration of their identity and membership of the Association by means of the “promise”, called for by art.40 of the Regulations of Apostolic Life. How does this difficulty arise? I would like to use this fact as the basis for a fundamental consideration.

First let us recall the formula of the promise:

“Father, I adore you because you are good and love everyone.

I thank you for having created and redeemed me,

for having called me into your Church,

and for having brought me in it to the knowledge

of the apostolic Family of Don Bosco,

which lives for you in the service of the young and poor.

Drawn by your merciful love,

I want to love you in return by doing good.

And so, after due preparation,

I PROMISE

to commit myself to live the evangelical Project of the

Association of the Salesian Cooperators,

- by being a faithful disciple of Christ in the Catholic Church;
- by working in your kingdom, especially for the advancement and salvation of the young;
- by deepening and witnessing to the Salesian spirit;
- and by collaborating, in Family communion, in the apostolic initiatives of the local Church.

Give me, Father, the strength of your Spirit,

that I may be able to remain faithful to this plan of life.

Mary Help of Christians, Mother of the Church,

help me and guide me.

Amen.”

The difficulty expressed by Cooperators who hesitate to make the “promise” stems from concerns of a juridical nature. Can the formula of the promise be considered, in fact, as being juridical? Most certainly not!

It is a prayer, and like every Christian and evangelical prayer it follows a line of thought that passes from adoration to thanksgiving (I adore you, I thank you); from love to commitment (Drawn by your merciful love, I promise to commit myself); from request to fidelity (Give me the strength of your Spirit, that I may be able to remain faithful).

I insist therefore that there are absolutely no grounds for fear of formalism.

It may be that not enough consideration has been given to the fact that the “promise” occupies in the Regulations of Apostolic Life the final place in the chapter dealing with “membership and formation” (cf. arts 36-40). At the end of a spiritual process of formation each one declares the will and intention to be a sign of God who is love.

The intuition of the Salesian Family stems from Don Bosco’s certainty that the Cooperator is a believer responsibly committed with others in the Salesian charism.

Don Bosco did not in fact use the word “CHARISM”.

He knew the word but it was not in current use at the time, as it is today or as it was at the time of St. Paul, but he was not unaware of the reality of its content. This is illustrated by historical facts that relate Don Bosco to the Salesian Congregation and to the Holy See, precisely concerning a conflict regarding the

Cooperators. He was not permitted to write in the Salesian Constitutions a chapter dealing specifically with the Cooperators as external Salesians committed co-responsibly in the Salesian charism.

It was an idea too advanced for the time and the dream could not be realized, but the substance remained; the idea of a lay person deeply inserted in the Salesian charism did not change, not even when certain practical realizations seemed to reduce the spiritual intuition to somewhat commonplace achievements.

Vatican II remedied the erroneous situation.

In fact, in Vatican II the Church opened new avenues and broader paths along which it became possible to revive and develop Don Bosco's intuition. And so at the present day the original salesian project acquires renewed strength.

But that is not all.

I make use of the reflections of a Carmelite scholar to express a new perspective. He says:

"Religious Institutes and Congregations must become aware of a reality that has changed profoundly, taking into consideration the fact that society at one time was explicitly and globally Christian, and had an evident and generalized ecclesial texture; at that time, it was still possible to speak of religious orders of men (as First Orders), of religious orders of women (as Second Orders), to which were aggregated, as a kind of appendix, the Associations of the Laity (the Third Orders, precisely).

But, in secularized and dechristianized societies, this does not make sense anymore. If we want to be logical, the associations of the laity, united around a concrete charism, are the ones who should be the First Order, extensively spread as a group of the People of God who live and act in line with a particular charism, in which vocations of special consecration insert themselves and grow according to the charism of a specific Founder" (Siclari Antonio).

These are the thoughts expressed by the Carmelite.

I do not want to express any judgement regarding the validity of his reflection, but it seems to me that what he says offers us some suggestions, which can be of use to those responsible for the Cooperators Association.

Charism speaks of life, presupposes a concrete experience, requires acceptance on the part of the person who is called to live it and make it fruitful.

And here arises a whole series of challenging questions which compel us as Cooperators to stand up and be counted, and to live the Salesian identity and membership of the Association publicly.

The ecclesiology of Vatican II has undoubtedly changed the relationship between the different groups of a single spiritual family. The perspective of Antonio Siclari is applicable to this extent.

