

Lesson 3 – A True Vocation (Session 2)

Objectives

1. To reflect on the Salesian vocation of the Cooperator in its Salesian character.
2. To reflect on the Salesian vocation of the Cooperator in its secular character.
3. To understand what vocation means.
4. To know some of the qualities needed to become a Cooperator.
5. To understand the two ways of living the Cooperator vocation.

Reference: The Salesian Cooperator, Joseph Aubry, SDB

Whoever receives a vocation as a Salesian Cooperator can go ahead and follow it with confidence. The Holy Spirit is logical in his works and abounding in generosity. Whoever is called by him along the Salesian way of life will be endowed with the necessary qualities to stride confidently along that way; he will be enriched with helpful gifts, gradually “converted” and sustained in faith and joy. The Cooperator will lean confidently on the divine strength and tenderness; he or she will frequently turn to God in humble and earnest prayer.

Cooperators are those members of the Church who commit themselves in a special manner to Christian perfection in their particular state of life, placing themselves at the service of the Church:

- In the apostolate of youth in particular with the Salesian spirit and educative method.
- In union with the entire Salesian family
- Capable of shouldering their own apostolic responsibilities.

The Cooperator as originally envisaged by Don Bosco is a true Salesian in the world, i.e., a Christian, be he layman, lay religious or priest, who, even if he has no religious vows:

- follows a vocation to holiness,
- by offering himself to work for the young and ordinary working people,
- in the spirit of Don Bosco,
- in the service of the local Church,
- and in the communion with the Salesian Congregation.

Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter 1, Article 3

One Vocation: Two Ways to Live It

1. Don Bosco conceived the Association of Salesian Cooperators as being open both to the laity and to the secular clergy.
2. Lay Salesian Cooperators carry out their apostolic commitment and live the Salesian spirit, with lay characteristics and sensitivities, in the ordinary situations of life and work.
3. Secular bishops, priests, and deacons who are Salesian Cooperators live their ministry taking inspiration from the pastoral charity of Don Bosco, whose priestly life is a model of one which gives pride of place to working with commitment in behalf of young people and in places where ordinary folk work and live.

Reference: The Salesian Cooperator, Joseph Aubry, SDB

For the Salesians who are religious Cooperators and the Salesians who are lay Cooperators there is no doubt that the finest aspect of such a vocation lies in the fact of living in the bosom of an immense family.

The elements common to all the members of the family are:

- the same founder, Don Bosco, represented today by his successor, the Rector Major;
- the same sharing in Don Bosco's God-given charism;
- the search for holiness (according to one's own state in life)
- by means of a mission;
- the search and the mission both being according to a special spirit
- and according to a specific form of brotherliness and collaboration.

Qualities needed to become a Cooperator:

- that the Holy Spirit is calling us to find our position in the Church and carry out our vocation in its common mission;
- taking the Gospel seriously and living our lives as authentic Christians;
- being sensitive to the problems of the young and the poor;
- knowing Don Bosco and correspond with his spirit, work, and methods in developing our own supernatural gifts;
- having a sense of brotherliness in co-responsibility and collaboration as disciples in action.

"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."

Reference: Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary

Vocation – A summons or strong inclination to a particular state or course of action; *esp*: a divine call....

Reference: Vatican II, Apostolicam Actuositatem – Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, no. 3

The apostolate is lived in faith, hope and charity poured out by the Holy Spirit into the hearts of all the members of the Church. And the precept of charity, which is the Lord's greatest commandment, urges all Christians to work for the glory of God through the coming of his kingdom and for the communication of eternal life to all men, that they may know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3).

On all Christians, accordingly, rests the noble obligation of working to bring all men throughout the whole world to hear and accept the divine message of salvation.

Reference: James 2: 14-18 [Good News Version]

My friends, what good is it for one of you to say that you have faith if your actions do not prove it? Can that faith save you? Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. What good is there in your saying to them, "God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!" – if you don't give them the necessities of life? So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead.

But someone will say, "One person has faith, another has actions." My answer is, "Show me how anyone can have faith without actions. I will show you my faith by my actions."

Suggested Reading

In the Footsteps of Don Bosco; pages 113-114.

Lesson 3: A True Vocation (Session 2) – Questions for Reflection

1. What is specific to the Cooperator vocation that attracts me? Explain.
2. What are the qualities that are important to be a Salesian Cooperator?
3. What are the two ways of living the Cooperator vocation?
4. How do you see the Salesian vocation as a call to action?

Prayer Experience

All apostolic action depends on prayer in order for it to bear fruit. Ask the Lord Jesus to help you develop a more personal relationship with him in order to help you sustain a vocation of service and sacrifice.

A Priest Forever

In 1841 Turin's Archbishop Fransoni ordained John, now twenty-five, a priest for his archdiocese. Shortly after ordination, the archbishop approved Don Bosco for an intensive two-year course of postgraduate theology at Turin's Ecclesiastical College (Convitto Ecclesiastico).

College authorities, aware that many Italian priests refused to mix with the people because of the anticlerical hatred, insisted that the young theology scholars mix with the city's population, particularly the poor. Thus John visited and worked in the hospitals, prisons, orphanages, and slum sections. This firsthand experience with cultured Turin's grubby underside shocked his sensitive and gentle heart.

It was, however, the young slum boys' plight that bothered him most. At nine years of age, John had dreamed of becoming a priest. He had accomplished this. Now he had to make real the second part of the dream: to serve young people.

Always on Sunday

He started. When still a graduate student, he persuaded a few youngsters to meet with him on Sunday afternoons at the Convitto courtyard.

