

Lesson 2 – A True Vocation (Session 1)

Objectives

1. To understand the vocation of the Salesian who is a Cooperator.
2. To recognize within yourself the calling to be a Salesian Cooperator.
3. To examine how the Cooperator vocation is directly linked to the mission of the Church.
4. To reflect on our own calling to be laborers in the Lord's vineyard in the Salesian Cooperator vocation.

Reference: The Salesian Cooperator, Joseph Aubry, SDB

Everyone has the duty of working out his vocation in a way that is personal and practical at this particular moment in his life in the history of the Church and the world. "God calls me to holiness: he calls me this very day. How shall I express my love? What task am I to fulfill? What service can I render to God and my brothers and sisters?"

We can attain holiness, love, and service in different forms of life: religious life, lay-celibate life, lay-conjugal and family life. In what form of life and in what responsibility will I find my own vocation? God gives us signs to our vocation through natural and supernatural gifts. He speaks through inspirations within the deep recesses of our heart. They come in the form of a deep desire or enthusiasm.

Don Bosco was inspired by the Holy Spirit to a vocation to the young who were poor, abandoned, in danger; inspired to save them from their spiritual and material wretchedness and to see to their advancement in every way. He founded a group of helpers (religious men and women, SDBs and FMAs) and a more flexible group of helpers (diocesan priests and lay apostles, Cooperators) from all walks of life. He chose St. Francis de Sales, that great model and teacher of charity. All these members are therefore "Salesians," dedicated to the same fundamental work. The Salesian vocation, whether practiced with the vows of religion or without, enjoys the same authenticity and mission within the Church.

The Salesian Cooperator vocation is none other than a Salesian vocation lived in the world without a particular form of consecration.

Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter 1, Article 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.
2. Catholics of whatever cultural or social circumstance can follow this path. They feel called to live their faith life fully involved in each day's concerns, characterized by two attitudes:
 - a) knowing God as Father and the Love which saves; encountering in the Only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, the perfect apostle of the Father; living in intimacy with the Holy Spirit, Who animates the People of God in the world;
 - b) feeling called and sent on a concrete mission: to contribute to the salvation of youth, committing themselves to Don Bosco's very mission to the young and to ordinary folk.

Reference: St. John Paul II, Christifideles Laici, "You Go into My Vineyard Too"

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

And you go too. The call is a concern not only of pastors, clergy and men and women religions. The call is addressed to everyone – lay people as well are personally called by the Lord, from whom they received a mission on behalf of the Church and the world. In preaching to the people of Saint Gregory the Great recalls this fact and comments on the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. "Keep watch over your manner of life, dear people, and make sure that you are indeed the Lords laborers. Each person should take into account what he does and consider if he is laboring in the vineyard of the Lord." (St. Gregory the Great, *Hom. in Evang. I, XIX, 2; PL 76, 1155*)

Reference: John 15: 1-5 (JB)

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more. You are pruned already, by means of the word that I have spoken to you.... As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain a part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing.

Reference: St. John Paul II, Christifideles Laici, "The Variety of Vocations"

45. According to the gospel parable, the "householder" calls the laborers for his vineyard at various times during the day: some at dawn, others about nine in the morning, still others about midday and at three, the last, around five (cf. Matt 20:1 ff.). In commenting on these words of the gospel, Saint Gregory the Great makes a comparison between the various times of the call and the different stages in life: "It is possible to compare the different hours" he writes "to the various stages of a person's life. According to our analogy the morning can certainly represent childhood. The third hour, then, can refer to adolescence, the sun has now moved to the heights, of heaven that is, at this stage a person grows in strength. The sixth hour is adulthood, the sun is in the middle of the sky, indeed at this age the fullness of vitality is obvious. Old age represents the ninth hour, because the sun starts its decent from the height of heaven, thus the youthful vitality begins to decline. The eleventh hour represents those who are most advanced in years.... The laborers, then, are called and sent forth into the vineyard at different hours, that is to say, one is led to a holy life during childhood, another in adolescence, another in adulthood and another in old age." (St. Gregory the Great, *Hom. in Evang. I, XIX, 2; PL 76, 1155*)

Suggested Reading

In the Footsteps of Don Bosco, pages 112-114 top.

Lesson 2: A True Vocation (Session 1) – Questions for Reflection

1. What does the term “vocation” mean to you?
2. How do you think the Salesian Cooperator vocation enriches the mission of the Church?
3. Can you think of some ways in which the vineyard of the Lord is open to the Cooperator? Explain.
4. How is your vocation as a Salesian Cooperator within the Church directly related to the parable of the vine? Explain.

Prayer Experience

Spend time with the Blessed Mother during the Rosary and ask her to show you the vineyard open to your vocation as a Salesian Cooperator.

Chapter 1 – Father and Teacher

Introduction

Throughout history, God has sent prophets and saints to warn, teach, and lead his people. Modern times are no exception. God has sent saints to found religious orders of men and women for particular needs. He has sent martyrs as witnesses to the Faith, virgins as defenders of chastity, and holy men, such as Don Bosco, the subject of this brief biography, in order to teach virtue and apostleship to a special portion of God's people – namely, youth.

A Troubled City

Political intrigue, assassinations, urban riots, and civil wars wrecked Western Europe as it struggled to establish democratic governments during the 19th century. The continent's Christians, bitterly divided, offered feeble opposition to militant atheists.

