

## THE SALESIAN COOPERATOR IN THE SALESIAN FAMILY AND IN THE WORLD

«You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you,  
and have appointed you that you should go and bear fruit,  
and that your fruit should remain» (Jn. 15:16)

The Holy Spirit raised up Don Bosco. Jesus chose His Disciples and appointed them to bear much fruit, a fruit that would last. As disciples of Jesus and Sons and Daughters of Don Bosco, the Salesian Cooperators are called to bear much fruit. What a great gift and stupendous mission have been entrusted to us! In order to understand the *Project of Apostolic Life* and to live it authentically, we must allow ourselves to be illuminated by this great Mystery.

In a well-known page of the prophet Ezekiel, he describes the wood of the vine. What value does it have? None. The wood of the vine is the only wood from among the trees of the countryside with which one can do nothing; nothing, no useful object, can be made from it. The wood of the vine is good for only one thing: to allow the vital fluid to flow to the branches so they produce fruit; therefore, the *wood* of the vine is wood useless for anything except to bear fruit. And it is to this image of the prophet Ezekiel that Jesus refers in His famous discourse on the Vine and the Branches in Chapter 15 of John's Gospel. In Israel's culture, the vine was the image of the people, of the people of Israel. There is the famous canticle of the love of the Lord for his vineyard in Chapter 5 of the prophet Isaiah; the prophet Jeremiah also speaks of Israel as a vine. Since Jesus declares Himself "the True Vine", there must exist false vines. Jesus continues substituting the reality of Israel with that of His own Person: not the manna from Heaven, but He Himself is the True Bread which gives life to the people; He is the True Light in contrast to the Law; He is the True Vine, the True People planted by the Lord. And the Father "is the Vinedresser". Thus, we can see that there are distinct roles: Jesus is the Vine, through which the Life-giving fluid flows, and the Father is the Vinedresser. What is the concern of the Vinedresser? That the vine might always bear fruit; indeed, the Evangelist writes, "every branch that in Me does not bear fruit, He cuts away."

What is the meaning of this expression? The Evangelist is speaking of the Christian community where there is a love that is communicated by the Lord, a love received from the Lord, and this love must be transformed into a love shown to others. This is characteristic of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, one takes in the Body of Christ, the True Bread, the Source of Life. He or she is then to be disposed to become bread, the source of life, for others. There is a risk, though: within a Community there might be someone who absorbs this vital fluid, this energy, this love, and this Bread, but then does not become bread for others or transform the love that he or she receives into love for others. He or she is a passive element who thinks only about his or her own interests and about him or herself and therefore does not communicate life. It's not the other branches and not even Jesus, but the Father, Who takes it away because it is a branch which is useless.

Love which translates into service is the guarantee that one is in full contact with the Lord. Jesus repeats this, saying, "Remain in Me and I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself if it does not remain on the vine, neither can you if you do not remain in Me." Therefore, Jesus continues to insist that this love received from Him must be transformed into a communicative love; otherwise, it is useless. Jesus returns to reclaim His title, His Divine condition: "I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who

remains in Me and I in him" – in this dynamic process of fusion with God, He asks only to be welcomed into the life of the believer, so as to spread its existence further – "to bear much fruit." The more one gives life to others, the more one receives. One has only what has been given to him. The greater, the more unlimited, the gift of life to others is, the more unlimited will be God's response. But then, Jesus warns: "He who does not remain in Me is thrown away like a branch and withers." This expression which we have translated with "withers" is, literally, "becomes arid". The Evangelist takes the expression from Chapter 37 of the prophet Ezekiel, who imagined the situation of the people as a valley full of dry bones, indicating that the people were without the Holy Spirit. And so, he who does not remain in Jesus – he who receives this love and does not communicate it to others – becomes arid because one possesses only what one gives to others. Behold the guarantee of Jesus (though, unfortunately, we, in our modern language have re-dimensioned it somewhat): everyone knows the expression "Ask for what you want and it will be given to you"; however, we forget the two conditions put by Jesus: – *if you remain in Me*, therefore, if we communicate to others the love received from Him – *if My words remain in you*, therefore they remain the guide for orienting our life, our existence, and a love which becomes service to others – at this point, and only at this point, preceded by these two conditions, does Jesus say, "Ask for what you want and it will be given to you." So, when one lives in harmony with the Lord, when a man or a woman's life is founded on that of God to the point of becoming one thing only, the only thing that he will ask for will be the gift of the Holy Spirit and a greater capacity to love. The Father will take care of the rest. The Father does not respond to the needs of His children; rather, He foresees them. This gives us great security. And take note of the ending: "In this is My Father glorified." There used to be a way of thinking that said God needed to be glorified through extraordinary works and gloriously great things; but no, the only way in which to manifest the glory of God, the revelation of His love, is a love which becomes like His, "that you may bear much fruit and become My disciples." The only manner to give glory to God is to manifest in our life that forgiveness, that mercy, and that sharing which in some manner resemble His.

This is the underlying choice which traverses the entire *Project of Apostolic Life* and its first chapter. It is a mysterious reality, but true and exalting. Here is born the "Salesian charism." It is the Holy Spirit Who, by calling the Cooperator to become a disciple of Don Bosco, animates him or her in the apostolic task which gives fruit – communion within the Association and with the other members of the Salesian Family and the Salesian Spirit. The first chapter defines, in a general and global manner, the qualitative and original identity of the Cooperators and of the Association. It delineates in broad strokes who the Salesian Cooperator is, what he or she does, how he or she does it, and what is his or her place and role in the Salesian Family and in the Church. Therefore, it covers what is of fundamental importance - laying the foundation of that building called the Association of the Salesian Cooperators.