

Lesson 8 – Communion and Collaboration (Session 1)

Objectives

1. To see ourselves as brothers and sisters in Christ in mutual exchange and collaboration.
2. To know how to work together in a true Salesian Family fashion.
3. To understand that being part of this unique, immense, brotherly community is one of God's greatest gifts that our vocation enjoys.
4. To know that to strengthen this unity, the Salesian Congregation (SDB) has a "special responsibility of preserving unity of spirit."

Reference: The Salesian Cooperator, Joseph Aubry, SDB, pp. 105, 103, 104, 105-106, 115

To emphasize the oneness of all who unite themselves about Don Bosco, the 20th GC chose the truly Salesian term "family."

The fraternal spirit discussed here refers to that practiced among the Cooperators themselves. . . . But it refers more especially to relations between the Cooperators and the other sections of the one Salesian Family. Being *part of this unique, immense, brotherly community* is one of God's greatest gifts that our vocation enjoys.

A superficial glance at the history of the Salesians tells us that Don Bosco first founded the Salesian Congregation (1859); next, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (1872); and finally the Union of Salesian Cooperators (1876). This is not at all correct if we understand it in the sense that he founded three institutes in parallel and then sought somehow to unite them. The fact was that with full intention he actually founded *one single "association of apostolic forces,"* . . . one single family . . . , which comprised different and complementary groups. The past with its problems has blurred the vision of these groups so that they have lost sight of the fact that originally they all belonged to this one common Reality. Today's problems, however, are drawing them together again, leading them to take stock of their essential oneness, and to be more aware of the "common Salesian good." Each group is thus invited to draw practical conclusions for its own way of life and its mutual relationships with the other groups.

The "concept of 'family' is applied in a different way to these various groups according to the nature of their relationship" (GC20 #152). It excludes no one who is involved in the "Salesian happening," but it does clarify just how things stand in practice and exactly what constitutes the identity of the various members.

Who belongs to the Salesian Family in the strict sense? Those who share the Salesian charism, i.e., those who make the Salesian reality their vocation; who have the urge of the Holy Spirit to seek *holiness* by dedicating themselves to the Salesian *mission*, according to *the Salesian spirit*; those, in short, *who work together in a spirit of co-responsibility to achieve this mission and practice the Salesian spirit.*

The genuine spiritual brotherliness which unites *all* the members of the Salesian Family should express itself in their various meetings and mutual relationships. This was Don Bosco's ideal right from the beginning. "The members of the Salesian Congregation will consider all Cooperators as brothers in Jesus Christ and will have their recourse to them every time that their work can help to the greater glory of God and to the advantage of souls. With the same freedom when the need arises, the Cooperators will turn to the Salesian Congregation." (1876 Reg. ch. VI)

Reference: Fr. Pascual Chavez Villanueva, Rector Major, to the Salesian Family, Haverstraw, N.Y., Sept. 15, 2007

In more practical terms, what is the Salesian Family? I would like to say what the Salesian Family is. I define the Salesian Family with three words: movement, spiritual, apostolic—an apostolic, spiritual movement.

It is a **movement**, therefore something dynamic. This explains why it continues to grow not only in the number of its members, but also in the number of the groups. I said that there are 24 branches that officially belong, but there are at least another 30 that exist—you don't realize—even though for the present they are not officially recognized, and some of them are very interesting and significant. And they continue to grow to respond to the needs that are always new. I remember Fr. Viganò, one of my predecessors, once told me that the Salesian Family would reach at least 300 groups. Imagine it! This means believing in Don Bosco's charisma, in thousands of its facets, in its dynamism, in its capacity to express itself in new ways. It's certainly a fine thing to belong to this Movement.

Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter IV, Article 21

Brothers and Sisters in Don Bosco

Their common apostolic vocation and membership in the same Association makes Salesian Cooperators spiritual brothers and sisters. Indeed, "united with one heart and one soul alone," they live their communion with those bonds characteristic of Don Bosco's spirit.