Patiently he established a relationship with the street kids based on the famous saying of St. Francis de Sales: "You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." Catch flies he did. Apprentice brought apprentice; street kid brought street kid; orphan brought orphan. As John moved through Turin's slums, he invited youngsters to his Sunday get-togethers at the Convitto. He called these gatherings his "oratory." The oratory featured songs, prayers, and catechism as well as horseplay, contests, long walks, and picnics.

A pioneer disciple remembered those pleasant Sundays. "At the end of each Sunday excursion," he recalled, "Don Bosco always told us to plan for next Sunday. He gave us advice as to our conduct and asked us, if we had any friends, to invite them too. Joy reigned among us. Those happy days are engraved in our memories and influenced our future lives."

Arriving at some church in the outskirts of town, Don Bosco would ask permission of the parish priest to play. The permission was always granted, and then at a signal the noisy band gathered together. Catechism followed breakfast. The grass and rocks supplied the plates and tables. It is true, bread failed now and then, but cheerfulness, never. "We sang while walking, and at sunset we marched back again into Turin. We were fatigued, but our hearts were content."

Not everyone in Turin was content. Indeed, John, having completed his Convitto residency, could find no place to gather almost 400 boys. Some generous people did try to help. But the noise and sheer presence of this huge, energetic band overwhelmed them and often brought neighbors' wrath down on their heads. No fewer than ten people within a space of five months had offered John the use of their facilities. Every one of them, after a few experiences, withdrew his promise. Don Bosco simply had no place to gather his ragged flock.

Later, remembering Palm Sunday of 1846, when John felt his work might come to an end, he wrote: "As I looked at the crowd of children, and thought of the rich harvest they promised, I felt my heart was breaking. I was alone, without helpers. My health was shattered, and I could not tell where to gather my poor little ones anymore."

John urged them to pray, and as so often happened, his youngsters' prayers were answered. A certain Mr. Pinardi offered to rent John a piece of property located in Turin's marshy area, called Valdocco. John, still stinging from his recent defeats, was slow to respond. Pinardi pointed out that his property contained a small hayshed which John could use for a chapel. When John saw the shed, he was bitterly disappointed. It was simply too low for him to enter. "Oh, good Father, do not worry," counseled the irrepressible Pinardi. "We will dig down and lower the shed's floor. You will celebrate here on Easter Sunday."

Pinardi was as good as his word. On Easter Sunday morning John celebrated at a humble altar surrounded by his urchins, who had jammed into the rickety shack. Pinardi's shed was no Sistine Chapel, and the young workers, no Sistine Choir. But that did not stop them from celebrating their Easter with gusto. The Oratory finally had a home. The priest did not yet know he was to pay a fearful price for his success.

“In My Children’s Name”

For five years, including during his graduate studies, John had dedicated his life to his youngsters. Although he met with them as a group only on Sundays, every spare moment he had during the week he gave to meeting their needs. He visited them at their jobs, found work for those laid off, nursed the sick, and assisted those who had run afoul of the law. Using every possible means, John struggled to keep his little ones out of Turin's corrupting reformatories.

But all this caught up with him when, three months after purchasing the Pinardi place, John, near exhaustion, suffered a severe pneumonia attack. At the hospital where he was taken, doctors feared for his life. Heartbroken and bewildered boys, on hearing the news, milled about the hospital courtyard, hoping for further information. Many youngsters straggled into a nearby church and prayed for this man who loved them so much.

Leadership sprang up from their ranks, and all-night vigils were organized. In their youthful enthusiasm the boys hurled stern promises heavenward. More than one vowed to reform his life, say extra prayers, and do penance. Some little construction workers, whose jobs demanded they carry bricks and mortar up four or five stories of scaffolding forty or fifty times a day, fasted from solid foods. Although these children suffered pain and came near fainting, they were determined to wrestle John Bosco out of death's grip by their prayers and penances.

All their efforts, however, seemed doomed to failure. As his condition continued to worsen, John prepared to die. At his bedside, Father Borel, a close friend, bent over John and whispered: “John, these children need you. Ask God to let you stay. Please, say this prayer after me, ‘Lord, if it be your good pleasure, cure me. I say this prayer in the name of my children.’”

John repeated the prayer. When he finished it, his fever broke. The pneumonia crisis had passed.

Welcome Home

Two weeks later, doctors released John from the hospital. In the courtyard outside, his young friends awaited him. When Don Bosco appeared, they rushed to him, picked him up, and carried him on their shoulders through Turin's streets. Filled with joy, they sang, shouted, and cheered. Even the city's proper citizens were moved to tears. These street kids and gutter children proved their magnificent loyalty and devotion to their father.

Mama Margaret Arrives

Until a short time before his illness, a wealthy noblewoman, the Marchioness of Barolo, provided John's living quarters in Turin. When the priest, absorbed in his own work, was unable to direct one of her charities, a girls' orphanage, she ordered John out of the apartment. So, when he came from the hospital, he actually had no place to lay his head.

It was no pressing problem, however, for he had decided to go to his mother's home in the farm country some twenty miles outside Turin for a period of recuperation.

When John returned to the city, the indefatigable Mr. Pinardi once more appeared and offered to rent John four rooms in the house to which the Oratory's shed chapel was attached. Because this particular house and its neighboring dwellings had an unsavory reputation, Don Bosco hesitated.

Finally, reasoning that his mother's presence would lessen suspicion of his own activities, John asked Margaret to make the painful sacrifice of leaving the farm life she loved to be a housemother in the narrow confines of a city apartment.

"Do you think it's God's will?" she asked her son. "Yes, Mother, I do," responded John. That was all Margaret needed, and in November 1846 she gathered her poor possessions and set out with her son for the city. The two, mother and son, walked the entire twenty miles from farm to city; they had no money for transportation.