

Lesson 21 – Membership & Formation (Session 1)

Objectives

1. To understand that every Cooperator is responsible for his or her own formation by his or her willing acceptance of help that is offered.
2. To understand that apostolic formation is necessary for a Salesian Cooperator.
3. To understand in what this formation consists (i.e., spiritual, doctrinal, and practical).
4. To understand that the success of the apostolate depends on our living union with Christ.

Reference: The Salesian Cooperator, Joseph Aubry, SDB, pp. 137, 139, 143, 141-142

“The apostolate can attain maximum effectiveness only through a diversified and thorough formation” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 28)

“In keeping with their purpose and according to their measure, lay groups and associations dedicated to the apostolate or to other supernatural goals should carefully and persistently promote formation for the apostolate. Frequently these groups are the ordinary vehicle of harmonious formation for the apostolate since they provide doctrinal, spiritual, and practical formation.” (ibid., n. 30).

The vocation to be a Salesian Cooperator has a special identity of its own; it is rich in content; it’s requirements are rugged. One should not imagine that it is possible to be a ready-made Salesian Cooperator all at once, without preparation and continuous effort. A formation in two stages is required: a) the “initiation” – for the acquiring of knowledge and basic capacities ...; and b) the “ongoing” stage – for acquiring perseverance (since it helps overcome the insufficiencies, weaknesses, fatigues, and at the same time responds to the ever-changing needs of persons and places in a world and a Church that are rapidly evolving).

“Your Salesian formation, whether spiritual or apostolic, must be the first of our urgent pastoral tasks. In this way we feel that we are complying with your desire, namely, to ‘make an authoritative invitation to the Salesian priests so that in their capacity as preachers and spiritual directors, they make themselves available for the formation and spiritual direction of the Cooperators.’” (SDB GC20, “Declaration of the Special General Chapter to the Cooperators,” Christmas, 1971, *Acts*, n. 735)

Don Bosco himself, in ways that were very flexible, took great care in the training of his young religious. As far as the Cooperators were concerned, he first introduced them to a more earnest spiritual life “in order to persevere in the tasks they had begun according to the aim of the Association” (1876 Reg.). It is noteworthy that in the famous chapter on the “extern members,” he requests that “the member make at least a promise to the Rector to dedicate himself to those things he judges to be conducive to the greater glory of God” (MB 7:885).

Every Cooperator docile to the Holy Spirit is plainly responsible for his own formation. He will achieve this by the way he elects to live, work, and study, and by his willing acceptance of help that is offered him. It is up to him to *choose* the kind of Salesian work for which he feels he is best suited, taking into account his personal talents, his social and professional position, his particular tastes. . . .

But as far as *Don Bosco* was concerned, the best training was given by the community. Every Cooperator should try to be in contact with Salesian *communities*, to see, to hear, be edified, learn . . . , and to make every possible effort to become a member of a *group* that is actively engaged: example attracts, *friendship* encourages, experience with others enriches.

“This formation should be deemed the basis and condition for every successful apostolate” (AA, n. 29). It is evident that “the success of the lay apostolate depends upon the laity’s living union with Christ. . . . in the ordinary conditions of life. . . . Such a life requires a continual exercise of faith, hope, and charity” (AA, n. 4). . . . The Cooperator will

need to cultivate “pastoral charity” in a special way: only an intense love of God our Father and his Kingdom and an intense love for our “brothers to be saved” can lead us to “a dedication” to co-responsibility in the Salesian mission.

“In addition to spiritual formation there is needed solid doctrinal instruction in theology, ethics, and philosophy, instruction adjusted to differences of age, status, and natural talents” (AA, n. 29).

All must study *Don Bosco*, his life, his work, his spirit, his pedagogical method.

All must be well informed regarding *the problems of youth today*, so as to understand the young and come up with the best solutions. It has been said that every Cooperator should become a “youth expert.”

Finally, “since formation for the apostolate cannot consist in merely theoretical instruction, from the very beginning of formation the laity should gradually and prudently learn how to view, judge, and do all things in the light of faith as well as to develop and improve themselves and others *through action*” (AA, n. 29, emphasis added). Don Bosco was always distrustful of formation that was over theoretical: “Practice makes perfect”: experimentation, sifting the results, making a fresh start, etc., with the help of others with more experience in the apostolate. They should “meet in small groups with their associates or friends, examine the methods and results of their apostolic activity, and measure their daily way of life against the Gospel” (AA, n. 30).

