



ASSOCIAZIONE SALESIANI COOPERATORI



*“Feeble forces that unite become strong. A single strand may be easily broken, but a three-ply cord is hard to break: Vis unita fortior; funiculus triplex difficile rumpitur.”
(Don Bosco’s Rule, Article 1; Ecclesiastes 4:1)*

THE ASSOCIATION OF SALESIAN COOPERATORS

WORLD CONGRESS V
Rome, October 25-28, 2018

THE WORLD COORDINATOR’S TALK

Dearest friends,

I have reflected, thought, and prayed much about these words – not because I was looking to write something which would be unforgettable or such that would leave a mark on history but, rather – because I wish to share with you, as brothers and sisters, what is in my heart and my mind.

When our very dear Don Pascual Chavez, the Rector Major emeritus, called me to this role of service six years ago, I came into a splendid and very rich inheritance: all that Rosario Maiorano, together with us on the World Executive Secretary (the SEM), the World Council, and the Salesian Cooperators of the entire world did to revise our Rule, bringing it up-to-date with the Magisterium of the post-Conciliar Church and the demands of a global society in continuous development.

Our *Project of Apostolic Life*, the true charismatic identity card of us Salesian Cooperators, is a wonderful mosaic, a harmonious work, which sprang from the passion, the sensitivities, and the prayer of all the Salesian Cooperators in the world. It employed an innovative work modality which involved the entire Association on a path of review, evaluation, and assessment which contributed to its comprehensive revision. In June 2013, the *Project of Apostolic Life* was approved by the Holy See and was entrusted to us to make of it our "book of life."

Along with this revision, the name of our Association also changed to "Salesiani Cooperatori" (from "Cooperatori Salesiani"), thus emphasizing our charismatic reality because – at least in the Romance languages (those derived from the Latin language of the ancient Romans) – put in this order, "Salesiani" became the noun, the substantive, making

it obvious that it held the primary significance. It highlighted our return to Don Bosco's original idea of "extern Salesians"!

In consequence, there also came into use the abbreviation "ASSCC" which, in Italian, the official language of the Association, stands for the "Association of Salesian Cooperators".

The first important task, therefore, that both the World Council and I took on in 2013, and in the years subsequent, was to have the *Project of Apostolic Life* translated, printed, and disseminated in a widespread manner so as to get it into the hands of every Cooperator. Thanks to this decision, I joyfully participated in the Regional Encounters of 2014-2015, whose theme was precisely "the *Project of Apostolic Life* and our getting to know it".

That first experience is part of what I carry with me, rooted profoundly in my depths. This encounter with and coming to know the very different realities that exist throughout our Association not only enthused me but also made me certain of the prophetic truth hidden in Don Bosco's dream – truly, the Salesian Cooperators of every latitude and longitude would be witnesses of their encounter with Christ to the least and neediest youth.

Believe me when I say that I am convinced that Christianity is neither a religion, if, by "religion" is understood a group of rules – no matter how excellent, nor a Faith, if by "Faith" is understood a philosophical dogmatism. No, rather, it is that Empty Tomb which opens one's heart to salvation - whether through an encounter that changes one's life or the imitation of that Christ who traversed the streets of Palestine speaking to us of the Love of the Father, healing bodies and souls. I was able to discover how each Cooperator, on every continent, gives witness to the extraordinary encounter with Jesus with humility, joy, and a profound feeling of responsibility – in short, with great love.

The many realities which make and keep our Association alive and strong are like the thousand facets of an exquisite diamond: different, but all capturing the same light... that of Christ... Each one reflects it in its own vivid way, with many diverse colors, adapted to the multiplicitous situations which history, culture, language, and traditions have created and shaped in each nation.

Due to having participated in Regional Encounters and having visited the shelters, schools of formation, oratories, and group homes where Cooperators carry out their apostolate, I was able to see and admire with my own eyes what our beloved Founder saw so clearly and so prophetically when looking at the little globe that he kept on his desk.

From these encounters with so many young people who grow humanly- and spiritually-speaking accompanied by Salesian Cooperators, I grasped how the seed of educational passion has borne fruit and continues giving it to society. From Mexico to Vietnam, from Kenya to Japan, from the Philippines (both north and south) to Lithuania, from India to Croatia, and from Spain to Poland, I felt I was a sister among the many Salesian Cooperators who are teachers and educators living their convictions coherently, transmitting those values of justice, of welcome and acceptance, and of peace, and giving of themselves with commitment and generosity. In one word, they give concrete, tangible love to God and to others – the way to sanctity.

Another gift that left its mark on my service to the Association in these years is tied to the bicentenary of Don Bosco's birth.