What does this new approach imply for the Association? How can and must the Cooperators express their responsibility for the preservation, development and diffusion of Don Bosco's charism?

Is it possible to do anything which manifests a deep linkage with the charism and not want at the same time to be identified with it, even through a "public promise?"

I repeat: the promise represents the culmination of a process of formation, and is diametrically opposed to juridical concerns and fears of formalism.

It would be very useful to read over again the official commentary on article 40, so as to set in its proper place and perspective the "promise" which all Cooperators are called upon to make as a personal and apostolic commitment.

In the context we are examining the relationship between the Salesian charism and the Cooperators Association at the present day should not be overlooked. The theme involves at one and the same time both historical research and spiritual reflection.

Let us look once again at the Contents of the Regulations of Apostolic Life. They bring the Cooperators into line with the new perspectives of the Church and the Council. They proclaim and start from the responsibility of the Cooperators in respect of the charism.

Don Bosco's charism is unique. He wanted the three Groups founded by him to live intimately united among themselves so as to form in practice a single family. From the outset he was opposed to the idea of a First, Second and Third Order.

In his spiritual family all were called to live in unity, with its various constituent groups committed in shared responsibility to the elements of the same charism:

- docility to the Holy Spirit;
- acceptance of the salvific mission entrusted to the whole Church;
- need of communion among all the Groups;
- elaboration of shared spirituality;
- insertion in the renewal of the Church;
- search for answers to the needs of those to whom the mission is directed;
- etc, etc,.

SDBs, FMAs, and Salesian Cooperators, as the main bearers and centres of charismatic intuition, share the responsibility for the development of the Salesian identity.

Identity sends us back to charism, and charism calls for shared responsibility; and shared responsibility, in turn, demands the taking up of rights and duties.

The acceptance of responsibility, therefore, in respect of the charism is something that involves all three groups. None of them can refuse to accept it.

And so we go back to where we began in this reflection: why the promise? What does it add to our daily commitment?

In point of fact the real question ought to be: why *not* the promise, if the "gift of the Spirit" which is something internal is always seeking ways of external manifestation?

The serious commitment as regards the charism (a responsibility of every group) is officially expressed by each group in different forms, and with different signs of identity and membership. Some are called to manifest their linkage with God and their commitment to their fellow men with religious and evangelical vows. Others make use of a "promise".

It would be incorrect to say that all are responsible for the charism and then, allow some to place conditions in the way of acceptance of shared responsibility.

'With Don Bosco and the present day' is not only a happy saying; it also expresses the need to follow a rhythm of life in constant growth and renewal, while at the same time demanding each day greater clarity of vision and courage in making options!

Don Antonio Martinelli

THE COOPERATOR: PROTOTYPE OF THE NON-CONSECRATED LAY-PERSON IN THE SALESIAN FAMILY.

1. The presence of the laity in the Salesian charism

The secular dimension in the Salesian Family is not something that has to be sought with a lamp and a magnifying glass; it is patently obvious for all to see. It is enough to note that in the Salesian Family we find the secular dimension in the lay religious Brother (the Coadjutor), the lay Religious Sister (the FMA) and the secular character of the consecrated lay-person (the DBV), in the lay "Salesian" in the world (the Cooperator), and other lay people who belong to the Family by various titles, e.g. the Past-Pupils, the members of the Association of Mary Help of Christians, etc.

It could not be otherwise when you recall that the laity were there at the beginnings of this Family, and it is striking to see the importance Don Bosco gave to them at a moment in history in which the laity were considered as spectators rather than actors .

Don Bosco's mission called for the commitment of all possible forces, which even then were all too few, but they were all helpful and he accepted the help each one was able to offer according to his or her situation in life. The only condition was that they should have a sincere love for the young and be willing to do some good for the benefit of poor and abandoned youngsters.

From 1841 he was already thinking of forming a "Congregation" that would have been a real innovation in those times: a congregation made up of people of every age and condition, both interns and externs, with vows an without vows respectively. The latter in turn could be secular priests or lay people.

His plan could not be realized, but we find lay persons present from the beginning of his work (1841) until the end of the work of Foundation (1876). In the words of the Rector Major: "Don Bosco did not consider his long and laborious mission as a Founder complete until he had succeeded in giving a valid structure and an Identity Card to this Association (of Cooperators)". (AGC 318, p.4). And in another letter he adds: "We SDBs were born and have grown throughout history in communion with the laity, and they with us. After a Council which has analyzed and launched this immense ecclesial value, how could we fail to commit ourselves to the growth, improvement in the quality of communion, and increase in numbers of the participants?" (AGC 317, p.16).