Reference: Vatican II, Apostolicam Actuositatem – Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity

4. Since Christ, sent by the Father, is the source and origin of the whole apostolate of the Church, the success of the lay apostolate depends upon the laity’s living union with Christ, in keeping with the Lord’s words, “He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). This life of intimate union with Christ in the Church is nourished by spiritual aids which are common to all the faithful, especially active participation in the sacred liturgy. These are to be used by the laity in such a way that while correctly fulfilling their secular duties in the ordinary conditions of life, they do not separate union with Christ from their life but rather performing their work according to God’s will they grow in that union.

Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter V, Article 29

Responsibilities and Initiatives as Regards Formation

1. Salesian Cooperators are the first ones responsible for their own human, Christian, Salesian, and professional formation.
2. The Association promotes and supports personal and group formation through the action of qualified Salesian Cooperators, delegates, and other members of the Salesian Family.

Reference: PVA Regulations, Chapter IV, Article 13

Entrance into the Association

1. The person who desires to enter into the Association matures his own choice freely and responsibly, by means of some fundamental steps: meeting with the group of Salesian Cooperators of a local center, sharing in their path of formation and participating in the initiatives promoted by it; sharing its spirit and mission, sustained by a progressive understanding, growth, and verification of his/her personal motivations.
2. The person who desires to enter into the Association is welcomed by those in charge of the local center. He or she agrees with the one who is responsible for formation (the delegate and/or the formator) on a program adapted to his/her path of discernment and begins, as an aspirant, this path of formation.

3. After completing the process of formation in the local center, the aspirant presents his/her written request to take part in the Association.
4. The local council passes the request of the aspirant on to the provincial council, accompanied by its own evaluation based upon the aspirant's knowledge of the charism of Don Bosco and of the contents of the PVA, the *Project of Apostolic Life*. The provincial council, on the basis of such evaluation, proceeds to the approval of the request.
5. Entrance into the Association happens when the personal apostolic *Promise* is made. This apostolic *Promise* is a spiritual and ecclesial commitment which the aspirant takes on through a free and knowledgeable choice. By means of it, he/she responds to the gift of the Lord and to his or her call to live this personal vocation according to the Salesian charism.
6. The apostolic *Promise* is ordinarily made in the local center in the way indicated by the person himself and in keeping with the diverse contexts.
7. In particular situations, where no juridically established local center exists, one of the world delegates will, in understanding with the Rector Major, give directions regarding the path of formation.

This directive is also valid for those persons who, because of logistical difficulties (of place or of time), are unable to be directed to a local center.

8. The apostolic *Promise* may be received by the Rector Major, by the world coordinator, by the provincial coordinator, by the local coordinator, or by someone delegated.

Reference: PVA Regulations, Chapter 4, Article 16

Ongoing Formation Initiatives

1. Conscious of the importance of ongoing formation, the Salesian Cooperators:
 - develop their own human gifts, so that they might fulfill ever better their family, professional, and civic responsibilities;
 - mature in their faith and in charity, growing in union with God, to render their life more Gospel-like and more Salesian;
 - dedicate time to reflection and study, to deepen Sacred Scriptures, the doctrines of the Church, their knowledge of Don Bosco, and Salesian documents.
2. The formative initiatives are:
 - periodic meetings, ordinarily held monthly, carried out according to the demands of life and of the apostolate of the members of the center; and other forms of encounters, possibly open to the territory and to the civic society;
 - intense moments of prayer and of discernment;
 - contacts with the groups of the Salesian Family at all levels;
 - deepening of the documents of the Rector Major and of the publications of the Salesian Family, giving preferential attention to the *Salesian Bulletin*
3. Meetings and planning or verification initiatives which the Association promotes at various levels have great importance in the formative plan. Proposals of specific themes with other groups of the Salesian Family are to be favored. Participation in such initiatives must be adequately prepared, and their fruits are to be shared with all the members of the center.
4. The Association is commits itself to utilize the many means of social communications and the new technologies to collaborate in cultural dialogue, to foster the development of their critical capacity, and to elaborate and spread formative publications accessible in various ways to all.

Ways of Cooperation

The Salesian Cooperators share the same [apostolic] harvest as the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales, to which they wish to be associated.

