

The Mission of the Salesian Cooperator

World Congress – Rome, 8 – 11 November 2012

Dear Salesian Cooperators,

We have come here from all over the world, united by our love for Don Bosco, our father, to live more intensely the Salesian spirit and to commit ourselves with generosity and enthusiasm to our mission. We are here to approve the Statutes and Regulations of our Association. This is an important moment, because the Project of Apostolic Life is a sure way to holiness and a guarantee of fidelity to the original inspiration of Don Bosco.

Every Rule or Norm must remain open to the breath of the Spirit that defines its vocation and mission. Without the Holy Spirit every Statute, even the most perfect, will remain a dead letter. Therefore, in this Assembly which approves the Statute that defines our vocation and mission, we invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit that he may breathe powerfully, as he did in the Upper Room, to give birth to a new Pentecost. With the gift of the Spirit, our assembly can then reach out to the whole Church.

Founded on the Apostles and with Mary, the whole Church is the great co-worker with God the Father and with Christ in the patient building of the Kingdom. There is no true and complete cooperation with God outside the Church. Don Bosco was totally convinced of this. In the Church all the members, without exception, are called to cooperate actively in the divine task of salvation. Today Christ, in the name of the Father, calls to himself and sends out to others every baptized person conscious of his faith. To Christians who are lazy, unemployed or asleep, the Father of the vineyard says, "Wake up! Why do you stand here all day doing nothing?" The reply, especially nowadays, may well be, "Because no one has hired us for the day." "Go then, you also, into my vineyard." (Mt 9,37). There should be no parasites in the Church. Every baptized Christian is called personally to cooperate as a good son or daughter in the Father's plan of salvation. Among the most eminent of those who cooperated with God's plan down through the Church's history, the Holy Spirit raised up Don Bosco. He felt called by God and sent by Mary for two things: (i) To dedicate the whole of his life to the salvation and all-round development of adolescents and young people; (ii) To give birth to numerous apostolic forces and to found the large Salesian Family which was also dedicated to the young. We, the Salesian Cooperators, have received this precious inheritance. We want to be "co-operators of God" in this present moment of history, as Don Bosco was in his time. From here arises the need for and the commitment to a greater visibility over the next three years on the part of the Salesian Cooperators at an ecclesial, social and political level. What does this involve?

1. The re-launch of the “honest citizen” and “good Christian”

The Rector Major says: “In a world profoundly changed from that of the nineteenth century, doing works of charity according to narrow, local, pragmatic criteria and forgetting the wider dimensions of the common good at national and world level, would constitute a serious failure in the sociological and theological order. To think of charity only as almsgiving or emergency help means putting ourselves at risk of a “false Samaritanism”. (Rector Major’s Strenna 2013)

In our Project of Apostolic Life it says explicitly that the Salesian Cooperators “aim at the formation of a mature critical conscience in order to participate responsibly in the social life in the fields of culture, economy and politics (Regulations 2.2)

In the introduction to the Regulations Don Bosco wrote: “Salesian Cooperators, or a practical way to promote good behaviour in civil society.” We need to understand what these words mean and to translate them today into practical commitment. This is the task of this Congress.

The mission of the Salesian Cooperator is the building of a world that is truly human and of the local and universal Church, especially by helping the young to find their place in both. We work for the all-round development of all, young people and adults, helping them to become honest citizens and good Christians. Salesian action is not limited to evangelization and worship, nor is it purely social service. It must be both. Our task is to liberate the young and the poor from every form of oppression and to promote their economic, social and cultural development, so that they can play a constructive part in this field.

What is asked of us today is a work of humanization and Christian animation, bringing the essential gospel values of truth, justice, freedom, brotherhood, peace, and belief in God. It is to educate the young to the faith, by means of the proclamation of the Gospel and catechesis, and by the witness of a deep Christian friendship.