Turin, a gracious northern Italian city nestled at the foot of the Alps' snowcapped peaks, had seen better days than those of the winter of 1846. So skillfully had ancient Roman engineers designed the town's main streets and squares that for centuries travelers praised Turin as "the loveliest village in the world." Many aristocratic families traced their ancestry to the days when Roman legions, garrisoned at Turin, had guarded Italy's northern reaches and controlled the Alpine passes through which commerce, and occasionally invading armies, moved into Italy.

With this magnificent scenic setting, cultured population, and commercial importance, the city very early in its history developed a distinct aristocratic style. In the times of which we write, the House of Savoy, royal rulers of northwestern Italy, held court there.

But all was not serene. Nineteenth-century Turin, like so many European and American cities, was changing from a quiet provincial center into a busy industrial city. As more and more factories appeared, more and more people flowed from northern Italy's farms and out of the Alpine valleys to seek the employment and excitement offered by Turin.

The recently arrived working class crowded into filthy, airless tenements, sometimes six or eight to a room. Vice, disease, and crime flourished; for most slum dwellers God was a dim memory associated with the farms or dairies they had abandoned for the city. Vicious gangs of young toughs formed in the streets and often invaded Turin's better sections, leaving a trail of robberies, muggings, and occasional murders in their wake. City fathers increased the police force and administered justice swiftly. "The loveliest village in the world," now claiming a population of 150,000 people, boasted no less than four good-sized prisons. Many inmates were mere boys, some not yet in their teens.

The Piped Piper

A new problem now plagued Turin's harassed citizenry. At its root was, of all things, a slightly offbeat priest. For the past several years this cleric, known as Don Bosco, had been leading a band of singing, shouting slum boys through Turin's stylish streets. The priest, clad in battered biretta, patched cassock, and peasant work shoes, had started with a handful of boys. Now the original pack had swollen into a horde numbering some 400. Although the boys had not yet committed any crime, citizens worried about Bosco's ability to control his small army.

Government authorities, newspaper editors, and enemies feared that Father Bosco was laying the foundations of a future political power base. In Italy's then unstable political climate, such an assumption was not unreasonable. The Italy of Father Bosco's time was not the united country we know today. It was divided into seven different states. Austrian and French royal houses ruled a good half of the nation. The Papal States, ruled by Pope Pius IX, straddled the nation's central portion. When Pius IX, who had but a small army, refused to support a war to throw out the Austrian occupiers, many Italians judged the Pontiff a defender of foreign rulers and an opponent of national unity. A vast tide of anticlericalism, which had been building for years, swept over the land.

Enemies of the Church drove bishops from their dioceses, suppressed religious houses, and exiled priests, nuns, and brothers. Pope Pius IX and the Italian clergy became the favorite whipping boys of the liberal revolutionary press.

Hatred reached a boiling point when revolutionary gangs, in November 1848, broke into Pius IX's Roman palace, stabbed his prime minister, and fatally shot one of the Pope's staff. Slipping out a secret door, Pius IX fled to the kingdom of Naples, where he remained in exile for six months.

Because of the nature of his work and the success he had already enjoyed with youth, John Bosco became a favorite target. To all charges he calmly replied: "In politics I side with no one. I am a priest. The only kingdom I serve is the Kingdom of God."

From the Age of Nine

John had been yearning to serve that kingdom since he was a small boy. "At the age of nine," he wrote, "I knew I wanted to be a priest and to help young people." He had no easy time in making his dream come true.

His father, a hardworking farmer, died when John was not yet two years old. His mother, Margaret, held her family together, running the small Bosco farm, raising three children, and supporting her own elderly and infirm mother-in-law. A woman of sterling character and enormous courage, Margaret proved equal to the relentless and often bitter struggle to survive.

But despite their poverty, Margaret encouraged John to build his dream. Although lacking money and influence, young John Bosco was not without resources. He possessed an amazing array of talents. His physical coordination, even as a youngster, was superb. At country fairs he studied the magician's tricks and the daredevil's acrobatic stunts. Back home he practiced these feats until he could imitate and often excel his mentors. Although suffering many a bruise and sprain in the process, John never lost his enthusiasm for his dangerous recreation.

He knew that "magic" tricks and tightrope balancing would attract young people to him.

His physical prowess, however, pales before his mental acumen. Highly intelligent, John possessed a formidable memory. This talent came to light one evening when, during the course of a parish mission, the pastor inquired whether John understood the missionary's sermon. The boy of fourteen repeated what the missionary had preached. Remember, this was in the day when no missionary would dare descend from the pulpit unless he had spoken for at least an hour!

As John grew to young manhood, he reached medium height. His face, open and frank, was crowned by a rich crop of curly chestnut hair. He was cheerful, disciplined, and had a tremendous capacity for work.

No Superman

Young Bosco had his faults, too. Even as a young man, his feelings and emotions ran deep and strong. He could be impetuous; he was not above, on a rare occasion, settling problems with his fists.

He judged himself so full of self-pride that he deeply feared he would use his future position as a parish priest to feed his cravings for prestige. So successfully, however, did John keep all these forces within him under control that calmness and peacefulness characterized his whole life and his relationships with others.

The Road to the Priesthood

John had to work very hard for his seminary education. During the long years of study, he picked up a variety of jobs and learned a host of trades. Before reaching ordination, John could make candy, repair shoes, design and mend suits, manage a restaurant, and put on a one-man circus. His showmanship attracted small youngsters. After he had the little ones suitably awed, he'd slip in a catechism lesson or two.