

The Project of Apostolic Life:

From being new to being lived – paths of co-responsibility

1. Responsibility, co-responsibility, and sanctity

Art. 2 Salesian Cooperators: a Specific Vocation in the Church

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

The idea of responsibility/co-responsibility immediately calls to mind the term "response," which, in its turn, remands us to a question. That is, if "responsibility" is understood in its fullest sense, it is intimately tied to vocation. It is the response to a question which arises from the depths within and which comes from the Lord. One seeks to follow through by responding to it after having discerned about it – with the encouragement and support of one's brothers/sisters and the community. Responsibility is indissolubly linked to the recognition of one's vocation. The Association of Salesian Cooperators represents a privileged place in which this dynamic of question and response is put into action and is developed.

The Association is, in fact, the place in which one succeeds in perceiving this gift which God has given to each one. It is discovered through its constant "exercise," with the help of others and, in particular, through the testimony of those who have put into effect decisive and definitive existential choices, living them with joy, and through having "before them the example of men and women happy in their faith." All of this is verified in the Association, not in any artificial way, but naturally, in the ordinariness of daily life and in interpersonal encounters. Moreover, the Association, through its own "associating" of people, succeeds in clearly expressing that whatever one receives has a communal destination. In other words, we cannot receive any gift under the pretext of keeping it for ourselves but we must offer it for the life of the community, of society, and of the world.

The beautiful Good News that we have and for which we have become responsible is to be communicated and put at the disposition of others. The following point regarding responsibility and co-responsibility is a crucial one: **we must move away from a "proprietary" dimension of existence so as to make space for a principle of gratuitousness.** The choice of the Salesian Cooperator is symptomatic of this attitude for his/her vocation exists as a response to a gift given to him/her for all, and as a placing of him/herself at the service of all - of the whole group.

Beyond this, though, even if each one responds to his/her personal vocation and is thereby responsible in it, still there exists the vocation to sanctity, as reaffirmed by Vatican Council II. Everyone is, in a certain sense, co-responsible for this vocation which is encouraged and fostered by the Association, which, itself, constitutes an authentic school of sanctity. This is a sanctity which certainly is not intimistic or spiritualistic but rather strongly incarnate and which comes alive and becomes concrete within the journey of the Church and the history of Man, and which, therefore, becomes fully responsibility and co-responsibility.

Within the Association, in fact, **the call to sanctity is placed on a level which is not only personal but also communal.** The responsibilities that one takes on are an occasion to live in a holy manner so as to receive and

to adhere lovingly and faithfully to His Holy Will and to live in a way which is “divinely active”, grasping the plan that God has for the good of both the individual members and for the Association as a whole, We are “called to become saints together” (I Corinthians 1:2) according to St. Paul's teachings. The efficacious reference points of the Salesian Family – our Saints and Blesseds – sustain us along this path.

2. Tending towards communion

Art. 21 Brothers and Sisters in Don Bosco

Their common apostolic Vocation and membership in the same Association makes Salesian Cooperators spiritual brothers and sisters. Indeed, “united with one heart and one soul alone” they live their communion with those bonds characteristic of Don Bosco’s spirit.

They joyously take part in the “family life” of the Association through getting to know each other, growing together, exchanging faith experiences, and working on apostolic projects.

They foster the associative life by welcoming each other reciprocally.

Responsibility, co-responsibility, and sanctity fit within this horizon of tending towards communion, which is understood as *the* fundamental yearning of all life, and of Christian life. From this perspective, every form of Christian commitment and of apostolate, exists in line with this fundamental tendency. “The faithful are called to engage in the apostolate as individuals in the varying circumstances of their life. They should remember, nevertheless, that man is naturally social and that it has pleased God to unite those who believe in Christ into the people of God (*see* I Peter 2:5-10) and into one body (*see* I Cor. 12:12).” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 18)

We are treating of two arguments with differing characters: the one derives from an **anthropological** perspective; the other from an **ecclesiological** reflection. In fact, one comes to recognize the need inscribed in human nature to cultivate social relationships because a person’s experience can find fulfillment only in loving interaction with others. One also recognizes that the organized apostolate is one form which responds to God's desire to see Christians united as His people and to see them live united as members of one body. **“The group apostolate of Christian believers then happily corresponds to a human and Christian need and at the same time signifies the communion and unity of the Church in Christ.”** (*ibid.*)

This is an exercise of communion which is not simply from within or understood in idealistic terms, but is full, intense, and fruitful co-responsibility: from knowing that we are one people and brothers and sisters one derives a sense of profound dedication to others and the other.