His original pedagogy, his prolific work in making concepts understandable to the uneducated, and his social insights made of him a personality who towers over others in the panorama of the 1800s, but for us, his sons and daughters, he is above all Father, Teacher, and Friend who has invited us to work for the Kingdom with the poorest youth.

The Bicentennial was not an isolated celebration, a stand-alone event, however. Instead, it occasioned our giving a concrete response to the new needs of the young, remaining faithful to Don Bosco, and extending the experience of the service and the educational presence of the first Salesians, with and for the young, into the present day.

A second occasion of 2015 which marked my commitment was having participated in the day dedicated to Don Bosco at the World's Fair (Expo) in Milan.

The presence of "Casa Don Bosco" gave the entire Salesian Family a worldwide visibility, not for the sake of seeking human approval, but for spreading in that global showcase the good and our love for the most fragile youth.

The visibility granted by that event had to translate into something more significant and lasting. Therefore, after having analyzed the new social challenges and having sought better ways to support projects and activities for the development and growth of Salesian Cooperators around the world, we decided to undertake the long and arduous *iter* to have our Association civilly-recognized at the world level. This was something that required much of me, in my capacity as the legal representative of the Association, as regards my time and energy, but I can now share with you, with satisfaction, that everything was brought to a positive conclusion on...

As was already said, the *Project of Apostolic Life* gave new vitality to the Association. It needed to be flanked, though, by other documents that would complete the renewal while not altering in any way the charismatic dimension or the mission.

The *Guidelines and Orientations for the Formation of Salesian Cooperators*, the *Official Commentary to the Project of Apostolic Life*, the *Criteria for Animation and Governance*, and the *Handbook* of the World Council are also the fruits of a complex and united work of the team which, profiting from the opportunities offered by our new technologies, has allowed the World Councilors and the representatives of the Provinces from around the entire world to compare and share with one another in dialogue and creative and fruitful interaction. Certainly, these documents are subject to ulterior changes and improvements, but they are also a tangible sign of the passion and the vitality which animate all of us.

We need to seek to be like Don Bosco, unafraid of novelty, and knowing how to gather the good there where we find it. We live in a truly happy time in many respects because precisely these innovative modalities which the Internet and the world of communication hold out to us allow us to be ever more united, true "little cords" which together strive for the Eternal.

Without a doubt, Don Bosco, who was a great communicator, would have taken advantage of even these new systems for the good of souls, "loving what the young love" and teaching the better way to make even the digital world a tool for and a way to sanctity.

Precisely because we are conscious of the importance of using these technologies for the good, we, with the World Council and the help of experts, created a new webpage which we

seek to implement and enhance, just as we seek to avail ourselves of other social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Messenger. We do this so as to maintain almost daily contact, exchange ideas, news, best wishes, support, and reflections. In this way, even Salesian Cooperators living in the most remote lands can share in our daily life so we may keep alive and strong the bonds of fraternity and friendship.

In Congress V, we want to feel we are ever more and more co-responsible for the Salesian mission and, therefore, bound ever more strongly among ourselves: Statutes Article 21 of the *Project of Apostolic Life* tells us that, by virtue of our common apostolic vocation and belonging to the Association, we are truly spiritual brothers and sisters.

So, I can say that I am living this fraternity with great joy and peace of heart – beyond linguistic and cultural differences – because getting to know each other, growing together, and sharing the same vision of life and the common mission, allow us to welcome each other reciprocally, just as St. Paul invites us to do in his letter to the Ephesians:

I therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beseech you to behave in a manner worthy of the vocation to which you are called, with all humility and mildness, with patience, supporting one another in charity, careful to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (4:1-3)

The fruitful experience of the second round of the Regional Encounters which were held in 2017-2018, has furnished us with the opportunity to share powerful formation moments lived in communion of intent, so as to turn difficulties and problems – which obviously are not lacking in any corner of the world – into springboards for new apostolic projects to give space and life to creativity in doing good.

After all, pastoral charity is the center and summation of Salesian spirituality. For St. Francis de Sales, charity is the "perfection of love" – not only the first of the commandments but also the foundational program of every spiritual journey.

Charity is the basis of life in communion. It is the pedagogical principle and the font of piety, giving meaning to personal happiness.

This specific form of Salesian charity is given the name "pastoral", which evokes the image of the good Shepherd - of the One who seeks he who was lost, who pardons the sinner, and who listens to and understands the last and the least.

It is a particular attention that is achieved in the proclamation of the Good News in educating to the faith. Therefore, our task continues to be that which Don Bosco handed down to us: to form good Christians and upright citizens. Because of this, we ourselves must be "good teachers" – credible witnesses of love.