They joyously take part in the "family life" of the Association through getting to know each other, growing together, exchanging faith experiences, and working on apostolic projects.

They foster the associative by welcoming each other reciprocally.

Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter IV, Article 23

Participation in and Ties with the Groups of the Salesian Family

1. In fidelity to Don Bosco's vision that "weak forces, when united, become strong, and if one cord taken by itself is easily broken, it is rather difficult to break three united," Salesian Cooperators care for the communion and the collaboration with the other groups of the Salesian Family. They do this by means of reciprocal knowledge and information, reciprocal spiritual and formative help, and involvement in common apostolic tasks, with respect for the identity and autonomy of each group.

2. Participation on the Salesian Family consulta/commission at the different levels and the link with the pastoral structures of the Church and civic institutions foster the common search for new initiatives. The Salesian mission promotes and gives witness to the rich spiritual and apostolic inheritance it has received.

3. Salesian Cooperators feel close to all the groups belonging to the Salesian Family because they are all heirs of the Salesian charisma and spirit.

They are open to and foster every form of collaboration, especially with lay groups, respecting the identity and autonomy of each one.

Reference: Acts 2: 42-47 (JB)

Life Among the Believers

These [3,000 converts of Pentecost Day] remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.

The many miracles and signs worked through the apostles made a deep impression on everyone.

The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed.

They went as a body to the Temple every day but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved.

Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter I, Article 5

The Association in the Salesian Family

The Association of Salesian Cooperators is one of the groups of the Salesian Family. Together with the Society of St. Francis de Sales, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and other officially recognized groups, it is a bearer of the common Salesian vocation and shares responsibility for the vitality of Don Bosco's project in the Church and in the world.

The Association brings to the Salesian Family those values which are specific to secular state. Taking inspiration from Don Bosco's apostolic project, they have a strong sense of communion with the other members of the Salesian Family. They commit themselves to the same mission to youth and to ordinary folk in a fraternal and united way. They work for the good of the Church and of society in a manner adapted to the educational needs of their territory and to their own concrete possibilities.

Reference: PVA Statutes, Chapter IV, Article 25

Particular Bonds with the Society of St. Francis de Sales and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

The Association of Salesian Cooperators has a "bond of stable and secure union" with the Society of St. Francis de Sales and particular charismatic ties with the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Every Salesian community (SDB and FMA), at both the provincial and local levels, feels involved, as Don Bosco wished, in the task of "supporting and increasing" the Association, of contributing to the formation of its members, and of making known and promoting their *Project of Apostolic Life*.

Suggested Reading

In the Footsteps of Don Bosco; pages 128-130.

Lesson 8: Communion and Collaboration (S 1) – Questions for Reflection

1. How can I better contribute to the Salesian family spirit of my center?

2. How can the family spirit help me to be a better apostle of Christ?

3. What are the bonds that unite the Salesian Family?

4. In what ways do you see a need for improvement within the Salesian Family?

Prayer Experience

Spend time with the Blessed Mother during the Rosary and ask her for greater unity among the children of God.

The Domes of the Church

Atop the large and beautiful central dome of the church stands a massive gilt bronze statue of Mary Immaculate with her hand raised in benediction. In the interior, on the ceiling of the cupola, is a vast painting of the historical events of the emancipation of the slaves, the victory of Lepanto, the liberation of Vienna, the return of Pope Pius VII to Rome after his captivity under Napoleon Bonaparte, and finally the works and missions of Don Bosco – all proof of the protection of Mary Help of Christians to her people.

On each side of the large central dome is a smaller one. Regarding these two smaller domes, there is a curious but significant historical connection. The small dome on the left, as one looks at the church, supports an angel carrying a bronze banner on which is engraved the word *Lepanto* with the date *1571*. The dome on the right supports an angel offering a crown of laurel to the Immaculate Virgin enthroned on the central dome.

