

# **The Identity**



## **of the SALESIAN COOPERATOR**

# THE IDENTITY OF THE SALESIAN COOPERATOR

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### ***Letter to the Young***

## ***Introduction***

The purpose of this text is to delineate the identity of the Salesian Cooperator.

But to achieve this objective, it is not enough to refer to any of the numerous texts - even official ones - which speak, and speak well, about this topic. At the start, it is probably more important to have recourse to *history* so as to take into account the important place that the Cooperators occupied in the thought, the labors, and the work of our Founder himself, Don Bosco.

When we read Don Bosco's writings, we are struck by the frequent use he makes of the concept of "cooperation." He expresses it with different words – *cooperators, co-adjutors, to co-work, to collaborate, to work with...* and in different contexts – the cooperation of the members of the Salesian Family among themselves and also with God.

From among his most significant texts, I noted the following two for in these the concept of "cooperation" is elevated to the highest degree of activity offered to man: *"There is nothing holier in the world than to cooperate for the common good of souls, for whose salvation Jesus Christ shed even the last drop of His Most Precious Blood."*<sup>1</sup>. And, further: *"We ought to help our brothers so as to cooperate in the spreading of Truth... of things Divine, and that which is most divine is cooperating with God in saving souls"*<sup>2</sup>.

Through the privileged use of this concept, Don Bosco reveals something of his own profound soul and of the ideal which he proposes to whoever wishes to be his disciple. A man of action, he wants to work and to succeed, but not alone: he wishes to work with God, the Great Worker, as a humble servant and instrument: "Da mihi animas! Let me work with You!", and he seeks collaborators in this work, people who accept to *"work with Don Bosco"*.

It is not for nothing that he chose the name of "Cooperator" to identify those Priests and lay men and women who helped him. It seems to me that *this name is rich in doctrinal and spiritual value*, and capable of laying the foundation for the choice of life and the mysticism which every Salesian Cooperator needs in order to realize his or her Salesian vocation with perseverance and joy.

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<sup>1</sup> *Vita di Domenico Savio*, ch. XI: in *Opere edite XI*, p. 203

<sup>2</sup> Frontispiece of the *Bollettino Salesiano*, beginning in February 1878

# ONE HISTORY



“Things are always better at the start,” said French philosopher Pascal. To understand the identity of the Cooperator and to be able to situate it with certainty in the Salesian Family and the Church today, it is necessary to return to its historical birth. Identity is not a static reality. Inside of it is an ever-evolving dynamism. It is born from the knowledge of its roots, bringing it to read and to live the present in an active way and always to look to the future with a creative eye and heart. This was Don Bosco. In essence, the Salesian Cooperators have the great fortune of having been founded directly by a saint – and a saint of great stature.

## 1. Don Bosco, Founder *(SPVA – Project of Apostolic Life, Statutes 1)*

The story of the Salesian Family begins not with the founding of the Salesian Religious, but with that of the Cooperators, even if the juridical form dates only to 1876.

Don Bosco himself affirms this in various writings<sup>3</sup> about the history of the Cooperators: “*The history of the Cooperators goes back to 1841 when we began gathering poor boys...*” [*Memorie Biografiche* (MB) XI, p. 84]. During his years of pastoral work in the three Oratories, of Valdocco, Porta Nuova, and Vangchiglia – 18 years before the founding of the Salesians – Don Bosco seeks and finds collaborators: Diocesan Priests, the nobility, or simple people who will teach catechism and night classes, will provide for the material needs and seek work for the boys in the city, and women who will do the sewing, mending, and cleaning.

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<sup>3</sup> Three are of particular importance: 1, the historical introduction to the first SDB Constitutions; 2, an autograph by Don Bosco from 1876, sent to Bishop Gastaldi; 3, a manuscript of Don Berto, corrected by Don Bosco, entitled *The History of the Salesian Cooperators*

### *Juridical Existence of this "Congregation"*

From very early on, "from the year 1844, in order to preserve the unity of spirit and of discipline," Don Bosco gives thought to gathering these collaborators together into a structured association, giving them the significant name of "promoters or Salesian Cooperators, established as in a true Congregation (as a lay group) under the title of St. Francis de Sales" (MB XI, p. 85) Around 1850, he has the group officially recognized by Archbishop Fransoni, and asks for spiritual favors for them from the Pope himself (MB IV, p. 93). In 1852 he obtains its canonical establishment (decree of March 31, 1852), which names him the "Spiritual Director-Head" of the three Oratories with "all the faculties necessary and opportune" for his pastoral work (MB IV, p. 378; XI, p. 85). These collaborators follow the Regulations of the Oratory (MB III, pp. 90-108).

