

Organizing the Association of Salesian Cooperators

IN an undated sketchy note going back a number of years, Don Bosco set forth the aim, means, and membership requirements of the Association of Salesian Cooperators. "The aim of this association," he wrote, "is to bring together a few individuals, both lay and ecclesiastics, to accomplish good works that may redound to God's greater glory and an active charity that adopts all spiritual and material methods which may contribute to this purpose, without ever seeking material gain or worldly glory. No branch of learning will be disregarded if it can contribute to realizing the association's purpose. Any practicing Christian determined to work for the above-mentioned goal in accordance with the means proposed may become a member." The words "a few individuals" and the missing reference to poor and abandoned youth seem to date this note to a time when Don Bosco was pondering the idea of an association without as yet envisioning the vast growth it achieved when it became a reality. However, this idea was the seed from which grew the first set of regulations of 1874, later amplified in both 1875 and 1876. In the next two years, Don Bosco did his very best to consolidate and broaden the association. His far-seeing mind could already foretell its providential worldwide development.

Nothing is more essential to an institution's solidity than the unity of spirit of its members. The *Salesian Bulletin*, desired by Don Bosco notwithstanding contrary opinions from near and far, was finally brought out by him in August 1877. Its aim was to maintain an unwavering unity of thought and harmony of action among the members of the new pious association for the realization of this common goal. From the very beginning the *Bulletin* was issued as an official publication, free of charge, to all Salesian cooperators. Written very plainly and in an almost intimate tone, it gradually created a sort of family environment among the members and between them and the Salesians, thus effectively promoting a common outlook.

Another indispensable condition to ensure the association's permanent stability was to come to a perfect understanding with ecclesiastical authorities. If a self-governed religious organization extending beyond diocesan boundaries was to be firmly and lastingly integrated into a diocese, it had to prove both its usefulness and its legitimacy. This took time and thought. In a brief of May 9, 1876, Pius IX, while granting the association certain spiritual favors requested by Don Bosco, affirmed its canonical existence in particular dioceses, gave it his blessing and expressed his earnest desire for its future growth. In Turin, however, the worth of the papal recognition was challenged since the association had not been canonically recognized by the diocese. Consequently it found itself in a difficult situation, which worsened in November 1877 when Archbishop Gastaldi banned as "irregular" the publicizing of papal indulgences in the *Salesian Bulletin*. He even threatened to caution all his clergy about it, and twice he appealed to Rome. Another fact ensued, however, to prove beyond doubt the association's diocesan recognition elsewhere. Archbishop Magnasco of Genoa had sanctioned the Association of Salesian Cooperators in his archdiocese three years before, but the fact had not been publicized. Now, since the *Salesian Bulletin* was being published at Sampierdarena, the archbishop realized that he was unavoidably involved in the controversy, and he issued a decree on December 15, 1877, confirming the approval given prior to May 9, 1876, reviewing it most explicitly and assigning the association a central headquarters for the territory under his jurisdiction. This very telling document reads as follows:

SALVATORE MAGNASCO
By the Grace of God and of the Apostolic See
Archbishop of Genoa
Abbot in Perpetuity of St. Sires
and Overseas Legate, etc.

As far back as 1874, Father John Bosco presented us with a project entitled "Association of Salesian Cooperators" whose main objective was to promote education and Christian instruction, especially among poor and abandoned youth. The sacredness of this objective as well as the regard for ecclesiastical authority embodied in the association's rules so favorably impressed us that we readily approved and commended it. Now, considering the advantages which this pious association offers our archdiocese in religious

instruction, especially at St. Vincent's Hospice in Sampierdarena, and wishing to promote catechetical instruction everywhere—in view too of the fact that the Roman Pontiff has already enriched this association with spiritual favors—we have decided to approve it within our archdiocese. The present declaration constitutes formal approval. We hereby also establish its central headquarters in the aforementioned St. Vincent's Hospice, provided that this organization remains always subject to our ordinary jurisdiction.

Given at Genoa, the Archbishop's Residence,
December 15, 1877.
Salvatore, *Archbishop*
Fr. Luigi Rossi, *Secretary*

Once the archbishop's decree reached Turin, the controversy about the association's approval came to an abrupt end. However, the actual *coup de grace* was given at a papal audience on March 16, 1878, as a result of which Don Bosco was enabled to proclaim far and wide that the Salesian cooperators had won the encouragement, praise, and blessing of the new Pope, Leo XIII. The fact was commented upon in the *Salesian Bulletin* of April. Without exaggeration, this event may be considered a milestone in the history of Don Bosco's glorious association.

A third requisite to hold the association together was to have solid ties to the Salesian Congregation. We are not faulting Don Bosco's closest co-workers when we say that they were not all readily disposed to favor his aim of creating such a vast organization, since he already had so many irons in the fire. But in a case like this he never gave the appearance of rushing, and he let things ride for a while, acting when the time came. Gradually the reasonableness of the idea broke down all resistance, until the desired moment of unanimous approval and willing cooperation came. It was a procedure which took three years, but Don Bosco was able to achieve his desired goal. At the general chapter of 1877, the general opinion was formed in favor of the association, and its basic rules were incorporated into the constitutions of the Congregation. Thus a solid juridical link was forged between the two, and the pious association became an integral part of the Salesian Society.

Let us examine the statutes that were ratified. There were only eight, but they covered all essential points.' The first identified the association as "most important for us" and "the strong right arm of the Congregation"; the last stated that "the regulations already printed separately" are commended and approved. The association's purpose and means were outlined in the second article: "The Salesian cooperators are good Christians who, while living at home, preserve the spirit of the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales in the world and support it materially and spiritually, especially in the Christian education of youth. They form a kind of third order whose purpose is performing deeds of charity for the benefit of their neighbor, especially poor and abandoned youth."

The third article stipulated the conditions required for membership: "To become a Salesian cooperator one must: (a) be sixteen years of age and free of any criminal record; (b) be free of debt and in a position to give some kind of moral or material assistance to the Salesian Congregation and to its undertakings, and (c) follow the association's rules.