It is, without doubt, a complex and difficult task, but we know that we can count on Mary's help, our Heavenly Mother – "She who has done it all" – the one whom we are accustomed to consider the true North Star in our life.

She is a woman who, with her "Fiat", has taught us free self-giving and conscious and filial surrender to the Father who has loved us from before time began and who always will unto eternity.

The Marian dimension of our life as Salesian Cooperators has already sunken its roots there in our Promise where we call upon Her to be the Guide and Teacher of our ever so important choice for our lives.

Therefore, we can count on the support of the Blessed Mother, of Don Bosco, and of all the Saints and Blesseds who crowd the "Salesian Garden" in Heaven. Because of this, we can feel rich and grateful to the Lord, of course, but we also have here, around us, strong ties with the other Groups that comprise the Salesian Family!

Ours is among the most fecund of charismatic families in which men and women, lay and consecrated, work, brought together by the Call of the Lord to follow Him according to Don Bosco's charism. During these years of participation in the meetings of the Consulta of the Salesian Family and the Spirituality Days, I always had the feeling that I was among persons dear to me and united by bonds of human affection but, above all, by our sharing in the same ideals of life and of spirit.

"We have believed in the love of God" and, therefore, we find ourselves, as regards individual realities, forming a huge polyphonic orchestra in which each instrument's sounds meld with those of the others to praise the Lord and to do good for the young, here and now.

But now, let us turn to the second part of the Congress' theme: that of identifying and analyzing the challenges put before us by the world of the young, as well as, in general, by the present secularized and globalized society. We will do this with the help of videos, of roundtables, and of fitting group work.

A huge part of the Western world is controlled by values - or better, by anti-values – which seek to make power, money, or egotistical and narcissistic self-affirmation the foundation of human life; but there are also courageous cries that censure the widespread attitudes and behaviors of Relativism and Hedonism.

The lighthouses to guide us in our action must be the powerful voice of St. John Paul II, who exhorted us to open (indeed throw wide open) the doors to Christ, not to fear, and not to be afraid of making radical and demanding choices that go against the current; the profound words of Pope Benedict XVI in his very rich writings; and the entire Magisterium of Pope Francis. These are the sure reference points when we feel confused and tempted by "the voices of the Sirens" which point out to us false, easy ways.

Permit me, then, to dedicate a short space of time, in all humility, to the wonderful Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*. It is an inexhaustible source of fodder for meditation, and just its invitation alone to sanctity in everyday life, and in the joyful fulfillment of one's daily tasks ought to instill in us the courage to strike out on a path of "higher-level living"!

I will pause to consider only paragraph 104, which has been truly striking to me as a Christian and Salesian lay person.

The Holy Father underlines that "the ultimate criterion on which our lives will be judged is what we have done for others. Prayer is most precious, for it nourishes a daily commitment to love." These words called to my mind what our *Project of Apostolic Life* says in its final article, number 41: "The Lord accompanies with the abundance of His grace all those who

work in the spirit of the 'Da mihi animas, cetera tolle,' doing good to youth and to ordinary folk."

And so, courage and grace to you as you confront the challenges of today's world and make of them creative opportunities to be seeds of hope, as men and women of joy and of faith who know how to "transform life in the light of Mercy, which is the key to heaven". (see *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 105)

There's nothing more for me to do but conclude by raising up a huge THANK YOU, brimming with gratitude, to the Lord for having permitted me to live with all the Salesian Cooperators this elating experience which has enriched me greatly and helped me mature in faith.

But, then, I have many other "thanks" that want to reach to the very many human and spiritual companions on my journey.

Thanks to the Rector Major emeritus and to our present Rector Major, Don Angel Fernandez Artime, to Mother Yvonne Reungoat, to our very dear Don Eusebio Muñoz and Sr. Maria Luisa Miranda, to the World Councilors – both the former ones and those now on the Council – whose smiles fill my heart and mind at this present moment and every day in my prayers.

Allow me to give a most special "thank you" to the members of "my" SEM, "my" World Executive Secretary – all precious friends, brothers and sisters, with whom I shared thoughts, fears, joys, difficulties, lights and shadows, and who were at my side at every moment: the incomparable Don Giuseppe Casti, Sr. Leslye Sandigo, Cinzia Arena, Filippo Servili, Giuseppe Cesaroni and, before them, Giorgio Signori and Enzo Battistoni.

Finally, and of truly primary importance, I wish to give a very personal thank you to my husband and my family who have helped, encouraged, and supported me all along these years.

To all of you, I wish "buon lavoro" with affection. May the Lord bless you!

Noemi Bertola

ASSCC World Coordinator

Rome, July 22, 2018