2. The laity in the recent Salesian General Chapters.

If the laity are so essential for the Salesian charism, the SDB General Chapters could not set them aside and ignore them. And consequently many of the Chapters have considered their contribution to the Salesian charism. We shall look at the more recent ones. We could go back as far as the 19th Chapter, but we will limit ourselves to a rapid glance at the 20th, 21st and 23rd.

The GC20, which could be called the Chapter of the Salesian Family, contains two specific documents on the Laity: Ch.18 deals with Cooperators and Ch.19 with Past-Pupils. They are documents which cannot be overlooked, because from them emerge in transparent clarity the identity of these two groups of the Salesian Family, and the commitment made by the Congregation in their regard. They also specify the contribution made by both to Salesian work.

The GC21 enthused over the allegiance shown by these groups to Salesian educational work, and asked that they be given proper care as individuals and as Associations, with trained and competent delegates to help them.

The GC23 emphasized the need for the Laity to be involved in the Salesian mission, as the GC21 had done earlier, but with attention focused more directly on lay people in general and those of the Salesian Family in particular.

Following Don Bosco, these Chapters could not deny a self-evident fact: the strong lay presence in the Salesian charism. Speaking as they were of renewal and of the education of young people to the faith, they could not lose sight of the very important contribution which the Laity, and especially the laity of the Salesian Family, were giving and must continue to give to the Salesian charism.

3. *Fr Egidio Viganò, Rector Major, writes about the lay members of the Salesian Family.*

Salesian literature too could not ignore this essential component of the Salesian Family, and its importance led the Rector Major to write separate circulars, amongst others, on the following groups in the Family:

- to the Don Bosco Volunteers, in 1979;
- to the Cooperators, in 1986;
- to the Past-Pupils, in 1987.

In 1986 he also published another interesting circular with the title: “The lay person in the Salesian Family”.

In these circulars the Rector Major not only speaks of the identity of these groups, but presents motives and arguments for their relaunching in fidelity to Don Bosco. They are documents which tend to remain little known but are, so to speak, the latest word on what these groups are and represent in Salesian tradition.

4. *The Cooperator, prototype of the non-consecrated lay-person in the Salesian Family.*

As we have just seen, the lay presence in general and its diverse specific manifestations has always been, and continues to be at the present day, an essential element in the Salesian charism. But within this lay presence there is a group which, we could say, *transcends* the others and which could be called the prototype of the lay non-consecrated person in the Salesian Family: the Cooperators.

A great help to the understanding of this point is the lengthy reflection offered by the Rector Major to the Salesian Family in the documents already mentioned. Writing to Provincials in the Circular on Cooperators, he says: “Every Provincial therefore, with his Council and Rectors, should study this document (the Circular on the Cooperators) so as to renew and intensify the relevant initiatives to be promoted in the houses. We are concerned with a living part of our charism; to it Don Bosco attributes the possibility of doing ‘great things’. It is not something extra that has to be done; it is part of our very selves; it adds a great deal of energy to the ‘Movement’; it is a promise of greater fertility; it is a growth in fidelity to the Founder and a requirement of the Salesian identity” (AGC 318, p.10).

Further on in the same circular, speaking to the Cooperators, he says: “The Pontifical approval of your Regulations brings to an end the post-conciliar consolidation of the three great columns of the Salesian Family erected by Don Bosco: the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and the Cooperators. This means that together we shall be the bold and apostolic bearers of the Salesian vocation in the years to come.

In these circumstances the promulgation of the Regulations takes on a historical importance of no little significance.

If all of us (you, we Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians) are fully aware of this, we shall be able to understand the particular responsibility to which the Holy Spirit has called us as the present century nears its end” (AGC 318, p.12).

To emphasize further the particular nature of the laity in the Salesian Family, we may quote another text of the Rector Major: “In his way Don Bosco’s plan is fully and synthetically expressed in a connected and complementary manner in the Salesian Congregation, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Cooperators’ Association. The three fundamental documents describe the identity and special characteristics of each group; taken together they constitute the path followed in practice by the Founder to ensure the future of the ‘Work of the Oratories’ begun in Turin in 1841. Don Bosco’s Regulations affirm the indispensable presence of you Cooperators in the Salesian charism” (AGC 318, p.17).