The fourth article specified the function of the *Salesian Bulletin* within the association: "The *Salesian Bulletin* is the sign of unity between the cooperators. To those who prove unworthy of membership, the *Bulletin* will no longer be sent; that will terminate their membership."

The fifth and sixth articles referred to institutional membership: "Educational institutions may belong to this pious association. In their case the names of the superior and of the institution alone need to be registered; however, all members must do their share of good deeds in accordance with the regulations so that they may all enjoy the spiritual benefits. Since membership in the association is not a binding matter, any religious may participate. This is especially true of Franciscan and Dominican tertiaries."

The seventh article specified the Salesians as the ones responsible for determining how membership drives were to be carried out. "The directors and Salesians in general should exert efforts to increase the number of cooperators. Hence, they should always speak well of the association and mention that the Holy Father himself is the foremost

Salesian cooperator; furthermore, they should stress that its aims are totally non-political. Since the association aims only at benefiting society, especially by saving poor and abandoned youth, membership is open to all. However, only those should be recruited whom we personally know for their piety and good morals or who are recommended by people whom we trust."

In order to strengthen the bond between the cooperators and the Congregation, certain obligations were imposed, as for instance the observance of this rule: "At the end of each year the members will be informed of the good works that should preferably be undertaken in the course of the coming year." We can trace to this rule the origin of the circular letters that the rector major has been sending to all cooperators every New Year's day. The first, dated January 1879, contained also a review of the work of the preceding year, setting both tone and content for all subsequent letters. Since both these elements are so important, we quote this first circular letter as a part of the cooperators' history:

My dear benefactors:

How comforting it is to me, my dear cooperators, to share with you the accomplishments we have achieved this past year, thanks to your zeal and charity. I must first fulfill my own duty of thanking you for the zeal and generosity with which you have responded to the appeals made to your goodness, whether in terms of cash donations or in other personal sacrifices. I trust that you will be gratified to learn of the achievements resulting from your kindness.

The aim of my letter is twofold: first to give you a brief summary of all that has been done; second to propose some good works to be undertaken next year. I do this to carry out Article 7, Chapter V, of our regulations.

Thanks to your help, we were able to accomplish many things which hopefully have redounded to God's glory and the benefit of our neighbor.

Twenty-two houses opened¹ this past year for poor and abandoned youth in Italy, France, Uruguay and Argentina. Our missions in those distant lands have expanded into a vaster and very promising evangelical field.

We were therefore forced to send a new group of Salesians and Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians to open new hospices and schools and to staff those already existing. The result has been an increased number of youth saved from impiety and restored to self-respect, to the honor of their country, and to the benefit of their families. We were also overjoyed to rescue thousands of boys from moral dangers and even from prison. We have led them back to the right path, taught them the way of goodness, and helped them at the same time to earn an honest living.

Another undertaking enthusiastically received was the church and boarding school of St. John the Evangelist. The construction has been completed except for the roof, and we hope to resume work the coming spring.

Heavy personal and financial sacrifices were called for to sustain all these undertakings, but, thanks to you, Divine Providence has not failed us. You should be happy for the holy use to which your charity was put, and for the moral and material achievements resulting from it for the good of souls and of society. It was this consideration which prompted the boundless charity of Pope Leo XIII, who also came to our aid. May God preserve him for us! Learning of our need, he kindly sent us a generous contribution of two thousand lire with a very heartening fatherly letter which you may read below. But we still needed ten thousand lire more to finance the cost of our new missionary expedition, and this sum was provided by the charity of a Salesian cooperator, a bountiful Christian who wishes to remain anonymous. With his offering, he enclosed the following note:

"I have read that our Holy Father, despite his own financial straits, has sent you two thousand lire for your various

¹ Included in these were the houses of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, and also the branch houses, so named because of the limited number of sisters in them, as well as the houses opened toward the end of 1877. [Author]

charitable works. Touched by such a noble example, I enclose the sum of ten thousand lire for the particular needs of your missionaries. This sum represents savings which I made through labor and thrift in my younger days, and I am happy to offer it to you now to be a beacon lighting my road to that eternity which is drawing near to me. A Salesian Cooperator."

May heaven bless the heroism of this pious donor and grant him a generous reward in this life and the prize of the just in the life to come.

With this kind of help, we have been able to send out new missionaries, outfitting them with whatever they needed for their work. We have also been able to provide for the further necessities of those already carrying out their ministries in distant lands.

Several undertakings might be initiated in the coming year. The first is to use every possible means to promote parish catechism classes and any other activities on behalf of abandoned and endangered youth. They must be rescued from the perils and evils about them, even from possible imprisonment; they must be helped to become honest citizens and good Christians.

A second worthy undertaking is to expand the Sons of Mary Program, whose goal is to foster belated vocations to the priesthood and religious life. With headquarters at St. Vincent's Hospice at Sampierdarena, this program has already borne good fruit. A sizable number of adults have made a decision on their vocations; some entered diocesan seminaries, others chose religious life, and still others opted for the foreign missions. Then there is the Church of St. John the Evangelist with its adjoining hospice. Since this memorial of the Salesian cooperators is to honor the glorious Pius IX, you should all be inspired to support it, in the trustful hope that at least the church may be completed during the current year.

My dear cooperators, where will we find the means to carry out so many charitable undertakings? I put all my trust in your charity. God has helped us through extremely difficult times in the past. He will certainly continue to inspire your generosity now and provide you with the necessary means.

Since we are presently faced with the need of feeding and clothing the many boys already in our hospices, we have sponsored a lottery with the approval of civil authorities. The prizes will be paintings and antiques donated for this charitable purpose. Tickets will be mailed individually to all our cooperators. I hope that you will accept them yourselves or dispose of them through good-hearted relatives or friends. You will be informed of the details in the *Salesian Bulletin*—

In the meantime, my worthy benefactors, allow me, along with all the Salesians and the boys you have benefited, to thank you from the depths of our hearts. You have our undying gratitude and the assurance of God's imperishable reward.

