

Lesson 5 – In Union with God

Objectives

1. To explore the dimensions of Salesian youth spirituality.
 - a. spirituality of daily life
 - b. joy and optimism
 - c. friendship with the Lord Jesus
 - d. communion in the Church
 - e. responsible service
2. To apply the principles of Salesian youth spirituality to the situation of the Cooperator.
3. To re-examine attitudes toward the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation.
4. To focus on the importance of daily growth in one's relationship with God.

Reference: The Salesian Cooperator, Joseph Aubry, SDB

The Salesian Cooperator vocation emerges as a rewarding and safe way to sanctity. Its mission, its specific spirit, the evangelical requirements it implies: there are so many sanctifying values enabling us to live united with God in the resemblance of Christ. In a particular way the divine aspect of the mission should not be overlooked. In a burst of faith every Salesian can say: "It is the Lord who beckons me on. I am here in his name. He is with me and I am with him. And I find him in those to whom he sends me. May his grace inspire and direct my activities. It is for him that I work, leading to him those he has entrusted to me." It is all a matter of learning with this apostolicity whereby we make ourselves one with the Christ-Servant of the Gospel.

Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter 3, Article 17

Style of Action

Salesian Cooperators live as "good Christians and honest citizens," sanctifying their existence in everyday life and rooting their action in union with God. They believe in the value of life, of giving freely without seeking return, of fraternity, and of "being neighbor." They cultivate those attitudes which foster education to the joys of daily life and they communicate this to others.

Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter 3, Article 19

Style of Prayer

1. Salesian Cooperators are convinced that they can do nothing if they are not in union with Jesus Christ. They invoke the Holy Spirit Who enlightens them and gives them strength day by day. Their prayer, rooted in God's Word, is simple and trusting, joyous and creative, permeated with apostolic ardor, holding tight to life and extending into it. So as to nourish their prayer life, Salesian Cooperators have recourse to the spiritual resources offered by the Church, by the Association, and by the Salesian Family. They participate actively in the liturgy and value the forms of popular piety which enrich their spiritual life.
2. They reinvigorate their faith through the Sacraments. They find nourishment in the Eucharist for their apostolic charity. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation they encounter the Mercy of the Father, Who impresses upon their life a dynamic and continuous conversion and makes them grow in their capacity to forgive.
3. They reinforce their interior and apostolic life with spirituality moments, including those offered by the Association.

Reference: Vatican II, Apostolicam Actuositatem – Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, no. 4 (excerpts)

Since Christ in His mission from the Father is the fountain and source of the whole apostolate of the Church, the success of the lay apostolate depends upon the laity's living union with Christ. For the Lord has said, "He who abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit: for without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 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 properly fulfilling their secular duties in the ordinary conditions of life, they do not disassociate union with Christ from that life. Rather, by performing their work according to God's will they can grow in that union. In this way must the laity make progress in holiness, showing a ready and happy spirit, and trying prudently and patiently to overcome difficulties. Neither family concerns nor other secular affairs should be excluded from their religious program of life. For as the Apostle states, "Whatever you do in word or work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17).

Such a life requires a continual exercise of faith, hope, and charity.

Only by the light of faith and by meditation on the word of God can one always and everywhere recognize God in whom "we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28), seek His will in every event, see Christ in all men whether he be close to us or strangers, and make correct judgments about the true meaning and value of temporal things, both in themselves and in their relation to man's final goal.

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Impelled by divine charity, they do good to all men, especially to those of the household of the faith (cf. Gal. 6:10), laying aside "all malice and all deceit and pretense, and envy, and all slander" (1 Pet. 2:1), and thereby they draw men to Christ. This charity of God, which "is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5), enables the laity to express the true spirit of the beatitudes in their lives. Following Jesus who was poor, they are neither depressed by the lack of temporal goods nor puffed up by their abundance. Imitating Christ who was humble, they have no obsession for empty honors (cf. Gal. 5:26) but seek to please God rather than men, ever ready to leave all things for Christ's sake (cf. Lk. 14:26) and to suffer persecution for justice' sake (cf. Mt. 5:10). For they remember the words of the Lord, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mt. 16:24). Promoting Christian friendship among themselves, they help one another in any kind of necessity.