But the passage which shows most clearly the unique nature of the Cooperator among other lay people of the Salesian Family is the following paragraph from the Circular on “The lay person in the Salesian Family”. He says: “But there exists an outstanding Association, that of the Salesian Cooperators. From the point of view of the Christian vocation of the lay person in our Family, this must be considered the centre of reference for all such possibilities, because it is not an alternative to other associations, but rather aims at animating those others. The Cooperators are not an Association which, as such, organizes works and specific initiatives; the Association is aware that it shares responsibility with us in preserving in all its

members and in our Family the vitality of Don Bosco's plan, bringing to it the riches of its own secular condition. In doing this it retains the possibility of offering animators for the identity of any other group or association whose specific nature needs to be known and appreciated, without prejudice to its autonomy.

On account of this vocational character, the Cooperators' Association has particular bonds with our Congregation; it is in fact called upon to ensure, in special communion with us, the identity and vitality of the spiritual and apostolic heritage of Don Bosco in the world. (...)

If all the authentic laity who are in mission with us (Past Pupils, Collaborators, Friends) became members of this special Association, it would strengthen their personal Salesian identity and in addition they would bring to the other associations of which they might be members a greater commitment in a better Family communion. This is what Don Bosco wanted" (AGC 317, p.19-21).

Again, in line with the vocational character of the Association, the Rector Major, following a tradition which has its roots in Don Bosco himself, writing to the Past-Pupils, says: "A particular aspect, emphasized by the GC21 (cf.GC21, 69), is that of Catholic Past-Pupils 'who have made the choice of the Gospel'. Their 'closer' participation brings them nearer to the Salesian Cooperators. It is for this reason that they are invited to join the Cooperators: the community, say our Regulations, 'should help those who are more sensitive to Salesian values to develop in themselves the vocation of a Cooperator' (SDB Reg.39). Nevertheless the two Associations are specifically different one from the another. That of the Past Pupils has its own physiognomy, linked with the communion and initiatives stemming from the 'education received'" (AGC 321, p.26-27).

It is important to have a proper understanding of the relationship between the Cooperators' Association and that of the Past-Pupils, and so the Rector Major continues: "The Cooperators Association is not in itself an alternative to that of the Past Pupils; it constitutes rather a centre of spiritual and ecclesial referral for those who have made the gospel option. Past Pupils who are Cooperators generously make their own, as convinced 'laymen', the objectives of their own Past-Pupils Association and place at its disposal the riches of the grace of Christ in the spirit of Don Bosco to bring to fruition among their fellow members and their former companions the 'education they received'" (ibid.).

Finally we recall a text of the Special General Chapter which sums up in itself the characteristic of the Salesian Cooperator within the Salesian Family: "In fact it is necessary to see clearly that being a Salesian Cooperator is to answer a true call; it is to accept an authentic Salesian vocation, to follow a true apostolic vocation. Through divine grace you have been enlightened and called to share in the mission of the Founder, in accordance with your state of life and in line with his Spirit" (SGC 730).

The Salesian Cooperator, therefore, is not just any kind of lay person in the Salesian Family, since he/she responds to an authentic Salesian vocation, sharing with the SDBs and FMAs in its mission and spirit.

5. *The Cooperators' Promise in this context.*

And so the presence of the Cooperator in the Salesian charism is not something indifferent but an essential integrating element. His absence would be an impoverishment. His preeminent lay position within the charism arises from being 'a true Salesian in the world', i.e. to be part of the Salesian charismatic current, and hence able to make his own the plan of Don Bosco, as something that belongs to him. This position that he holds within the charism is not something that should give him a sense of superiority over others, but rather an awareness of his responsibility for ensuring that the charism gives rise to abundant fruit, and this he will be able to do if he lives his lay Salesian vocation in an authentic manner.

It is not only a question therefore of feeling part of the charism, but of feeling responsible for it, and the Cooperator is not afraid to express this openly, by making a "promise" before his brothers and sisters in the Association. In the last analysis it is a matter of taking things seriously and of being willing to be known as having made an option which is at the same time both a gift and an act of freedom (cf. RAL 2,2).