Each morning and evening, prayers are offered in the Church of Mary, Help of Christians and in all Salesian churches and houses for your health and happiness, for harmony and peace in your families, and for prosperity in all your undertakings. We also invoke God's blessings upon you so that after a happy and peaceful life here on earth, you may all also reap the fruits of your charity in heaven.

We especially commend to your prayers our first Salesian cooperator, Pope Leo XIII, all those who labor for the welfare of our Church, and those cooperators whom God has called during the past year. Finally, I ask your prayers for myself.

Ever gratefully yours in Christ, Fr. John Bosco

These annual reports kept the cooperators informed of what was going on and aroused greater benevolence for Don Bosco and his Congregation. Another pious practice which increased the people's good will was the knowledge that many prayers were being offered throughout the Congregation for deceased cooperators. This practice was fostered by printing extended obituaries for better-known cooperators in the *Salesian Bulletin* along with a list of all deceased cooperators. The first such list appeared in the June 1878 issue, introduced by the words: "Special prayers are said in Salesian houses for deceased cooperators as soon as word of their death is received. They are further remembered every morning [at Mass]. In addition

we publish the full name and place of birth of each deceased cooperator at the beginning of the year, so that cooperators all over the world may also pray for them." Fifty-three names were listed, people of different social levels, many of them variously ranking priests, first and foremost among them Cardinal Berardi. A third factor which attracted devout souls to the cooperators was the treasury of spiritual benefits which they shared with the Salesians. To a cooperator who had said that he wanted to become a Franciscan tertiary so as to gain the abundant indulgences of that order, Don Bosco replied: "You need not become a Franciscan tertiary. Our cooperators have been granted the very same indulgences, and you are already a member. Read our little booklet and try to earn more indulgences, and you will gain their merit." As a reminder to the cooperators, the last page of the *Salesian Bulletin* always carried a list of indulgences to be earned at any time, underscoring those particular ones which could be earned within the month. This practice was followed from August 1877 to April 1883—that is, as long as Don Bosco could personally give detailed attention to the magazine before entrusting its editing to someone else who faithfully followed his instructions.

Having described the consolidation of the cooperators' association, we would like to make an observation before going on to describe how Don Bosco promoted the spread of the cooperators during the years 1877 and 1878. In his circular letter reported above, Don Bosco spoke of promoting "parish catechism classes and any other activities on behalf of abandoned and endangered youth." That a cooperator should call himself a "Salesian" only because he supported the Salesian Congregation was always as far from Don Bosco's mind as from his program. Those who were not well informed may have thought so, but there is not a single word of our founder to sustain such a limited concept.

Don Bosco's real mind on this subject can be found in his first circular letter and also in the very first issue of the *Salesian Bulletin*. Here, in an article entitled "First Efforts of Some Cooperators," he offered the members of the association an example of what their activities might be. In a village near Turin, a parish priest, concerned about the poor attendance at catechism classes, had repeatedly striven to attract more children, but his efforts had all failed. Suddenly it dawned on him that there were some Salesian cooperators in his parish and that he was one himself. He called them all to the rectory, explained the sad plight of the parish, commenting on the tragic consequences of religious indifference among youth, and begged his fellow cooperators for their help. They immediately set to work. They called on their friends and acquaintances for a friendly chat or to discuss some business. Then they brought up the subject of catechism classes and found no difficulty in convincing those good people of the value of religious instruction. The more enterprising ones even went to the homes and shops of strangers. Before long, some four hundred pupils were attending local catechism classes. Then another problem arose: Where could teachers be found for so many classes?

The very same ones who had found the pupils solved the problem by volunteering their services as either monitors or teachers for the Lenten instructions. Thus, as the priest wrote, a handful of willing helpers who were willing to go out of their way reaped an abundant harvest with lasting effects. The cooperators' official bulletin cited examples such as this from the first issue on under Don Bosco's personal supervision.

But it was not only a question of consolidating the association; it had to be expanded. The idea met with widespread approval. One Oratory alumnus wrote, "How many of us boast of having been nominated Salesian cooperators!"⁵ The expression "nominated" explains Don Bosco's usual way of drawing new members to the association. Most of the time he did not wait for people to apply for membership. As long as he had no reason to fear that he would run into resistance from the good laymen and ecclesiastics he approached—some known to him by name only—he simply sent them a certificate of enrollment with an enclosed copy of the regulations. This certificate read: "The undersigned respectfully offers this certificate stating that the bearer is a Salesian cooperator and asks that it be accepted. Should any of your acquaintances wish to share in the same spiritual favors, they need only apply and a certificate will be sent immediately. Praying to God to grant you every benefit, I remain your grateful servant, Fr. John Bosco."

Don Bosco used every opportunity to gain new cooperators in this manner. In 1876, for example, when giving Father Rua a list of twenty-three eminent citizens of Turin to whom token gifts of grapes were to be sent, he also instructed him to include the cooperators' booklet.

To persons in high positions he usually sent a personal invitation to join. Just as he had personally asked Leo XIII, with saintly simplicity, to allow his name to head the list of Salesian cooperators, so he too humbly asked bishops and cardinals in writing to join in entourage about the Vicar of Christ. He also appealed to leading lay persons of the aristocracy to grace the membership rolls of his pious union with their names. One such appeal was addressed in 1878 to the Count and Countess of Chambord, pretenders to the throne of France, whom he contacted through their secretary, an intimate and frequent guest of the noble Maistre family.

[No date]

Your Royal Majesties:

The Catholic principles which Your Majesties so proudly profess, together with your well-known and commendable piety, inspire me humbly to request your permission to add your august name to the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators. Instituted and endowed with spiritual favors by Pope Pius IX, of sacred memory, it has been confirmed by the present Pontiff, who is himself a member.

Trusting that your Royal Majesties will wish to join, I herewith enclose a certificate of enrollment with a copy of the regulations. I also pray to God that He will bestow every blessing upon your Royal Majesties.