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The perfect example of this type of spiritual and apostolic life is the most Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles. While leading on earth 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 and are surrounded by dangers and difficulties; she will care until they are led into their blessed fatherland" [LG 62]. All should devoutly venerate her and commend their life and apostolate to her motherly concern.

Reference: Mark 14: 32-42 (JB)

Gethsemane

They came to a small estate called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Stay here while I pray." Then he took Peter and James and John with him. And a sudden fear came over him, and great distress. And he said to them, "My soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here, and keep awake." And going on a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by. "Abba (Father)!" he said "Everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you, not I, would have it." He came

back and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Had you not the strength to keep awake one hour? You should be awake, and praying not to be put to the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came back and found them sleeping, their eyes were so heavy; and they could find no answer for him. He came back a third time and said to them, “You can sleep on now and take your rest. It is all over. The hour has come. Now the Son of Man is to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up! Let us go! My betrayer is close at hand already.”

Suggested Reading

In the Footsteps of Don Bosco; pages 118-120.

Beloved Beggar

By 1860, the Oratory had outgrown its simple church of St. Francis de Sales. Don Bosco conceived of a huge, magnificent shrine in honor of Mary Help of Christians. During the building of this new church in the 1860s, Don Bosco was always somehow able to pay his bills. When money did not come from ordinary sources, Don Bosco was quite prepared to beg for it. His begging excursions were almost always marked by humorous incidents.

Once when church bills were piled high, John visited an extremely wealthy man who had been bedridden for three years. After a few moments of chatting, Don Bosco ordered the man to get his clothes, go to the bank, and withdraw the money necessary to pay the church's latest bills. "I can't go to the bank," complained the sick man. "I haven't been out of bed for three years." "Promise to take your money out of the bank," Don Bosco said, "and our Lady will take you out of bed." The man made the promise and left his bed. John, taking no chances, accompanied him to the bank.

Many people thought John, because of his ability to raise money, was a financial wizard. He was anything but. A wealthy lady, judging him a great financier, asked him where she could best invest her money. Not saying a word, Don Bosco simply held out his open hands in front of her.

Although millions of dollars passed through his hands, he never kept a penny for himself. Indeed, he lived poorly, going so far as to save half sheets of letters, dyeing string black to use for his shoelaces, and saving wrapping paper and cord. He wore a cast-off military overcoat and used old army blankets on his bed. Because he considered himself a servant and a working man, he cheerfully waited on his boys at the dining table, mended their clothing, and cut their hair. Because he was a poor man, he felt hard work was his lot. He gravely warned his Salesian sons that if they should ever lose their love of poverty, it would be a sure sign that the Society "had run its course."

The Blessed Mother

Don Bosco made many a demand on the Blessed Mother. Once a pastor requested him to give a three-day mission to prepare his people for the feast of the Assumption. The parish, located in a farming area stricken by a terrible and lengthy drought, was suffering bitterly. The farmers were desperate.

In his opening sermon Don Bosco remarked "Come for these three days, make a good confession, do your best to prepare for a fervent Communion on the feast of the Assumption, and I promise you, in Mary's name, that rain will come to refresh your parched land."

After the sermon, the pastor, accusing Don Bosco of raising false hopes, was furious. He feared that the people would wreak terrible revenge on both him and John when the promised rain did not materialize.

For the next three days the farm folk jammed the church. On the feast of the Assumption, the day of the promised event, Don Bosco awoke and looked into the sky. It was a cloudless blue. The early morning sun was already burning the dusty earth. As John made his way to the church for morning Mass, people crowded around him.

"Will it rain?" they demanded.

Calmly he responded, "Purify your hearts."

The day wore on; the sky remained like a blue ceramic. As evening came and the people gathered for the last devotion for the feast, there was still no sign of rain. As John entered the church for the final evening devotion, he looked once more to the horizon. It was cloudless – almost. A miniscule gray cloud hung like a tiny rag on the porcelain sky.