3. Co-responsibility, social by nature, ecclesial by nature

Art. 22 Co-responsible in the Mission

§1. The Salesian Cooperator feels responsible for the common mission and carries it out according to his or her own conditions in life, competencies, and possibilities, giving it valuable and substantial support. He or she shares educative and evangelizing co-responsibility in the Association. Each Cooperator must participate in the meetings for programming and evaluating the various activities and in choosing those who will undertake specific responsibilities.

If called to take on particular responsibilities, he or she commits him or herself to carry them out with fidelity and in a spirit of service.

§2. With responsibility and a sense of belonging, every Salesian Cooperator supports the economic autonomy of the Association so that it can carry out its mission.

This tending towards communion expresses and indicates, in a certain way, the multiplicity of the forms of co-responsibility within that strict unity between the dimension of our being gregarious by nature and the ecclesial dimension of being Church, the people of God. This does not allow us to take on an idealistic attitude as much as it allows us to **see to the fulfilment of courageous choices together with others**, having everyone's needs at heart and valuing fully each one's contributions in the simplicity and creativity of their forms. This causes us to become, therefore, responsible for everyone, and, all of us together, co-responsible.

The Association is, therefore, a place for sharing, in which, as in every family, different generations interact, sharing and comparing their ideals and expectations, dreams and disappointments, bitter moments and joyous ones. In this way, it is possible to care for and reinforce an authentic and efficacious relational style which places love for the person and for his or her life at the center of every journey and every proposal. This teaches, in its ordinariness, a love which is able to confront situations of conflict with clarity and openness and which is able to cultivate communion and hope in people's hearts.

The Association, therefore, carries out a role of **authentic human promotion**, in its co-responsible way of relating. Living an active life in the Association means, therefore, identifying with the ordinariness of people's lives and trying to spread an authentic style of communion and of great passion for relationships, which become today – in a time marked by the prevalence of ephemeral and narcissistic attitudes – a privileged path for announcing and giving witness to the Good News. It means, in just a few words, **to educate to become responsible for others, keepers of our brothers and sisters.**

In educating to relationships, and permitting the experience of them, the Association educates, raises up in us a sense of "we," and fosters this growth in us, helping us taste its beauty. This is a "we" that does not end with the group or the Association – neither does it have the group or the Association as its endpoint but it grows greater, expands, and opens itself up until it encompasses **the Diocesan and the Universal Church, one's area, and the world.** It is a "we", therefore, with a great ecclesial and social worth. It is a "we" which has "added value" for building communion and co-responsibility in every place and situation.

The experience of the Association as group, in fact, is not reduced to a "purely organizational reality," but with the human and spiritual weight that gives substance to the encounter between persons **"...[leaders] within the Association, at whatever level, carry out said roles in a spirit of service, according to the principles of communion, co-responsibility, synergy, and cooperation."** (Regulations, Art. 7) Life in the Association is substantially the place of communion and co-responsibility, *per se*. The structures through which people's lives mature as they go deeper into the life of the Association are not walls that constrain the spontaneity of the encounters between an "I" and a "You" but ones that allow us not to lose the abundance of the gift – of relationships which are offered to us and which make us a "we." In this sense, **the places where the life of the Association happens are authentically formative, as the sine qua non school of fraternity, and of the continuous exercise of collegiality."**

4. Co-responsible within the Church: *sensus ecclesiae*

Art. 4 The Association in the Church

§1. The Association of Salesian Cooperators is approved by the Apostolic See as a public Association of the Faithful and shares in the spiritual patrimony of the Society of St. Francis de Sales.