### *The Enrichment and Splitting of this "Congregation"*

Beginning around 1852, Don Bosco formulates two convictions, the fruit of his dreams: 1. for his work to continue, he needs people who will be totally available to him and 2. he will find them from among his own boys. And so, the "Congregation of Promoters" was enriched little by little with young members: from among the older boys, whether externs from the Oratory or student boarders, and in particular, from the members of the Immaculate Conception Sodality (founded in 1856). From this group the Pious Society of St. Francis de Sales (Salesian Society) will be born on December 18, 1859. Nevertheless, the "ordinary" members never leave Don Bosco's mind for a minute. Don Bosco himself, in one famous text, presented the Salesian Society as the fruit of a break-up of the first group – that of the Cooperators. The two groups, existing contemporaneously, were working under different conditions; some as Religious, the others as laity, but both "united in working for poor youth" (MB XI, pp. 85-86).

### *The plans for one, elaborate Society*

Don Bosco had understood that his Congregation would have a new character: completely apostolic, adapted to the service of the young, and in no way monastic<sup>4</sup> so much so that its "founding members" were not men of particular religious experience, but the young who had grown up in the lively atmosphere of Valdocco.

For this reason Don Bosco conceives of the idea that his Society could officially aggregate to itself the lay members from whom it arose: they, too, would dedicate themselves in a Salesian way to the young and could do so not only in the Salesian Oratories, but also in their parishes

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. The typical excerpt of a letter from Don Bosco to Canon Guiol of Marsiglia, cited by F. Desramaut in *Costruire insieme la F.S.*, 85: "Noi non siamo religiosi...In faccia alla Chiesa ed al governo noi non siamo considerati. se non Pious Società di beneficenza". ("We are not Religious... we are not considered as anything other than a Pious Society of charity by the Church and by the government.")

and neighborhoods (here appears a new, amplified, type of Cooperator). This revolutionary plan is presented in the text of the Constitutions sent to Archbishop Franson in 1860, and in the text sent to Rome in 1864: chapter 16 “The Externs” (MB VII, p. 885)<sup>5</sup>:

1. *Anyone, even someone living in his own home, in his own family, can belong to our Society.*
2. *He does not make any vow; but will seek to put into practice that part of the present Regulations which is compatible with his age, state of life, and condition... works of charity, especially those directed towards the spiritual good of youth and the people.*
3. *...Let him at least make a promise to the Rector to use both his material goods and abilities in such a way that he deems will be for the greater glory of God.*

#### *The Significant Struggle Between Rome and Don Bosco over this Plan (1864-1874)*

On June 23, 1864, the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Religious puts out the Decree of Praise that recognizes the “ecclesial” existence of this new Society, and on March 1, 1869, they put out the Decree of Approval. Don Bosco interprets this as an official recognition of the two groups and of their joint unity. But the Roman examiners do not intend it in this manner. For 10 years – up until the penultimate version of the Constitutions, in January of 1874, Don Bosco will try to make them understand and accept his idea, but without success. He immediately thinks of how to adapt this new situation to their still valid juridical existence. After two years of reflection and three successive rough drafts of the Regulations, he definitively establishes them in a “pious association” under the name: “*Union of Salesian Cooperators.*” This, after they had been recognized by Pius IX in a pontifical brief of May 5, 1876. Don Bosco writes their definitive Regulations and publishes it in Torino, with the date of July 12, 1876, under the title: “*Salesian Cooperators, or a Practical Way to Be Useful for Good Mores and a Civil Society.*”

#### *Considerations*

1. An attentive reading of these Regulations (one of the fundamental texts written by Don Bosco) with its 8 little chapters and its preface “*to the Reader*” leaves no doubt about the exact nature of this *Union*, for they present a picture of the Cooperator and leave them open, even beyond Salesian works, to ample Salesian action in their parishes and in “civil society”.
2. Its members are brothers and descendants, without interruption, of the 1850 “Salesian Promoters” (cf. MB XI, p. 86);
3. They count among their number women Cooperators (Reg. IV, 4) and Cooperators who have not been officially “aggregated” to the Salesian Society (cf. MB XI, pp. 73-74);

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. the different drafts of this famous chapter in G.BOSCO, *Costituzioni della Società di S. Fr. di Sales*. Critical text by F.MOTTO, LAS-Roma 1982,210-211

4. They are “in association” with the Congregation of St. Francis de Sales, whose members serve as their “*sure and stable link*”. To them are proposed “*the same harvest*,” they have the same Major Superior, and “*the members of the Congregation consider them all as other brothers in Jesus Christ*” or “*confreres*” (Pref.; ch. II; ch. IV intro; ch. V 3; ch. VI 1-2; ch. VII 4-5);
5. The Regulations, also called “Rules”, are closely inspired by the Salesian Constitutions and put forth the “lay” Salesian vocation: “*the tenor of life*” is the same as that of the Salesian Religious (III); “*the principal aim is an active life in the exercise of charity towards one’s neighbor, especially to youth at risk*” (III), whether in Salesian works or in their parishes (V, 2), with the same spirit and method, “*the spirit*” of chastity, poverty, and obedience (VIII, 1); the same fundamental practices of piety (VIII, 2 and 4), and even the same indulgences as the Salesians themselves (VII, 1-3).