John made his way to the pulpit. Hundreds of faces turned up to him, and all had written on them the same question, "When is it going to rain?" These wondering, questioning faces could, in a short time, turn hard and bitter with disappointment.

Suddenly, yellow lightning stabbed the sky, thunder clapped, and the first heavy raindrops splattered on the roof. The farmers, with a new lease on life, broke into heavy cheers and joyful songs. Although the farmers did not realize it, the most relieved man in the district was their pastor.

The Last Years

As Don Bosco grew into his 60s, his health became more and more fragile. But he continued his exhausting pace. His days were filled with teaching, counseling, and supervising his endless projects.

By the early 1880s, his Salesians had spread beyond the borders of Italy, establishing themselves in France and Spain. He yearned to visit them. Thus, when Pope Leo XIII in 1883 asked him to journey to France to beg for funds to complete the construction of the Sacred Heart Church in Rome, John cheerfully complied. He could beg for the Pope -- and visit his spiritual sons.

Don Bosco's heart was deeply moved by the warm, enthusiastic welcome the French people gave him. They responded generously to his appeal for the church.

"Never had such a crowd gathered in Paris around a priest since the visit of Pius VII," one eyewitness recalled. Father Rua, remembering this visit to France, said, "If we had seven secretaries, many letters every evening would still have had to be left unanswered." The journey, however, exacted a terrible toll on John's already fragile health.

John's right eye, injured years earlier in a fall, pained constantly. Phlebitis made his walking so unsteady that a Salesian stood on either side of him, their presence necessary since he would often fall asleep on his feet as he moved through the crowds, greeting and blessing the people.

Three years later Don Bosco made a similar trip to Spain and was greeted with the same enthusiasm. He preached in the most famous cathedrals in both France and Spain. Although he could speak both French and Spanish, he hardly possessed "an orator's tongue." The people, however, understood him well, for he spoke to them with the language of the heart.

The Final Days

"You have burnt away your life by working to excess. Your whole constitution is like a coat worn threadbare by too much use. There is no remedy except that we hang this coat in a closet for a while. You must completely rest."

Don Bosco had heard his doctor's advice before. The reply was always the same: "Doctor, you know that's the only remedy I cannot take. There's too much work yet to be done."

Right up until his very last days, Don Bosco, held up on either side by a Salesian companion, journeyed through Turin, visiting the poor, begging from the rich, and cheering the hearts of those who were sad. He knew death was imminent. "I want to go to heaven," he would say, "for there I shall be able to work much better for my children. On earth I can do nothing more for them."

Don Bosco's doctor now advised Salesian authorities: "He is not dying of any disease; he is like a lamp dying from want of oil."

The famous Bosco humor did not fade. He advised the Salesians who carried him from place to place to "put it on the bill. I'll settle up everything at the end." At one time, gasping for breath, he whispered to a Salesian bending anxiously over him, "Do you know where there is a good bellows maker?" "Why?" the puzzled Salesian asked. "Because I need a new pair of lungs, that's why!"

The illness dragged on. Father Rua took over the government of the Salesian Society. His first command was to request every Salesian who could possibly do so to come to Turin and bid farewell to their father. From all over, these sons came. Don Bosco had taken many of these little street boys and farmers and helped them to grow with a deep love of God. One by one they passed by him to receive his blessing. Next came all the boys who had gone through the Oratory at Turin. Hundreds of them came and passed by his bed, two by two. John blessed them all, his face calm, almost young.

Early in the morning of January 31, 1888, he turned to Father Rua and said, "Tell my children that I will be waiting for them in Paradise." And with those words one of the nineteenth century's most magnificent men breathed forth his strong and valiant spirit.

During his lifetime he often said he wanted to die poor. He did. On the day of his death, the Turin Oratory, with 800 mouths to feed, was penniless. But that did not stop the baker from delivering his bread on schedule. The baker, like everyone else, knew that Don Bosco would find money as he always did, in heaven, to feed his boys on earth.

In 1934, Pope Pius XI canonized St. John Bosco as a saint of the Catholic Church. And in 1988 Pope John Paul II named him "the Father and Teacher of Youth."