

Lesson 4 – Mary, Our Help

Objectives

1. To examine the role of Mary in the life and apostolate of Don Bosco.
2. To reflect on the place of Mary in the prayer life of the Cooperator and the Salesian Family.
3. To reflect on the necessity of asking Mary for the strength needed to be a Salesian.
4. To understand the role of Mary as our Mother, guide, and teacher.

Reference: The Salesian Cooperator, Joseph Aubry, SDB

The perfect example of this type of spiritual and apostolic life (in the lay Christian) is the most Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles. While leading a life common to all men, one filled with family concerns and labors, she was always intimately united with her Son and cooperated in the work of the Savior in a manner altogether special. Now that she has been taken up into heaven, “with her maternal charity she cares for these brothers of her Son who are still on their earthly pilgrimage....” All should devoutly venerate her and commend their life and apostolate to her motherly concern.

“Mary most holy is the foundress and will be the sustainer of our works.” The Salesian is convinced of the special, unquestioned role which Mary – always the handmaid of God and co-worker with his Son – has had in the life of Don Bosco and of the Congregation. She is the watchful mother of his boys and their “interior teacher.” She is, besides, HIS mother; hence he has for her, the immaculate one and his help, a tender and strong devotion, simple and true, enlightened and dynamically practical.”

Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter 3, Article 20

In Communion with Mary Help of Christians and our Saints

1. Salesian Cooperators, like Don Bosco, nurture a filial love for Mary Help of Christians, the Mother of the Church and of humanity. She cooperated in the salvific mission of the Savior and continues to do so also today, as Mother and Helper of the People of God. She is the special guide of the Salesian Family. Don Bosco entrusted the Salesian Cooperators to her so that they might receive protection and inspiration in their mission.
2. They turn with particular affection to St. Joseph, Patron of the Universal Church. They have trustful recourse to the intercession of St. John Bosco, “Father and Teacher” of the young and of all the Salesian Family.
3. Among the models of apostolic life, they venerate, with predilection, St. Francis de Sales, St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello, Alexandrina da Costa, Mama Margaret, and all the other saints, blesseds, and venerables of the Salesian Family. Knowledge of their lives is a font of inspiration and prayer.

Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter 3, Article 14, #3

Experience of a Committed Faith

The Salesian Cooperator entrusts him- or herself to the Immaculate Virgin and Help of Christians, for she is the guide of one’s apostolic vocation: to be a true “cooperator of God” [1 Cor 3:9] in making His plan of salvation real. He or she asks Mary, the Help of Christians and Mother of the Good Shepherd, for the help and strength necessary for his or her own salvation and for that of the young. The daily entrustment to Mary characterizes Salesian spirituality.

Reference: Redemptoris Mater (The Mother of the Redeemer), nos. 44-46 (selections)

44. Given Mary's relationship to the Church as an exemplar, the Church is close to her and seeks to become like her: "Imitating the Mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, she preserves with virginal purity an integral faith, a firm hope, and a sincere charity." Mary is thus present in the mystery of the Church as a model. But the Church's mystery also consists in generating people to a new and immortal life: this is her motherhood in the Holy Spirit. And here Mary is not only the model and figure of the Church; she is much more. For "with maternal love she cooperates in the birth and development" of the sons and daughters of Mother Church. The Church's motherhood is accomplished not only according to the model and figure of the Mother of God but also with her "cooperation."

She cooperated, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, with a maternal love. Here we perceive the real value of the words spoken by Jesus to his Mother at the hour of the Cross: "Woman, behold your son"; and to the disciple: "Behold your mother" (John 19:26-27). They are words which determine Mary's place in the life of Christ's disciples and they express—as I have already said—the new motherhood of the Mother of the Redeemer: a spiritual motherhood, born from the heart of the Paschal Mystery of the Redeemer of the world. It is a motherhood in the order of grace, for it implores the gift of the Spirit, who raises up the new children of God, redeems through the sacrifice of Christ that Spirit whom Mary too, together with the Church, received on the day of Pentecost.

45. Of the essence of motherhood is the fact that it concerns the person. Motherhood always establishes a unique and unrepeatable relationship between two people: between mother and child and between child and mother. Even when the same woman is the mother of many children, her personal relationship with each one of them is of the very essence of motherhood. For each child is generated in a unique and unrepeatable way, and this is true both for the mother and for the child. Each child is surrounded in the same way by that maternal love on which are based the child's development and coming to maturity as a human being.

46. This filial relationship, this self-entrusting of a child to its mother, not only has its beginning in Christ but can also be said to be definitively directed toward him. Mary can be said to continue to say to each individual the words which she spoke at Cana in Galilee: "Do whatever he tells you." For he, Christ, is the one Mediator between God and mankind; he is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6); it is he whom the Father has given to the world, so that man "should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The Virgin of Nazareth became the first "witness" of this saving love of the Father, and she also wishes to remain its humble handmaid always and everywhere. For every Christian, for every human being, Mary is the one who first "believed," and precisely with her faith as Spouse and Mother she wishes to act upon all those who entrust themselves to her as her children.

Reference: John 19: 25-27

Jesus and his Mother

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopus, and Mary of Magdala. Seeing his mother and the disciple he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother, "Woman, this is your son." Then to the disciple he said, "This is your mother." And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home.

Suggested Reading

In the Footsteps of Don Bosco; pages 116-118.

A World of Young People

Soon after John's mother arrived at the Oratory, the children dubbed her "Mama Margaret." Don Bosco would often say to her, "Mother, someday this whole place will be a playground, with schoolrooms and workshops; there will be helpers and a world of children."