Your humble, devoted servant, Fr. John Bosco

And there is the gracious note of the celebrated historian, Caesar Cantii, to Don Bosco acknowledging receipt of an enrollment certificate: "Feast of the Epiphany, 1878. You have picked a very puny cooperator. I admire your zeal and your inexhaustible charity, but I have neither the capacity nor the strength to emulate you. I can only rejoice in sharing in your prayers, of which I am in great need. Please accept the enclosed modest offering. Most respectfully yours, C. Canth."

A skilled organizer, Don Bosco realized that as the cooperators increased in number, it became all the more imperative that they be organized. He therefore set up groups under local leaders whose duty it was to assist the members and to act as trustees of the rector major of the Salesians, who was the presiding superior. When there were about ten cooperators in a town or city which had no Salesian house, Don Bosco appointed a leader with the title of "decurion," in some instances an exemplary layman. We find as yet no mention of diocesan directors. We have a copy of a letter written personally by Don Bosco in 1878 appointing a parish priest, whose name we do not know; it may be the original of a circular letter of which no copies have survived.

Turin, 1878

Dear Reverend Father:

While I am happy to welcome you and several worthy parishioners of yours into the ranks of the Salesian cooperators, I would also like to ask you respectfully to assume the office of leader or decurion of these cooperators, in accordance with Article V of the regulations.

Should your work or other circumstances keep you from accepting this responsibility, I would appreciate your suggesting the name of another priest or deserving cooperator who you think can fulfill this function.

Trusting in your assistance, I take this opportunity to send you my very best wishes. With esteem and gratitude, I remain,

Your servant Fr. John Bosco

Another effective means of recruiting members for the association were the two annual conferences prescribed by the regulations on the feasts of St. Francis de Sales and Mary, Help of Christians. These conferences spread the cooperators'

name far and wide because admission was free, newspapers published reports, and the conferences occasionally generated publications which were widely distributed. These conferences were not held prior to 1878; it was then that Don Bosco held the first model conference in both Rome and Turin, Don Bosco expressly organized the Rome conference, held on January 29, 1878, to serve as a model for all others wherever they might be held.⁶ He set it up carefully, choosing a place that would attract Roman aristocracy: the chapel of the noble Oblates di Tor de' Specchi. He also sought the support of several noble men and women and prelates and priests and succeeded in persuading the cardinal vicar of Rome, Monaco La Valletta, to act as co-chairman with Cardinal [Aeneas] Sbarretti. He sent out personal invitations with a printed program which read:

January 25, 1878

CONFERENCE OF THE SALESIAN COOPERATORS IN ROME JANUARY 29 1878

With the authorization and participation of His Eminence the Most Reverend Cardinal Monaco La Valletta, vicar of His Holiness, the first conference of the Salesian cooperators will be held, as prescribed by Chapter VI, Article 4 of the regulations, at the church of the distinguished convent of the Oblates of St. Frances of Rome, known as Tor de' Specchi.

Entrance will be through the convent gate. Participants are asked to go directly to the chapel.

All Salesian cooperators are cordially invited to attend. His Holiness most graciously grants a plenary indulgence to all who take part in this meeting.

As the regulations prescribe, a collection will be made for the Salesian missionaries of [South] America, for those who are about to leave for there, and for new Salesian houses about to be opened in areas where their need is most felt.

Fr. John Bosco

Don Bosco could not have chosen a better audience in terms of numbers and nobility of rank. At three that afternoon, a Salesian priest ascended to the platform especially set up for this occasion and read aloud the chapter, "The Saint's Love for the Poor," from GPlia's *Life of St. Francis de Sales*.⁸ The audience listened with rapt attention. Next, a celebrated woman singer, accompanied by organ, rendered the beautiful motet *Tu Es Petrus*. Lastly, Don Bosco took the stand, wearing biretta and short cape, and delivered a forty-five-minute address.⁹

Your Eminences, Reverend Fathers, honorable ladies and gentlemen—he began—on this solemn feast day dedicated to St. Francis de Sales—the first time the Church honors him as a Doctor of the Church—we hold our first conference of the Salesian cooperators. It is my great honor to address you today. The Holy Father has sent us his apostolic blessing, granting us the precious gift of a plenary indulgence, and his cardinal vicar is graciously presiding over our meeting. We chose the church of the noble Oblates of St. Frances of Rome as our conference site because it has been this city's first institute to go to the aid of poor boys who are cared for in Salesian houses. I had another engagement, but strong reasons held me here and enabled me to take part with great pleasure in this first Reports on it were carried in *L'Osservatore Cattolico* of Milan (No. 27), *Unita Cattolica* (No. 30), the *Spettatore* (Feb. 5 and 6) and the *Salesian Bulletin*, March issue. conference of Salesian cooperators. Blessed be the Lord! May His divine dispositions always be adored! In keeping with the aim of this first conference, I do not intend to deliver an academic discourse or a sermon. Let me just run through a history of the origin and growth of the Salesian cooperators.

After narrating the history of the cooperators from their earliest beginnings, he broke into a fervent exhortation to all his listeners to help the Salesians in their mission of saving youth.

My illustrious audience—he pleaded—Protestants, unbelievers, and sectarians of every hue leave no stone unturned in their attempts to harm our guileless youth; like ravenous wolves they stalk the streets, seeking to devour the lambs of

Christ. They resort to every possible means to corrupt innocent souls, wrest them from the Church's maternal bosom, and enslave and ensnare them in the clutches of Satan. They do this through publications, pictures, kindergartens, schools, subsidies, promises, theats, and slander_ What grieves us most is that instructors, teachers, and even parents cooperate in this campaign of destruction. How can we remain cold and aloof when faced with such heart-rending sights? Never let it be said, generous souls, that the children of darkness are more eager to do evil than the children of light to do good_ Let each of us become a guide, teacher and savior of children. Let us react against the deceits of evil with loving efforts of charity, countering our publications to theirs, our classrooms to theirs, our boarding schools to theirs. Let us vigilantly watch our children within the family circle, in our parishes and schools. Vast numbers of poor boys and girls are everywhere exposed to the gravest harm, because of either their parents' neglect or extreme misery. Let us be parents and foster parents to them as our means and position permit, so as to save them from the allurements of vice and from the attempts of the evil ones to corrupt them. Ever more to drive us and strengthen our resolve in this task, let us often recall the loving care and concern which the Son of God lavished upon the young during His earthly days. Let us recall, too, the rich reward He promises those who benefit His little ones in word, deed, and example: a hundredfold in this life and an eternal crown in the next.