This should not be considered as a series of distinct or parallel activities, but as different dimensions of a single overall action. In summary, it is a question of being, like Don Bosco, for the young and the poor a living sign of Christ, the Evangelizer of the poor, who sets people free from every form of slavery,

2. What do we mean by honest citizen and good Christian?

It is a mistake to think that the common good has been defined in practice once and for all, without the need to discern what it means in specific complex social situations. The building of a just social order, in which everyone receives all that is due to him, is a fundamental task which every generation must face anew. The commitment of the “honest citizen” for the common good is then, more a way of life and a way of acting, characterized by some fundamental choices to be required of everyone who is committed or wants to be committed in the socio-cultural field. These choices can be summed up in five guidelines, which seem to me to be indispensable for anyone who wants to work for the common good.

First of all, involvement in social ethics cannot be separated from ethical commitment at a personal level. There is no place for the kind of hypocrisy that combines “private vice and public virtue”. This

implies recognition of the primacy of conscience in social action and the right of every representative of the people to conscientious objection on ethical matters. It also means that credibility is measured on the seriousness of one's lifestyle, on generosity and constancy in commitment, and fidelity in practice to the values proclaimed.

In second place, in his relationships with other citizens the Cooperator will have to follow the maxim formulated by Don Lorenzo Milani and the boys of his school at Barbiana: "Belong to the crowd, and have a ready word." This means staying close to the people, listening to their problems, and being a voice for those who suffer injustice and cannot speak for themselves. We are at the service of the ordinary people, not of the lords and masters. The poor, the voiceless, the socially vulnerable are our points of reference in our social commitment for the common good. They are the people we listen to and respect. Social welfare, education and healthcare for all are not optional extras, but essential values to be safeguarded and improved. Waste needs to be eliminated, and likewise all forms of assistance that do not actually benefit the poor.

In third place, cultural, social and political dialogue should always include the search for possible lines of agreement, so that people can work together for the common good. Co-responsibility, dialogue and participation are to be placed before preconceived ideas or motives based on personal interests or the interests of a particular group. The common good must always be sought before personal gain or that of one's political party.

In fourth place, in working for the common good we must be able to accept gradual progress towards the goals. The populist slogan "we want it all and we want it now" has often led to promises that are not kept, or sometimes even to violence or the success of causes that are unjust. We must persevere, keeping the end firmly in view, and not yield to any moral compromise or unjustified delay, and without ever having recourse to wrongful means. Every decision made for the common good is to be judged not on its immediate efficacy but especially on its intrinsic value and its educative contribution to the service of all. In particular, there must be a commitment to safeguard human life in all its stages, the promotion of the family, justice for all, the avoidance of war and every form of violence, and a commitment to work for peace.

This set of very basic rules for seeking the common good will remain a dead letter if there is not a moral input that will give reason for life and hope to all, and especially to the young! What is at stake is not the gain of a few but the future we will build together.

3. The need for an ethical stance to enable us to progress together

The age in which we live is marked by globalization and financial and economic crises. What kind of social and political action does this require of us? In a context where there is so much litigation and corruption, how can we decide on the choices to be made for the common good, without allowing ourselves to be swayed by party interest, or by generalizations that apply to all areas of behaviour and decisions of a public character? These seem to me the questions to be asked by everyone, and in particular every Salesian Cooperator, as a disciple of Jesus and follower of Don Bosco, when confronted with the urgent situations that challenge us all, and the expectations especially of those who are weakest and most threatened by the present economic and political insecurity.

These questions demand more than a ready-made answer, accompanied by well-meaning reassurances. We need to respond in a serious well-motivated and responsible manner, and to do this, we need to agree on a high criterion which will serve as a point of reference. We need an inspirational criterion that is, at the same time, credible and realizable. It must be one that we can refer to with inner conviction, and must lead to a decision that in turn leads to action, and we must be ready to pay the price in person for the choices we make.