But there is still one more thing to be said: if the Cooperator is the prototype of the non-consecrated lay person in the Salesian Family (which is the theme of this article) he cannot fail to accept identification and be recognized even externally as a person identified with the charism. There is no doubt that there are many sympathizers, friends and benefactors, who can offer more or less consistent help of various kinds to the Salesian charism, without the need to be identified with it. They will always be welcome, but we do not identify them with the prototype of the lay "Salesian" in the world. This title we reserve for the person

who has assumed the charism in a responsible manner, not merely as a temporary commitment, but as something which implies “a specific manner of living the Gospel and sharing in the Church’s mission” (RAL 2.2). It is natural that if there is a lay person committed in the world in a Salesian fashion, not in fits and starts but permanently, such a one alone can be presented as a prototype for any lay person who contributes to the charisma.

His identification with the charism, the appropriation of it as his own, are things the Cooperator does through a promise by which he commits himself to live out the evangelical project of the Association of Salesian Cooperators.

José Reinoso

THE ASSOCIATION OF SALESIAN COOPERATORS: A PUBLIC ASSOCIATION OF CHRIST'S FAITHFUL

INTRODUCTION

Experience of numerous meetings of Cooperators at various levels, and questions that reach the Central Office from time to time, lead us to the conclusion that *what is implied by the fact that the Association of Salesian Cooperators is what the Code of Canon Law refers to as a "public association of Christ's faithful" is not always properly understood.* Sometimes, in fact, decisions are made and things are done which are in open contradiction to what the statutes of the Association require. Some members behave as though it were a group like any other, to be treated according to one's own ideas. It can be said that the nature of the Association is not respected because its ecclesial identity is not understood.

It seems opportune therefore to recall, through an article in *Cooperatores*, some fundamental ideas concerning the significance of being an association of Christ's faithful.

The official Commentary on the Regulations of Apostolic Life (RAL) has dealt with this problem, at least in part, and so will serve us as a point of reference, but the Church's Code of Canon Law is the obligatory text for the development of the theme.

THE ECCLESIAL CHARACTER OF THE ASSOCIATION

Chapter I of the RAL, which deals with the identity of the Salesian Cooperator, contains only six articles. The last of these defines the ecclesial character of the Association in the following terms:

"§1. In the Church the 'Association of Salesian Cooperators' is approved by the Apostolic See as a public association of the faithful and participates in the spiritual riches of the Society of St. Francis de Sales. Its members

- collaborate actively in its mission in the name of the Church,
- are united with the Salesian Congregation under the authority of the Rector Major,
- act in a spirit of fidelity to the Bishops and to the Church in her other projects.

§2. The Association of Salesian Cooperators, which has the status of an ecclesiastical public juridical person, has its headquarters in Rome."

Art.6 of the RAL, therefore, presents the Association as a juridical reality inserted in the canonical structure of the Church. Hence all the implications that follow from this fact must be given due consideration, i.e. if the Salesian Cooperators Association is a public association of Christ's faithful with the nature of a public ecclesiastical juridical personality, it must be treated accordingly. It is opportune to recall that, in the words of the Official Commentary on the RAL, "Article 6 takes up the fundamental guidelines of the Founder, contained in his Regulations, and presents them in updated form on the basis of the renewed Code of Canon Law" (Comm.RAL, p.82).

THREE REALITIES WHICH DEFINE THE ASSOCIATION

In art.6 we find two interconnected realities since every public association of the faithful erected by the competent ecclesiastical authority is constituted a juridical person by the very decree by which it is established (can.313); and to them is added a third, which is the equivalence of the Association to a 'Third Order' since it is united to the Salesian Congregation under the authority of the Rector Major. An understanding of these realities is important for a correct attitude towards the Association.

A PUBLIC ASSOCIATION OF CHRIST'S FAITHFUL

According to the Code of Canon Law "associations of Christ's faithful which are established by the competent ecclesiastical authority are called public associations" (can.301,§3). Three elements are required for an association to be qualified as public:

- the act of the ecclesiastical authority from which the new association takes its rise;
- the objective pursued, connected with the satisfying of the general interests of the association, and hence of the particular aims of the ecclesiastical institution in general;
- that it acts in the name of the Church.

The Salesian Cooperators Association contains all these elements, as is stated in the Commentary to the RAL when it says: “This is precisely true in the case of the Association of Salesian Cooperators since 9 May 1876, the date on which it was recognized by Pius IX in the Brief ‘Cum sicuti’” (Comm.RAL, p.82). And so art.6 describes the Association of Salesian Cooperators as an association of the faithful with a juridical personality. In virtue of the decree of erection the Association enjoys the status of a public ecclesiastical juridical person, a reality which is affirmed in art.6 §2.