Don Bosco anticipated two possible objections of his listeners. The first concerned the relations of the Salesians with civil authorities. Rome, more than other areas of Italy, acutely felt the change of status that religion had undergone under the new regime, and insurmountable difficulties seemed unavoidable.

There is—Don Bosco averred—no such danger. The work of the Salesians and their cooperators promotes good moral conduct and cuts down the number of juvenile offenders who, were they abandoned to their own devices, might easily end up in prison. Educating such young persons, teaching them a trade, helping them and, if necessary, sheltering them—in brief, sparing no effort to forestall their ruin and turn them into good Christians and honest citizens—these are works which cannot fail to command respect. They are the concern of every government and political party. Doubtless, in our wicked times we must combine to the highest degree the simplicity of the dove with the cleverness of the serpent. On our part, we shall use that cleverness to save souls, inviolably upholding sound moral principles, but always sparing and respecting individuals.

The second objection Don Bosco faced was the broad expanse of charity that the people of Rome were being asked to cover. Their own city was already faced with so much poverty. How could they justify spreading their charity so thin, however admirable the work, especially if it was outside Rome?

Those Romans who have always been so very generous in helping the Salesians—Don Bosco went on—can take comfort in the thought that they have also benefited Rome. We have always taken Roman boys into our houses; many of them are with us now, while others are on our waiting lists. Be that as it may, feel free to work for the welfare of this great city's young people. The Salesians themselves nourish the hope that God will soon allow them to join you and your zealous clergy in working for the poor youth of Rome. In the meantime, though, let us bear in mind that Rome is a Catholic city, indeed the very center of Catholicity. Roman charity has always reached out to all nations and all Catholics. From Rome and by means of Roman aid, bands of missionaries have continually set forth to spread and nurture the faith in foreign lands. Thus, by helping the Salesian work at home or abroad you are really promoting Catholicism and working for the Church as a whole, that Church whose sovereign head is located in Rome while her children are scattered all over the world: *Te per orbem terra rum sancta confitetur Ecclesia* [Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims You, O God].

Don Bosco was followed by the cardinal vicar, who opened his address thus:

I can only praise the work of the Salesian cooperators. While aiming at promoting good morals for the benefit of society, they do not neglect to instill and spread the sound principles of our holy Catholic faith. Let us take heart. But do not neglect Rome, presently so much in need of your help. Concentrate your efforts and your concerns here. Make it your task to bring a Salesian house here as soon as possible so that the Salesians may join their forces to our clergy and save those poor and abandoned boys who have no future unless a charitable hand reaches to hold and lead them to a life of work, faith and

virtue.

The cardinal then went on to develop St. Paul's exhortation, "Never grow weary of doing what is right, brothers" [2 Thess. 3, 13]. And he urged the cooperators never to tire of doing good. Three obstacles, he said, usually stood in the way: boredom, discouragement, and fear. Rather than be overcome by boredom, they should grow daily in fervor. Nor should they be overwhelmed by discouragement, when at times no fruits are visible; rather they should seek comfort in the thought that the good seed they have sown will one day certainly produce good fruit. Lastly, they should fear neither peril nor persecution, but steadfastly persevere even unto death. This talk was followed by the motet, *Panis vivus*, after which His Eminence imparted Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, thus closing the conference.

Don Bosco wrote that very evening to Father Rua: "Today we held our conference, at which the cardinal vicar presided. He delivered a magnificent short address. You will get the details. It will make history." Doubtless, he meant the history of the Congregation, but why not the history of the Church as well? After the formal approval of the Association of Salesian Cooperators on May 9, 1876,¹⁰ this conference, presided over by Rome's cardinal vicar, was practically a public reaffirmation of the association's canonical existence. The conference marked the triumphal entry of the association in the field of Catholic apostolate. This new army, grown beyond expectations, paved the way for the Congregation everywhere, affording reliable support for all its endeavors and strenuously coming to its defense at all times. If the Salesian Congregation has managed to win high standing in the history of the Church, the Association of Salesian Cooperators, making a name for itself before the Church, has certainly deserved to share in the honor and merit of the Congregation.

It should not surprise anyone, therefore, to learn that Satan tried to intervene. Father Turchi, who attended the conference, sent articles to two Turin newspapers. One was *Emporio Popolare*, edited by Father Vasco, S J., who requested the archbishop's permission to print one article, since he had made it a standing order that anything having to do with Don Bosco had to be referred to him. Permission was denied. *Unita Cattolica*, however, did print the other article, but rumors had it that Father Margotti, the editor, did not get away with it. Monsignor Ighina, then canon and rector of the Mondovi seminaries, did not publish a digest of the article in his *Apologista* for fear of displeasing the archbishop, who had already protested the periodical's publication of the Salesian cooperators' regulations. The archbishop's personal explanation for his denial was that he considered all such articles to be directed against him. Father [John Baptist] Anfossi informs us, however, that *Unita Cattolica's* article "gladdened the hearts of the faithful and those who loved Don Bosco, while it disheartened the wicked. They took it as a resounding blow to knavery. Don Bosco continues to be admired for both his energy and his love of goodness."