The members actively collaborate in its mission, in the name of the Church, under the authority of the Rector Major as Don Bosco's Successor, in a spirit of fidelity to its Pastors and in collaboration with other ecclesial forces.

Vatican Council II pointed out that the Church is the bearer of a very lofty vocation and an indispensable mission, defining Her more historically as the "People of God".

This is a vision of the Church in which there is the **fullness of co-responsibility and of equal dignity for all**, without any individualism at any level. It is "communitarily" faithful within one entity while being differentiated in multiple ministries and charisms.

Within the Church, all, both ordained and lay, are Cooperators with God and each other.

Built on the foundation of the Apostles and with Mary, who is its image and prefiguration, the entire Church is a great Co-operator with the Father and with Christ in the work of the patient construction of their Kingdom. There is no true and complete cooperation with God outside of the Church: Don Bosco was also convinced of this. In the Church, all the members, without exception, are called to cooperate actively in the Divine task of salvation. Today, therefore, Christ, in the name of the Father, and Mary and the Church in the name of Christ, call to themselves and send to others every baptized person who is consciously aware of his faith. To lazy, unengaged, sleeping Christians, the Master of the Vineyard says: "Wake up! Why are you here all day long doing nothing? – Their dramatic response: Because no one has hired us! – Therefore, *go, you, too*, into my vineyard!" (Mt. 9:37). The Council has reaffirmed this with great clarity, and in a very impressive way, using the term "cooperation". **There are to be no parasites in the Church:** everyone baptized is personally called to collaborate, as a good son, in the paternal undertaking of God, and precisely for this reason, everyone, whether ordained or lay, receives from the Holy Spirit – in *different capacities*, and with different gifts ("charisms", I Cor. 7:7 and 12:7) – the possibility to give his contribution, little but indispensable.

There exists, therefore, a profound and intimate link between **communion and co-responsibility**. Precisely because it is connected to communion – indeed, is derived from it – co-responsibility is experienced, lived, and concretized in the Association through direct involvement in its life – in a spiritual sense – and not in the sense of any activist group or "Workers' Union". This triad of **communion-collaboration-co-responsibility** is undivided *and* indivisible. Ecclesial communion leads to collaboration: from soul and heart to hands, to concrete, living gestures, and to initiatives undertaken. In a word, they are lived as reciprocal gifts and mutual service. In their turn, communion and collaboration cannot but bring one to true and proper forms of co-responsibility.

All of this is strongly felt by the Association, which for some time has been living formative paths ordained to construct authentic co-responsibility and not ones based on exclusively functional elements. Feeling that one belongs to the Church, inasmuch as we are "the people of believers," calls one to a co-responsibility which is a sharing in the ecclesial mission and which has greater worth precisely because it is carried out not only by separate individuals but as members of an Association.

It is probably necessary for the Association to run **on two tracks**. That is, on one track, **it needs to be inserted into pastoral life and needs to be available to respond to the many requests for collaboration and commitment which are made in regards to multiple pastoral projects**. On the other track, the Association needs to know how to **open up new paths**, to allow others to catch a glimpse of new possibilities for encounters between God and His People, especially the young, within the life of the Church. In this way, it will contribute to the realization of a truly integrated pastoral.

It is most opportune that the laity, as a group, promote a greater quality of ecclesial service, most especially in the present situation in which emergencies very often seem to be the most widespread of all elements. In other words, we are continuously assailed by multiple problems necessitating immediate solutions and, when coming up with these quick solutions, the risk is to propose initiatives which are disjointed among themselves and of scarce effect on one's journey to personal growth. Therefore, **it is indispensable that the Association continue to propose paths which give co-responsibility its most authentic significance**. One is truly co-responsible only if one nurtures a great passion: ecclesial passion – passion for the Church. One will actively participate only if one feels that he or she is part of the Church and of the Salesian Family and that these are their home. Thus, co-responsibility and active participation are understood not simply as "being a part" of the body but as **“feeling that one is a part” of a shared life: it is that “taking to heart” from which taking care of each other derives**.