This group of facts let us see that Don Bosco, our Founder, never had in mind that either the pastoral work of the Salesians or the pastoral Salesian work in the world would ever be without the active presence of the Cooperators, who would always be seen as brothers in spirit and in work.

When a Founder “ruminates” over his plan for 14 years and defends it for 10 before a Roman Congregation, it means it is something significant and important. Don Bosco views the Cooperators through an “apostolic” lens: they are “lay” Salesians, “brothers” of the Salesian Religious. They follow, in substance, the same Rule based on a promise, and dedicated, in their own way, to the good of youth. This ought to make us understand how closely bound the relationship between Salesian Religious and Salesian externs was in Don Bosco’s mind. At the first General Chapter (1877), Don Bosco thus explains why he refused to “decentralize” the organization of the Cooperators, as the Franciscans do with their Third Order: “*The greatest effort that I have made for these Cooperators, something which I studied for many years... was exactly this: to find the way in which to make all united to the same head and that this head might be able to have his thoughts reach everyone*” (MB XIII, p. 263). Don Bosco’s concern is for unity of spirit and of action.

## **2. In the communion of the Salesian Family and of the Church**

### ***a. The Salesian Family (SPVA, 5)***

Don Bosco consciously, purposely founds one single Family, the Salesian Family, so that his work will continue.

At the conclusion of one of his studies, Fr. Desramaut summarizes the *"identity of the Association"* in 1876 (in *Costruire insieme*, 1983, pp. 94-100) and concludes: "There was the fraternal association of three societies, two Religious, and one non-Religious, whose members:

- were strictly united to the Superior of the male Congregation, who was the center of the entire structural system,
- pursued the same moral (sanctification) and social (particular apostolic service) goals,
- lived in common according to the values and to a program, in the degree in which the Statutes, Religious or not, permitted to each one" (p. 100).

Aware of being, by the dispositions of Divine Providence, the Father of a vast movement of united and joined spiritual-apostolic forces, Don Bosco lived his call profoundly. Although helped by his temperament and the socio-ecclesial mentality of his time, he also held the firm conviction that the charism which he was passing on to his sons was original. Thus writes Don Stella: "He appears dominated by the aspiration for unity, the *"vis unita fortior"* (a united force is stronger), in which we see reflected his rather firm idea about his religious patrimony: that of *"one single Family"* in the image and likeness of the human family which has God as its Father, and also that of the Church which has the Pope as its common Father" (*Don Bosco... I*, p. 225). In 1877 he expressed his concept in a stupendous text for the first General Chapter in which he puts the three groups he founded on the same plain and in association with each other, using his typical stylistic form of a triple *"We have..."* (cited by P. Stella, I, p. 225, and by the *Acts of the General Chapter*, SDB, no. 153).

One can declare that for Don Bosco no one group was ever conceived or existed in isolation, outside of a unitary vision, stronger and richer than the distinction among the three groups required by Canon Law and by a legitimate process of personalization, but, unfortunately, exaggerated over the passage of time and history.

The fact that the first three groups - the Salesian Cooperators (SC – formerly CC), the Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB), and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) - were the object of the direct charismatic founding action on the part of the Founder is to be considered fundamental. The first mode of existence for the Salesian Family was that of intimate communion among the SDB, FMA, and Cooperators, all "held in the reins" by Don Bosco himself. This is the first form, and probably the most typical and profound one. Precisely this historic fact makes us understand something further: the yet more special place held by the SDB. For them, Don Bosco was "Founder" in a totally special way: *"the sure and stable bond of union"* (Reg. CC II). Logically, according to tradition, the Rector Major, inasmuch as he is Don Bosco's successor, has taken this place of Father and Center of Unity for the entire Salesian Family. And, as Father of the Salesian Family, we listen to what he has to say to us today:

**“I make a pressing invitation to this Family to acquire a new mentality – to think of ourselves and to act always as one Movement, with an intense spirit of communion (unity of heart), with a firm will to act in synergy (unity of intent), with a mature capacity to network (unity of plans). In the *Regulations* of the Salesian Cooperators, Don Bosco wrote: “In every era, unity among good people was deemed necessary so they could help each other in doing good and in keeping far from evil... Weak forces, when united, become strong; if one little cord taken by itself is easily broken, it becomes rather difficult to break three united together. Weak forces, united, become strong: *Vis unita fortior, funiculus triplex difficile rumpitur.*” We need never forget that we were founded by a Saint of social charity, Don Bosco (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 40), who was conscious of the fact, however, that educative pastoral work needs cooperative charity and that, to this end, the Holy Spirit raises up charisms” (Don Pascual Chavez, Strenna 2009).**