A publication did appear about that time, however, directed against the archbishop, and it carried a great deal more weight than any harmless newspaper article. It was an eighty-six page pamphlet published by the Tipografia Bruno [Bruno Press] of Turin, entitled *A New Year Gift to the Clergy; or a Critique of the 1878 Liturgical Calendar of the Archdiocese of Turin by a Chaplain*. The anonymous author subjected the newly-published diocesan calendar to a rigid examination for the sake of ridiculing the archbishop. He went at it with devilish zest, criticizing him for a large number of misspellings and grammatical errors, as well as for many inaccuracies in history, dogma and liturgy. He also took him to task for having several times wronged Don Bosco. For example, in the appendix, among twenty-four uses of "It is said . . ." three had reference to Don Bosco. One of these, the ninth, read:

It is said that the archbishop has forbidden *Emporia Popolare* from publishing anything that might in any way be favorable to Don Bosco. The journal carries this to the point of having to pass over in silence facts and correspondence which are not just to the credit of Don Bosco to whom the journal owes so much, but also to the honor of the Salesian Congregation, the cardinals, and even the Pope. The aforesaid journal may not even publish data which would reflect favorably on the archdiocese itself and which would be of historical interest, such as the missionaries' departure, etc.

This booklet caused quite a stir in Turin. Priests particularly were very anxious to learn the author's identity. It was supposed that Don Bosco knew, but to all questions he invariably answered that he had no idea at all. Rather, he showed very great displeasure. The pamphlet managed to get into the Oratory, where many read it.

To inquiries whether he had read it, Don Bosco's reply was, "No, I have not, nor will I."

One day at mealtime, Father Barberis good-humoredly let slip the remark that it might be a good idea to know the contents of that booklet because, after all, it should be brought out into the open so as to relax so much tension. Father Vespignani, who was present, tells us that Don Bosco reprimanded Father Barberis. The latter, however, writing in his chronicle which at that time had only sporadic entries and was soon to cease altogether, stated under the dateline of May 11 1878: "This booklet does honor to Don Bosco in the eyes of the clergy, but he grieves for the other side of the picture." For us only the latter half of his statement is valuable.

It was difficult to publicize the Roman conference in Turin, but nothing could prevent the holding of a similar meeting in Turin. Indeed, after Rome, Turin was the most appropriate place for it. Furthermore, at this time the rainbow of peace seemed to be about to appear between the archdiocese and the Oratory. The [forthcoming] feast of Mary, Help of Christians [May 24] provided the opportunity for an assembly of the Salesian cooperators on

May 16 in the Church of St. Francis de Sales. The printed invitation read:

MEETING OF THE SALESIAN COOPERATORS IN TURIN

May 16, 1878

Turin, May 10, 1878

My dear cooperators:

Our regulations (Chapter VI, Article 4), call for two annual conferences to be held wherever the number of cooperators warrants it. Because of our ardent desire that our first conference in Turin take place with the blessing of Mary, Help of Christians, we have chosen May 16, the second day of the novena in preparation for the great feast of Our Lady, Help of Christians, which will be celebrated most solemnly on May 24.

I therefore invite all cooperators to do their utmost to attend. I thank you from the bottom of my heart and pray that God may shower His heavenly blessings upon you.

Your grateful servant, Fr. John Bosco

He enclosed the meeting's agenda of seven items, the last two of which were : "The Supreme Pontiff grants a plenary indulgence to all who take part in this conference, and a collection will be taken up to benefit the Church of St. John the Evangelist and to support the Salesian missionaries in [South] America, who need our aid."

At three o'clock, May 16³ some two hundred and fifty persons gathered into the tastefully decorated little church. It was not a select audience as was true of the one in Rome. It was rather a fraternal gathering of a cross-section of Turin's social ranks. The same passage was read from the *Life of St. Francis de Sales* as had been read in Rome, followed by a motet sung by the boys. Don Bosco then took the podium and reviewed the history of the Salesian cooperators, which began in that very church, and where they had launched their first undertakings. Many were present who from the very beginning had aided the "poor priest" who came to them without money. They had often made sacrifices in order to give. Now they were able to corroborate Don Bosco's words and were delighted at the progress made by the work which they had themselves begun. It was important for us to preserve Don Bosco's talk for posterity. Impatient readers may skip to the conclusion of this chapter, but what follows came from Don Bosco's heart:

My dear cooperators, I am not sure whether I should thank you first or ask you to join me in thanking the Lord for having brought all of us into one body to achieve so much good and for having called us together today to hold our first

conference of Salesian cooperators in Turin.

But before going into my main address, let me first give you a brief resume of what the Salesian cooperators have done here in Turin even before they were known by this name. Then I shall touch upon the task we are still to do.

Thirty-five years ago the very spot now occupied by this church used to be a hangout for idle gangs of boys who came here to fight, quarrel, and blaspheme. Two houses of ill repute were standing nearby. One was a tavern frequented by drunkards and crooks; the other, once occupying the place of this pulpit, was a house of prostitution. In 1846 a penniless priest arrived with his mother and rented two rooms in the second house at an outrageous price, hoping to do some good for the poor people of this neighborhood.¹² Everything they owned, a few scattered things, fit into a small hand basket. This priest, spotting the youngsters at their mischief, got close to them, and the Lord made sure that what he said was listened to and accepted. It was all too obvious that what this place needed was a church where God could be worshiped.

There used to be a kind of lean-to or shed starting here on the "epistle side" of the main altar and extending to the far right, as you would see it now. It was for sale and it was easily adapted into some kind of a chapel, since nothing else was available. Little by little the young toughs were attracted to the little chapel. Their number kept growing, and they spilled over into the open space before it, where you are seated now. Here catechism was taught. That priest was alone, though he was sometimes blessed with the help of the zealous Father John Borel, who did so much good in Turin. But Father Borel was already so busy with his own work for prisoners, especially those on death row, and so involved in the charitable undertakings of Father [Joseph] Cottolengo and of Marchioness [Juliette] Barolo and others, that he could devote little time to the boys. Still the Lord provided what was needed.

Little by little other worthy priests came to the help of that poor priest by hearing confessions and giving sermons or religious instruction. They kept the Oratory going, but there weren't enough of them. To meet the needs of evening classes and Sunday school a handful of priests hardly sufficed. Then a goodly number of laymen lent a hand. They were clearly a Godsend, and much more good was done through them. These priests and laymen were the first Salesian cooperators. Heedless of discomfort and fatigue and noting how many young lads were turning to the practice of virtue, they willingly sacrificed themselves to help out the others. I have seen many of them give up the comfort of their homes to come here not just on Sundays but on every day of Lent to teach catechism at hours most inconvenient for them just for the boys' sakes.