5. Co-responsible in history, co-responsible for history

Art. 8 Apostolic Commitment

§1. Salesian Cooperators carry out their apostolate, first of all, through their daily tasks. They follow Jesus Christ, the perfect Man, sent by the Father to serve the people of the world. This is why they are committed to putting into practice the Gospel ideal of love for God and for one's neighbor in the ordinary circumstances of life.

§2. Animated by the Salesian spirit, they give special attention to young people, especially to those who are poorest or victims of any kind of marginalization, exploitation, or violence; to those setting out in the world of work; and to those who show signs of a specific Vocation.

§3. They foster and defend the value of the family - the foundational nucleus of society and of the Church - and are committed to construct it as “a domestic Church”. Married Salesian Cooperators live their mission through their marriage as “co-operators with the love of God the Creator” and as “the first and chief educators of their children,” according to the pedagogy of goodness proper to the Preventive System.

§4. They are attentive to the Social Justice Doctrines of the Church and to social communications so as to foster educational journeys to grow in these areas.

§5. They support the Church's missionary activity and commit themselves to educate to a global perspective as an opening to dialogue among cultures.

The Association, however, besides being an exemplary path for formation to co-responsibility within the Church can also be one in regards to **the duties of civic life**. This is a co-responsibility which derives from a Christian sense of history and from the knowledge that we believe in the God of history and that within this history live those persons whom He loves – ourselves included. Co-responsibility, i.e., is always born from love because it finds its origin in Love. The responsibility that each one of us learns to live, therefore, is not a burden that slows

down our steps, but **a passion for others** – that passion which renders us more solicitous, swifter on our course. It is a responsibility that makes us **think back over the past**, making innovations in our story, and turning even the limitations into positive elements. **It is a responsibility that has a feel and a passion for the future.**

Co-responsibility of this type is never improvised. It only comes as **a result of a patient labor of education and self-education.** It is a formation that opposes every temptation to “pass the buck”, and that invites one to know that he or she is a citizen and not an “occasional guest” in his/her own city. The task of forming to responsibility as regards the "City of Man," makes us question ourselves in a strong way. **To form others to civic responsibility means to have a Christian sense of history and to be long-suffering and joyful in the sowing.** It means knowing that **good is not accomplished overnight.**

Realizing that good is done a little at a time is the other face of a living and true love for one's city/land/country. The one who knows the continual tension that exists between the ultimate goal of man fully-realized and gestures of justice and solidarity that can be put into action daily but never completely and the vertex of that goal, finds in this limitation not a reason to quit but an extra impetus for a responsible and impassioned commitment and action in one's own country/land. **Formation to civic responsibility, therefore, also moves from educating the person in himself to one of educating him to a sense of the common good.** It also promotes a deep analysis of goals and projects, even if these seem to run counter-current to the present moment.

Individual commitment alone is insufficient. This is why we are an Association. Being co-responsible means that: The new education *is a symphony which must be executed by an orchestra.* And the orchestra is, in this case, the men and women who, like the Cooperators, are asked to find inside themselves educative passion, all difficulties notwithstanding. This is what their vocation and their mission are. *God has created man not only so that he might be good, but so that he might cooperate with Him and be a leading actor in history.*

To educate means **to help the new generations become leading actors in their own history.** The primary goal of education – as Pope Benedict XVI reminded us – is “the formation of the person so as to enable him to live in fullness and ***to make his own contribution to the good of the community.***”

Fidelity to Don Bosco requires that the social and apostolic action of the Salesian Cooperators be directed in a preferential way to the poor youth of the big cities (especially those of the slums and the outskirts of the city, where they are most abandoned), to the young workers, to the young who are non-believers in countries that are Christian by tradition, and to under-developed areas where poverty and abandonment are most evident.