Margaret, aware of John's natural exuberance, listened skeptically to her son. All the priest had was a piece of land of dubious value, a half-underground chapel, an apartment in a building that was contributing significantly to Turin's urban blight, and a weekend invasion of some 600 boys. But John was determined to establish a world of children, and he would build that world step by step.

He determined first of all to provide a solid practical education for his boys. Starting at ground zero, he taught the three Rs. Since religious instruction was essential to his education program, John selected a simple catechism for his students' reading primer.

He first held classes in his Pinardi apartment. As more and more students came, they overflowed the tiny rooms into the chapel and the sacristy. Even this was not enough, and John finally persuaded Mr. Pinardi to rent him the whole house.

The curriculum expanded. To the original three Rs, John soon added geography, grammar, and drawing. He also added singing, stating that "an oratory without singing is like a body without a soul."

To ensure a steady supply of teachers for his ever-expanding school, John worked out an agreement with some of the school's more gifted students. He trained them in secondary studies, Italian, literature, Latin, French and mathematics, with the understanding that they would, in turn, teach for a period of time in the grammar school. The arrangement benefited both John and his teaching staff. Don Bosco had a fine faculty drawn from the ranks of the pupil-teachers of the Oratory itself.

The new teachers now had sufficient education to enter studies that would lead to professional careers. Thus they could break the cycle of poverty into which many of them had been born.

The Hive Swarms

Within a year of settling on the Pinardi property, John had under instruction between 600 and 700 children, ranging anywhere in age from eight to eighteen. These earnest youngsters jammed every available inch of space in the Pinardi house and the chapel. John refused to turn anyone away. Yet there was simply no more room.

Undismayed, John summoned the whole Oratory one night and resolved the crisis. "When a beehive overflows," he explained, "it swarms, and its surplus goes out to fill another hive. And so it is with us. In playtime we are all upon one another; at chapel we are packed like herrings in a barrel. There is no room to move. Let us copy the bees and go and seek another oratory."

The fact that he had no money did not disturb him at all. He knew God would provide. As usual, he was right. Not one, but two oratories soon opened in Turin.

The Boy Who Came to Dinner

One cold, rainy night in May 1847, Margaret responded to a tap on the Pinardi house door. A youngster, wet to the bone, stood trembling on the steps. Margaret immediately brought the child in, set him before a roaring fire, dried him, fed him, and then put him to bed. He turned out to be "the boy who came to dinner." He was an orphan, and his gentle knock opened a whole new door for Don Bosco. The plight of Turin's orphaned and homeless boys had weighed heavily on Don Bosco's heart since his arrival in the city.

A World of Children

Now John felt he could do something about it. It was not long before the new arrival was joined by ten other lads whom John somehow stuffed into the Pinardi house. After the winter of 1851, when he finally purchased the Pinardi house, John was able to accept some 30 boarders.

The house lived by a wondrous routine. In the morning, after a prayer together, they would depart for their workshop or factory, a little snack in their hands. At noon they would return and crowd into the kitchen for their noonday dinner, which John, the cook, had prepared and, now clad in a white apron, served them. The boys would depart for afternoon work, return in the evening for supper; then Professor Bosco would supervise their lessons.

The increased activity, however, took its toll on Mama Margaret, now in her mid-60s. She toiled all day long cleaning house, washing and mending clothes, and nursing the little boys who were ill. Boys being boys, their carelessness often caused poor Margaret much extra work. One day, fed up with her clothesline being knocked down, her vegetable garden trampled, weary from endless washing, mending, and cooking, Mama Margaret announced to her son, "I'm going home."

Don Bosco felt his mother's anguish. He said nothing. He simply pointed to a crucifix hanging on the wall. His mother understood, and her eyes filled with tears. "You are right, son; you are right," she said softly. Mama Margaret replaced her apron.

Projects and Plans

As quickly as John finished one project, he began another. In rapid succession he built a boarding home for 150 boys, a new chapel to accommodate the Oratory's increased enrollment, and pioneered evening education and vocational schools for his future craftsmen. He built shoemaker, tailor, carpentry, bookbinding, printing, and ironwork shops. Again he chose his faculty from boys who had come through the Oratory. His schools, considered among Turin's best, took their inspiration and direction from Don Bosco himself, who ranks among modern Europe's finest educators.

A colleague, a distinguished professor, explains why. "His love shone forth from his looks and his words so clearly, and all felt it and could not doubt it.... They experienced an immense joy in his presence."

John demanded much from his teachers. At a time when schoolmasters considered whipping an indispensable tool of their trade, Don Bosco forbade any such violence. "Make yourself loved," he counseled them. "If you wish to be obeyed, be fathers, not superiors."

In John's view, the teacher's responsibility extended not simply beyond the classroom to personal conferences with the student, but to the creation of an environment at the Oratory characterized by Christian love and joy.

Don Bosco could make no such demands unless he himself led the way. He joined in students' recreation, challenged them in conversation, and joked with them. A superb athlete until his middle 50s, he would often footrace with them. Although plagued with varicose veins at 54, he could still outrun any of them. Don Bosco respected the boys' freedom and carried that respect into every aspect of the Oratory's program. If he had to punish, he was careful never to demean or embitter a child.

Don Bosco possessed great educator's skill: he combined authority with liberty, discipline with friendliness, and order with room for youthful effervescence.

"Without affection, there's no confidence," he often counseled his faculty. "Without confidence, no education."

Religion for John was no mere adjunct to education. He saw the relationship with God as the very source and foundation of all human growth and activity.

For him it was essential to present God as a loving Father to his children. He most effectively did this by being a loving father to his Oratory. He urged his students to be aware that they lived in the presence of the heavenly Father who loved them.