AN ASSOCIATION EQUIVALENT TO A ‘THIRD ORDER’

Can.303 states: “Associations whose members live in the world but share in the spirit of some religious institute, under the overall direction of the same institute, and who lead an apostolic life and strive for Christian perfection, are known as third orders, or are called by some other suitable title.” These associations are governed by the norms common to all associations of the faithful and also, as is natural, by the norms contained in their own rules and statutes, into which will be transfused those spiritual and charismatic indications which constitute the bond of each one with a particular religious Institute and distinguish them one from another.

This is the case of the Salesian Cooperators Association, because:

- it is an association of apostolic life: an expression which inspired the title given to the Regulations;
- it is linked with a religious institute, the Society of St. Francis de Sales; this is the reason why the Regulations were approved by the Congregation for Religious and not by the Pontifical Council for the Laity;
- it shares in the spiritual heritage of that Society, which are all the Salesian values proper to the apostolic project of Don Bosco, common to all the vocational Groups of the Salesian Family;
- it is placed under the overall direction of the Society of St Francis de Sales, in the sense defined by the Regulations themselves (cf. Comm.RAL, p.83).

The juridical configuration of the Association defined by the two expressions means that both the general ecclesiastical legislation concerning associations of the faithful and those regarding public associations apply to it.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS AND APPLICATIONS OF PARTICULAR INTEREST CONCERNING THE PRESENT THEME

After examining these realities we naturally want to see what incidence they have in the animation and guidance of the Association, as described by certain canons which affect these realities.

1. *Public associations operate in the name of the Church.*

(a) A public association erected by the competent ecclesiastical authority becomes a juridical person by virtue of the very decree of erection, and receives (to the extent it needs it) the mission to carry out its activities in the Church’s name (can.313). This requirement is met by art.6 §1 when it says explicitly that “the members collaborate actively in its mission in the name of the Church”. This means that the Cooperators do not work merely as *members* of the Church, something that concerns all the baptized, but *in the name of* the Church. Hence their apostolate is officially recognized by the ecclesiastical authority and becomes part of the mission of the Christian community. The apostolic commitment and the manner in which it is fulfilled are described in the Regulations of Apostolic Life. This fact reveals the noble nature of the Cooperators’ apostolate and their responsibility before the ecclesial community. Their apostolate must always reflect the true face of Christ and of his Body which is the Church. At the same time no one may use the Association for his own private purposes or those of a particular group. No one may ever try to take over the Association, but must seek in the Spirit the best way to correspond with its mission within the Church. We may ask ourselves whether those with responsibility in the Association behave as its servants or its masters.

(b) Cooperators collaborate also in the mission of the Church “in a spirit of fidelity to the Bishops and in collaboration with other ecclesial forces”, as is indicated in can.311 which asks members of institutes of consecrated life who preside over or assist associations which are joined in some way to their institute to ensure that these associations help the apostolic works existing in the diocese, cooperating under the direction of the local Ordinary with associations which are directed to the exercise of the apostolate in the diocese.

It is evident therefore that Cooperators must feel the obligation to walk with the local Church, contributing to it what is specifically theirs. They cannot stand aside from those who, like themselves, are at the Church's service, i.e. other apostolic associations, and still more in the case of those which are closer to us or belong to our Family, such as the Past-Pupils Associations of the Salesian Family.

2. *The particular statutes.*

In accordance with can.304 §1, all public associations must have their own statutes, the approval of which is a necessary preliminary to the decree of erection.

The statute must contain all the elements which serve to define the association, both as regards its objectives and its activities. Once the statute has been drawn up, it must be approved by the competent ecclesiastical authority. It is natural that the statutes of such associations (the RAL for the Cooperators), which are public associations of the faithful, should require the approval of ecclesiastical authority since they operate in the name of the Church. If such statutes should happen to require subsequent modification, they must be submitted for fresh approval.

The Regulations of Apostolic Life must therefore be observed because they have been approved by the Holy See. For this reason no one may play fast and loose with the Regulations or make decisions contrary to what they say or not in accordance with their spirit. Sometimes one hears of arbitrary decisions being made which certainly have no juridical force and are merely impositions which have nothing to do with what the Association should do or be; e.g. decisions which should be made collectively but are made by an individual without the least authority to do so, and are then imposed on a group or a Centre.