Regarding the Angel on the Right



The official biographer of St. John Bosco testified that he personally saw the original plan which the saint had made for that angel on the right. That original plan had that angel also carrying a bronze banner on which was inscribed an incomplete date, *19--*. The question immediately arises: “Did St. John Bosco have a vision of some great victory which Mary Help of Christians would obtain for her people in this atomic century – a victory which would be comparable to or possibly even greater than that gained over the Turks on October 7, 1571, at Lepanto?” We will probably never know for sure what Don Bosco had in mind when he drew up the original plan for the angel on the right.

The Painting above the Main Altar

The most splendid adornment in the church is the great painting above the main altar. This picture measures more than 33 square yards and is bordered with gold. Our Blessed Lady, as Help of Christians, occupies the central position. She is surrounded by symbols of God the Father and the Holy Spirit, and by the Apostles and Evangelists. This painting of Mary Help of Christians is one used by Don Bosco and the Salesians to depict Mary in pictures and sculptures.

The Dedication of the Church

June 9, 1868, was the glorious day of the consecration of the great church. It was dedicated and called the Church of Mary Help of Christians. The dedication festivities lasted nine days, and on each day one bishop preached while another took part in the religious ceremonies.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the Church of Mary Help of Christians in Turin had become famous, and in 1911 Pope St. Pius X gave it the crowning glory by raising it to the rank of a basilica – the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians.

Three Living Monuments

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

In the course of time, Don Bosco began what became known as his three living monuments or memorials to Mary Help of Christians. The first is the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Don Bosco always shied away from working with girls, for he believed his calling was for boys only. Then he had a dream in which a group of girls begged him to work for them as he was working for boys. Still, he was very reluctant to do so.

It so happened that in the village of Mornese, there was a group of young women called “The Union of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate.” They were under the guidance of Fr. Dominic Pestarino. Don Bosco became acquainted with the group and was very impressed by them, especially by Mary Mazzarello.

In 1871, before the beginning of the month of Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco called together the members of his council and related the following:

“Many people are continually urging me to do something for girls in the same way that we are trying, by God’s grace, to do a little good for boys. If I heed my own feelings, I am not inclined to undertake this sort of apostolate. But, as these appeals have been made to me so many times by persons worthy of every consideration, I fear I may be going against the designs of Providence if I do not give the matter serious consideration. Therefore, I put the question to you, and I invite you to reflect upon it before the Lord, and to weigh the pros and cons, so that we shall be able to come to that decision which will be for the greater glory of God and the greater advantage to souls. Therefore, during this month, our prayers in common and in private shall be directed to this end: to obtain from our Lord the necessary light in this important matter.”

At the end of the month of Mary Help of Christians, Don Bosco again called together his council and asked the members one by one their opinion, beginning with Fr. Rua. All were unanimous that the time was most opportune to make provisions for the Christian education of girls, as was already being done for boys.

“Well,” concluded Don Bosco, “now we can be sure that it is the will of God that we concern ourselves with girls. And so to come to something concrete, I propose that the house which Fr. Pestarino is about to finish at Mornese be destined for this work.”

Don Bosco then went to Rome and asked Pope Pius IX about the idea of founding a society of sisters. The Pope said he would think about it. A few days later, Don Bosco returned to the Pope and was told the following:

“I have thought about your idea for the foundation of a religious society of women. I am persuaded that it is for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls. My advice is then that they have as their principal scope the instruction and education of girls, just as the members of the Society of St. Francis de Sales do for the good of boys. They will depend on you and your successors in the same way the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul depend upon the Vincentians. Draw up the constitutions on these lines and try them out. The rest will follow.”

Don Bosco informed Fr. Pestarino of the Pope’s approval, and he then gave him a rough outline of the rules for the aspirants of the new congregation.

On August 5, 1872, Don Bosco was present for the reception of the habit and the religious profession of the first Salesian sisters. He then left it on record that, from that day forward, they would be called *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*.

As a result of Don Bosco’s work in consolidating the new congregation, Sr. Mary Mazzarello told the sisters, “Let us bear this well in mind: after God, we owe all to Don Bosco and his worthy and saintly sons whom He has given us for our guidance and support.”