**b. *The Church* (SPVA, 4)**

The venture of God, Who inserts Himself into the vicissitudes lived by man through His Presence, His Word, and His Love – whether to one person or to a people – is a Mystery which surpasses us. The Church is thus the “Body of Christ” and the “Spouse of the Spirit”; an unusual reality, which cannot be comprehended or lived deeply except through the categories and capacities of intuition and of analysis proper and exclusive to faith. Vatican Council II pointed out that the Church is the bearer of a very high vocation and indispensable mission, defining Her more historically as the “People of God”.

This is a vision of the Church in which there is the fullness of co-responsibility and of equal dignity for all, without any individualism at any level, where it is “communally” faithful in one entity differentiated by multiple ministries and charisms.

*Within the Church, all, both ordained and lay, are cooperators with God and each other.*

Built on the foundation of the Apostles and with Mary, who is its image and prefiguration, the entire Church is a great Co-operator with the Father and with Christ in the work of the patient construction of their Kingdom. There is no true and complete cooperation with God outside of the Church: Don Bosco was also convinced of this. In the Church, all the members, without exception, are called to cooperate actively in the Divine task of salvation. Today, therefore, Christ, in the name of the Father, and Mary and the Church in the name of Christ, call to themselves and send to others every baptized person who is consciously aware of his faith. To lazy, unengaged, sleeping Christians, the Master of the Vineyard says: “Wake up! Why are you here all day long doing nothing? – Their dramatic response: Because no one has hired us! – Therefore, *go, you, too, into my vineyard!*” (Mt. 9:37). The Council has reaffirmed this with

great clarity, and in a very impressive way, using the term “cooperation”. There are to be no parasites in the Church: everyone baptized is personally called to collaborate, as a good son, in the paternal undertaking of God, and precisely for this reason, everyone, whether ordained or lay, receives from the Holy Spirit – in *different capacities*, and with different gifts (“charisms”, I Cor. 7:7 and 12:7) – the possibility to give his contribution, little but indispensable.

*The ordained ministers - Bishops, Priests, Deacons* - are obviously eminent cooperators with God. The Council applies this title explicitly to missionaries because they cooperate “in the mystery of salvation” (*Ad Gentes, AG*, 15b and 25b). Priests, especially parish priests, are often defined as “prudent cooperators with the Episcopal order” (*Lumen Gentium, LG*, 28b and 41c).

*The laity*, in their turn, are all, *in full title*, co-responsible in the work of God. *Lumen Gentium* says: “Through their Baptism and Confirmation all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself. ... every layman, in virtue of the very gifts bestowed upon him, is at the same time a witness and a living instrument of the mission of the Church itself (*LG* 33b). *Apostolicam Actuositatem (AA)* says: “the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate... The laity derive the *right* and *duty* [emphases my own] to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head;... by the precept of charity, which is the Lord's greatest commandment, all the faithful are impelled to promote the glory of God through the coming of His kingdom (*AA* 2a; 3 b). And they specify: “it remains for each one of them to cooperate in the external spread and the dynamic growth of the Kingdom of Christ in the world.” (*LG* 35 d). “They are fellow workers for the truth... they cooperate in presenting the word of God especially by means of catechetical instruction” (*AA* 6 a and 10). And, magnificently: “they should be aware of the fact that they are cooperating with God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier (*AA* 16 a)... “co-workers [of Christ] in the various forms and modes of the one apostolate of the Church” (*AA* 33). Obviously, they also work with the Bishops, Diocesan and Religious Priests, among themselves, in their parishes, in the diocese, and beyond (cf. *LG* 27c). The *catechists* in the Missions are called “reliable coworkers of the priestly order” (*AG* 17b), “cooperators in grace and witnesses of faith for each other, their children” (*AA* 11 b), “witnesses and cooperators in the fruitfulness of Holy Mother Church” (*LG* 41 e).

Christian spouses and parents receive the sublime titles of “cooperators with the love of God” (*Gaudium et Spes, GS*, 50 b), “cooperators in grace and witnesses of faith for each other, their children” (*AA* 11 b), “witnesses and cooperators in the fruitfulness of Holy Mother Church” (*LG* 41 e).

All these things manifest the *mystical greatness*, the *ecclesial value*, and the *doctrinal and spiritual qualities of the name “Cooperator”*. What is it, then, to be a Salesian Cooperator? For

a Christian, it is a *manner* of expressing and making real one's cooperation with the plan of God *which is included, as a sine qua non, in one's very vocation as a Christian.*