3. *Official acts recognized by the Church.*

As a public juridical person, the Salesian Cooperators Association can perform, in the manner foreseen by the Regulations, official acts recognized by the Church in respect of: the group apostolate, collaboration within the Association and with apostolic forces external to it, the acceptance of candidates, the formation and dismissal of its members, its organization at various levels and the administration of its goods, as appears very clearly in the Regulations which have been made in the light of canonical legislation.

If arbitrary actions must be eliminated when there is question of statutes, still more is this the case when the matter is one of acts officially recognized by the Church, e.g. the acceptance of candidates, which must be made in accordance with precise regulations. At the other extreme there has sometimes taken place the dismissal of all the members of a Centre by a peremptory edict made by someone with no authority to do so, with phrases like: "Here we will start again from scratch".

4. *Internal organizational autonomy.*

All the associations have internal organizational autonomy recognized by canon law in respect of their statutory dispositions (can.215). This means that the associations can not only make organizational and executive regulations which permit the implementation of what is defined by statute, but can also adopt deliberations necessary for the group life. Such deliberations are binding on the associates and also on the organs of government of the association. The law foresees therefore the freedom of associations in the functioning of their associative organs, and in particular organs of deliberation and governance.

5. *Jurisdictional power of the ecclesiastical authority.*

The competent ecclesiastical authority has jurisdictional power to prescribe norms of a general character, or to intervene in associations with emergency procedures.

The supervision of the ecclesiastical authority, as specified in its functions of vigilance and control of which can.305 speaks, is carried out in consequence by checking to see that the association's activities are not in conflict with the general and particular norms of canon law, and with the objectives of the statutes. Such authorities have also a great discretionary power for assessing whether activities are consistent with the character of the association, and hence with the mission the association is called to carry out on the Church's behalf.

The special juridical regime of public associations, deriving from the fact that they act in the name of the Church, implies a special manner of dependence on the competent ecclesiastical authority. This is

characterized among other things in matters concerning the appointment, confirmation, and removal of organs of government of the association, and in the wider framework of general powers of vigilance and control over them recognized by the authority in question (can.315).

6. *The origin, regime, and dissolving of the associative linkage.*

The origin, regime and dissolution of the linkage with the association are left for determination by the statutes and other internal norms, which are an expression of the specific intention of the competent authority.

The requirements for joining public associations are determined by the statutes, as are the relevant ways of becoming members (can.307). To them are added other requirements already determined by law:

- profession of the Catholic faith;
- integral preservation of ecclesiastical communion;
- freedom from excommunication.

The Association has a worldwide experience, and undoubtedly there will be here and there some difficulty concerning the requirements for admission. Each case needs to be studied individually so as to find a just solution.

8. *The goods of the Association.*

Can.319 §1 foresees that associations will administer their goods and property in accordance with their respective statutes, and under the overall supervision of the competent ecclesiastical authority, to which they have the obligation of giving an account of their administration. One must be aware of the fact that the goods of public associations come under the heading of ecclesiastical goods and are subject to ecclesiastical dispositions as well as to the statutes of the individual associations. For the Salesian Cooperators Association the RAL (art.49) is very clear regarding the administration of its goods. The Commentary on the RAL discusses the matter at length and its consultation is recommended (Comm.RAL, pp.453-461).

In any case it must be kept in mind that the possession and use of the temporal goods of the Association, insofar as they are ecclesiastical goods, must be tailored to the achievement of the particular objectives of the Association (can.1254 §1).

CONCLUSION

This brief excursus through the canons which govern the public associations of the faithful has shown us the need to treat the Association with due respect and seriousness. Briefly it is an invitation to know it better so as to lead and guide it more effectively. What is of interest to us is not the Association in the abstract, but the persons who make it up and who, through it, seek a “path that leads to holiness” (RAL 50). This is something that deserves all our attention and care to do things with the greatest responsibility.

Very often one gets the impression that the Association begins with a lot of enthusiasm and flourishes here and there, but then because of lack of structural solidity or whole-hearted interest and application by leaders, ends by dying out altogether, until someone else starts it up again from scratch, thus starting a new cycle which frequently ends in the same manner. This is certainly not the end to which the excellent fifty articles of the RAL lead when they are faithfully applied and lived with the optimism that is proper to a Salesian heart.

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