Meanwhile it was very obvious that these boys had to be helped also materially. Some of them wore trousers and jackets that hung in tatters, torn all over even to the embarrassment of modesty. Others had nothing better to cover their backs than miserable unwashed rags. Then the good woman cooperators were moved to pity and resourcefulness. I'd like to tell you, to the glory of many of Turin's ladies, how, even though they came from prominent and genteel families, they still picked up those trousers and jackets without disgust, mending them with their own hands, taking these ragged shirts which had perhaps never seen water and washing and patching them and then clothing those poor lads. Drawn by the sweetness of Christian charity, these boys were motivated to stay on at the Oratory and persevere in virtue. How many of these same worthy ladies sent clothing, money, food, and all kinds of things! Some are here today, hearing me praise them; others have been called by the Lord to their reward for their works of charity.

Thus, by the help of many hands, we were enabled to do things we could never have achieved alone. What was the result of such powerful help from so many priests and lay people? Thousands of boys came for religious instruction to the very place where once they had learned to curse. To a home which had once been a den of debauchery they came to learn virtue. Evening classes and Sunday school became a reality. The poorer, more abandoned youngsters were given a home. In 1852 the little square became this church, the house became a hospice for poor boys, and all of this has been your work, my dear cooperators.

With the continued contributions of these first benefactors and with the coming of others every day, we found it possible to open two more festive oratories in two other sections of the city. One was at Vanchiglia, called the Guardian Angel Oratory, which moved to the parish church of St. Julia when it was built; the other, named for St. Aloysius, was

opened at Porta Nuova. Just next to it the Church of St. John the Evangelist is being built.

But the needs felt so acutely in Turin were also felt elsewhere. Always with the help of our cooperators, we found it possible to consolidate the festive oratories already in existence and to extend their work beyond the confines of Turin.

The cooperators had to recognize the acute shortage of priests which was showing itself throughout Piedmont and Italy. What was to be done? Catholicism is not restricted to any one town or locality or person. It is universal and demands that more be done where more is needed in terms of charity. And so we opened a school at Mirabello, then another at Lanzo, and more after that, so that presently we have more than a hundred institutions all told, including churches and houses, and over twenty-five thousand boys are being given religious instruction in our houses, both as boarders and as day students.

Whose achievement is this? Mine? No! That of two, ten, or fifty priests? No! Twice that number could not have accomplished so much. It was rather the many Salesian cooperators who everywhere, in every city, town and village, united their efforts to help the few priests committed to the task. Yes, you cooperators! But not only the cooperators. Indeed, we must recognize God's hand in all this. How else could so great a work have been created out of nothing? Yes, it was Divine Providence who sent such abundant means to save so many souls. If the good Lord had not willed things to turn out this way, I know that it would have been absolutely impossible for anyone to have brought it about. The need was both real and vast, and the Lord meets the greatest need with the greatest help. Indeed, the need increases day by day. Can we fear that the Lord will abandon us?

When I say that these material and spiritual needs keep growing every day, I am telling you a painful fact that no one can deny. If you could only read the requests that pour in for homes for poor and abandoned boys! There was a time when only large cities had to take care of destitute youth, body and soul, unhappy victims of misery, vice and crime. Now we must meet these needs even in small towns if we are to save society. It is mind-boggling to see the reality of even a fraction of so much misery.

But there is more. Growing mission needs call for more aid and more zeal. Bear in mind, too, that I am not talking about risking one's life in pain and martyrdom, for the Indians themselves are beginning to recognize their miserable lot and are begging to be taught. They are the one who reach out to us, begging for someone to go to civilize them and teach them religion, without which they know that they can never be happy. The demand for opening missions comes from everywhere. Requests for missionaries pour in from India, China, Brazil, Santo Domingo and Argentina, so much so that if I had two thousand trained missionaries right now I would have a place to send them, certain of the harvest each could reap. Great work has already been done in mission lands through the festive oratories. With the Salesian cooperators' help and support, we hope that this good work can be increased a thousandfold for God's greater glory.

There is another good work which has gone forth from these oratories, one that I would not care to publicize but that you should know about. This is the work of recruiting young men of good will and giving them the means to reach the lofty state of priesthood. It is plain to see the number of God's ministers diminishing every day in a frightening manner. Everywhere we have looked for young men who show promise of a serious priestly vocation, we have brought them together and have given them the opportunity of study, and, lo, thank God, hundreds and hundreds of priests have already gone forth from our houses as a result of this work. Shall I tell you in strictest confidence how many seminarians donned the cassock last year? All of our houses together, in Italy, France, Uruguay and the Argentine Republic, turned out over three hundred clerics last year. Most of them have gone back to their own dioceses. For example, of the forty-two seminarians in the diocese of Casale thirty-four came from our houses. Others have joined religious orders or have gone to the foreign missions, and a few remain with us to add their support to our efforts. Do you see now where your contributions, support and charity are going?

Another task of ours, by no means insignificant, is to erect a bulwark against heresy which threatens to engulf countless cities and nations. Already it has wrought havoc in Catholic countries, spreading wildly with the growth of political

liberty. When evil runs rampant with the blessing of political liberty and the efforts of good men are thwarted and stopped, the consequences are disastrous. And so we have endeavored to raise a bulwark against heresy and irreligion in the first place by producing wholesome books and distributing them widely among Catholics. But more than books was needed. We saw that we had to post a sentry, as it were, in localities where the enemy was expected to strike, and we assigned an entire squad to where the danger was greatest and most persistent, where we felt we could quash the evil at its start_ Here in Turin, then, in 1849 we opened the St. Aloysius Festive Oratory alongside the Protestant church, and there, also, after much study and work, we succeeded in laying the foundations of the Church of St. John the Evangelist, now under construction. Heresy also threatened Sampierdarena, and so we set up a hospice there. In Nice, nudging the Protestant church, we erected the St. Pierre's Hospice. At La Spezia heresy was beginning to spread among all the boys attending the imposing Protestant school, drawn by its many facilities. We made one great thrust, and behold we have a school there!