1. The associates shall promote novenas, triduums, spiritual retreats, and catechetical instruction, especially in places where material and moral means are lacking.
2. The scarcity of priestly vocations in these times of ours is felt in all its severity. Hence, those associates who are in a position to help shall take special care of youngsters, and adults as well, who have the necessary moral qualities and an aptitude for study, and show signs of a vocation. They can help them with timely advice and by directing them toward those schools and boarding establishments where they may receive nurture and guidance [in their vocation].
3. [There's an urgent need to] counter the irreligious press by the good press. Hence [associates can help] by spreading good books, leaflets, and all kinds of printed matter, in those places and those families in which acceptance may prudently be expected.
4. Finally there is the exercise of charity in behalf of children at risk. [This includes] taking them in, instructing them in the faith, introducing them to church services, counseling them when in moral danger, and taking them where they receive religious instruction. These activities are another field for Salesian Cooperators. Those who cannot personally be engaged in such activities might do so through others, for example, by involving a relative or friend. Then one may cooperate by prayer, or by helping financially if needs be. The early Christians used to bring their goods to the Apostles, to be used to help widows and orphans, and for other [charitable] purposes.

This meant to live the Beatitudes, the life of the good Christian: "Blessed are the poor in Spirit": by thrift and sharing with the poor; live a chaste life in thought, word, and deed; to obey the laws of God, the Church, and the nation.

Some Cooperators, because of age or some other good reason could not give financial support. These were expected to pray for God's blessing on the Cooperators' projects.

The Scope

The fundamental scope of the Salesian Cooperators is to be of benefit to themselves by leading a life similar to that which is observed by religious in common life insofar as they are able. For this reason the Association is considered in the Church as a Third Order, with this difference, that in the older third orders, Christian perfection was proposed as an exercise of piety, while this association, however, has for its principal purpose an active life in the practice of charity toward one's neighbor and especially toward youth who are in danger of losing faith and morals.

Constitution and Governance of the Association

1. Anyone who has completed 16 years of age may be enrolled as a Cooperator, provided he or she is ready and willing to abide by the rules submitted here.
2. The Association is humbly recommended to the kindness and protection of the Supreme Pontiff, bishops, and parish priests. To them it shall defer *without reservation* in everything that pertains to religion.
3. The Superior of the Salesian Congregation is also the Superior of the Association.

The Rules of the Association

Don Bosco wanted the Salesians to teach the boys that Mary Help of Christians would not be pleased with us if she did not see her Divine Son come frequently into our hearts and reign over us by his grace. The first seven rules of the

Association show us how St. John Bosco desired that devotion to our Lady should lead us to Jesus. "To Jesus through Mary."

The Association of Mary Help of Christians seeks to promote the glory of the Most Holy Mother of our Savior, in order to merit her protection in life and particularly at the hour of death.

Spread devotion to the Blessed Virgin and love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

For this purpose, members shall endeavor by word and counsel to foster a reverent and devout celebration of the novenas, feasts, and solemnities in honor of the Blessed Virgin and of the Most Holy Sacrament which take place during the year.

The members shall seek to promote to the best of their ability the following practices of piety: the distribution of good books, holy pictures, medals, diplomas; taking part in processions in honor of Mary Most Holy and the Most Blessed Sacrament, and encouraging others to do the same; the practice of frequent Communion, assisting at Holy Mass, accompanying the Blessed Sacrament to the sick.

The associates shall use every means in their power to prevent blasphemy or any words harmful to religion, and to try, as far as possible, to remove any obstacle in the way of the sanctification of Sundays and the great feasts of the Church.

On the recommendation of the spiritual directors, every associate is earnestly exhorted to approach the sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion every two weeks or at least once a month, and to attend daily Mass as far as their state of life permits them to do so.

In honor of the Blessed Sacrament, after their usual morning and evening prayers, they shall recite the following brief prayers: "Blessed and praised at every moment be the Most Holy and Divine Sacrament," and in honor of our Lady: "Mary Help of Christians, pray for us." For priests, it will be sufficient if they have the intention, when celebrating Mass, to pray for all the members of the pious association. These prayers shall serve as a link to unite all the associates with one heart and soul, to render due honor to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist and to his Holy Mother, and to share in all the good works performed by the associates.

The next eight articles deal with the spiritual advantages of the associates, followed by three articles on joining the Association.

Particular Obligations

The members of the Salesian Congregation will consider all Cooperators as other brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ and will consult them whenever their assistance can help to the greater glory of God and to the advantage of souls. With the same liberty, when the need arises, the Cooperators will turn to the members of the Salesian Congregation.

Therefore, all the members, as children of our heavenly Father and brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, will do as much as they can to promote and sustain the works of the Association with their own material means or with donations collected from charitable people.

The members have no monetary obligation, but will monthly or annually make that donation which the charity of their hearts will direct. These offerings will be used to support the works of the Association.

In places where Cooperators cannot constitute a center or unit, and when some cannot be present, offerings should be sent privately in the way they find best.