But rather than enumerate a list of things, let me tell you what happened at Ventimiglia. Here, owing to a population explosion over the past few years, the valley of Vallecrosia witnessed a boom in home construction. The population increased by hundreds and even by thousands. The homes were all new, and, while they were being built, nobody even thought of building a church. Sensing the situation, the Protestants put up a huge building right in the heart of the valley to serve as a hospice, a school and a church. Since the villagers had no other school, they were constrained to attend this one, and eventually some began attending the Protestant church as well. The bishop was in a quandary. Today no single person can possibly build a church and erect a parish. When we were asked to help, we gladly offered our services. Really we had no money to build, but Providence came to our aid. We rented a house, scrubbed and remodeled a storeroom on the first floor, and installed an altar, and all at once we had a working church. In adjacent rooms at its right and on the second floor we set up two classrooms for boys; in the rooms to the left we opened a class for girls, taught by the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians.

How things changed! The festive oratory now draws both youngsters and adults on Sundays, and people of the surrounding countryside are able to hear Mass there. Classes for both boys and girls are full. Everything was done with such a sense of commitment that the Protestant schoolrooms soon stood empty; not a single boy or girl attends them today. Even those who had been enticed to the Protestant church, once they were kindly invited to receive the sacraments at Eastertide, willingly left the church which threatened to become the heresy headquarters of Liguria.

One man alone cannot possibly carry on all these works. Cooperators are needed. Their donations help us to break into new areas to gain a foothold; once we are established, new cooperators join up and keep us going from there. Without the cooperators, the Salesians would be greatly hampered in their work and their zeal would end up in frustration. True, obstacles are always to be encountered in trying to accomplish good works, but the Lord always intervened so that we might overcome them.

This year our problems have actually increased, yet we can see the Lord's hand always sustaining us. This year our incomparable benefactor, Pope Pius IX, passed away. He had approved this association and had enriched it with precious indulgences; he wanted to be considered the first Salesian cooperator and never lost an opportunity to help us. Pius IX is dead, but God has been pleased to have a man like Leo XIII succeed him. I have already spoken with him about the Salesian cooperators in a private audience, and I have even asked him if we might include his name among them, as we enrolled his august predecessor. After questioning me about our association, Leo XIII said: "I want to be an active Salesian *worker*, not merely a cooperator." Should not the Pope be foremost in fostering works of charity?" So you can see that, having lost a father, we have now been given another father by the Lord, no less benevolent than the first. This was a year too in which a number of distinguished Oratory benefactors died, and again the Lord provided for other benefactors to take their places. The charity of the faithful has never let us lack anything necessary.

What, then, is the main purpose of the Salesian cooperators, their main concern? They must bring to completion the good works that I have just described—indeed, multiply them a hundredfold. To achieve this we need both people and resources. We continually offer ourselves and daily the Lord sends us persons ready to sacrifice everything, even their lives, for the

salvation of souls. But people are not enough; we need material means. My dear friends and cooperators, you have to obtain these means for us. This is the charge I give you. Let it be your task to provide these means. Be aware of the Lord's abundant grace as He gives you the means of cooperating in the salvation of souls. Yes, in your hands rests the eternal salvation of many souls. From my words you have become aware how many have found the way to heaven through the help of good people.

Now would be the best moment to thank you from the bottom of my heart. And yet, what thanks can I give? None. All thanks of mine would be far too paltry a recompense for your many good deeds. I will leave it to the Lord Himself to thank you. Yes, the Lord. He often said that He would take as done to Himself whatever we do for our neighbor. Furthermore, it is certain that spiritual works of mercy have even greater merit than mere corporal ones. Not only greater merit, I say, but even something which is divine. Do you want to do a good deed? Educate the young. Do you want to do something holy? Educate the young. Something even holier? Educate the young. Do you want to do divine work? Among divine works this is the most divine of all. The Church Fathers agree with these words of St. Denis: "The divinest of divine deeds is to cooperate with God for the salvation of souls." St. Augustine's explanation of this passage is that carrying out such a divine task is an unfailing pledge of one's own salvation: "When you have saved a soul, you have predestined your own." By cooperating in good deeds which the saint speaks of, you may be confident that you are securing the salvation of your own soul. And so, I do not especially thank you myself. However, I do want you to know that in the Church of Mary, Help of Christians, special prayers are offered for you morning and evening, indeed throughout the day, that the Lord may thank you on the last day when He will tell you: "Well done, good and faithful servant; because you have been faithful over a few things I will set you over many; enter into the joy of your Master" [Mt. 25, 23]. You are making sacrifices, but remember that Jesus Christ made the far greater sacrifice of Himself, and that we shall never even begin to come up to the sacrifice He made for us. Let us then take heart! Let those who strive to imitate Him, and to do all they can to help save souls, be at ease for their eternal destiny. *Animam salvasti, animam tuam praedestinasti*. This is no exaggeration. I hope and pray that you will be crowned with the words, "Enter into the joy of the Lord."

Don Bosco concluded his address with his blessing, and all then went into the playground, crowding around Don Bosco and conversing with him for almost an hour. After 1878, these conferences were held twice a year wherever there was a nucleus of cooperators. The January and May issues of the *Salesian Bulletin* unfailingly informed its readers of these meetings and widely publicized what was going on in the various centers.

Father Michael Rua, who had personally been involved in the organization since its very beginning, explained Don Bosco's intent for the Salesian cooperators. Don Bosco, he said, had three aims in mind: first and foremost, to give his benefactors adequate thanks by offering them an opportunity of sharing in all the spiritual advantages of the Salesian Society; second, to inspire them to continue supporting his work and recruit other cooperators; third, to unite all his benefactors into a union of auxiliaries for parish priests and, through them, for the bishops, loyal sons and daughters of the Church's Supreme Pontiff. The facts make it luminously clear that Don Bosco achieved his threefold goal.