This criterion might even lead us back to one drawn up by St Augustine at the time of the decline of the Roman Empire, a period in history no less dramatic and complex than our own. Some people accused Christians of being responsible for the disintegration of the Empire, but the Bishop of Hippo was not afraid to point out the real causes of the crisis. According to St Augustine, the underlying cause of the collapse of the Roman Empire was of moral character – the widespread tendency beginning with those at the top, but soon the generally accepted mentality – to prefer appearances to reality, or in the Latin of the time, to prefer *vanitas* to *veritas*. These two concepts are expressions of completely opposite ways of reasoning. Vanity or *vanitas* is the result of giving priority to appearances. It represents the triumph of the mask that covers up selfish interests and short-term gain with fine-sounding words. Vanity leads to gradually becoming accustomed to evil, and to compromises accepted without any qualms of conscience. It is satisfied with an outward semblance of doing good, to cover up the real game of private interests that is being played. Truth, on the other hand, makes choices based on permanent ethical values, and so it respects the inalienable dignity of the human person in the light of his temporal and eternal destiny. Truth looks not only to this world that will perish and end, but sees beyond it to the work of God which is to gather all people into one family to make of it the eternal and glorious city of God, “not to the applause of vanity, but thanks to the judgment of the truth.” (De Civitate Dei, II, 18,3).

This insight of St Augustine is of surprising relevance in today’s world with its culture of the mask, which heeds the myths of rampant consumerism and hedonism. Augustine offers an alternative vision built on truth and the primacy of values from which no one can legitimately stray. What is this truth? What are these values? We are faced with the choice between *vanitas* and *veritas* in four great spheres which are the responsibility of every man or woman who is concerned about public affairs, whatever role he or she may play.

In first place, there is the sphere of politics and civil institutions. We are often faced by a dehumanization of civil life, which is the result of a way of governing in which authority is separated from effective leadership, and democratic representation is separated from the real needs and interests of citizens. The ideal of good governance is inseparable from a strong ethical conviction that respects the participation of all in decision-making that is for the good of all, and never for the advantage of individuals or particular social groups.

In the field of culture and spiritual resources, vanity triumphs when people prefer to pursue ephemeral goods, eradicating the pursuit of the common good from the collective memory. Precious traces of this collective memory are to be found in art and other works of genius, as well as in spiritual and religious traditions. A community that has lost its collective memory has lost also its identity and risks being used for wrongful ends. The triumph of truth consists here in respect for the cultural, artistic and religious patrimony of the community, as a basis for discernment of the real

needs and priorities to be aimed at. Prior attention to the education of the young, in school and university, is one consequence of the pursuit of truth in this sphere.

Decisions in the economic sphere must also be based on the criterion of vanity and truth. Vanity (as understood by Augustine) leads to economic action geared only towards profit and private interest, whereas truth works for an integrated economic vision, attentive not only to the maximization of profit but also to the participation of all in wealth, the involvement also of weaker members, the welfare of the young, of women, of the elderly, and of minorities. Truth seeks to build an economy of communion which aims at the sharing of resources, respect for nature, participation of all in the use of goods, investment for social purposes and responsibility for future generations. In this way, it offers a good model for the change that is needed in the economic field.

The principle of “gratuity” of which Caritas in Veritate speaks, applies also in economic matters, and is an essential element for the development of all. The city of the future must not be planned and managed on exclusively utilitarian principles. If it is not the product of an integrated vision of the economy, which combines public and private interests, and values the contribution of all the members and their common welfare, it runs the risk of being fragmented and dehumanized. The decisive criterion, where *vanitas* and *veritas* come head to head, must be the centrality of the human person as the term of reference in every decision and in all aspects.

The most profound application of the principle proposed by St Augustine comes in the field of general ethics. An individualist and utilitarian morality which aims only at the interest of one person or a few, often hidden behind propaganda or a pretence of doing good, must be replaced by the ethics of truth, which is open to values founded in our common humanity and the transcendent dignity of the human person. This ethics of truth is characterized by the primacy of responsibility for others, for self and for the environment. From this follows an urgent concern for solidarity and participation, giving priority to the rights of the weakest, be they individuals, groups, peoples or even entire countries. It implies also openness to spiritual values, including cultural and artistic values, religious freedom, freedom of conscience, respect for worship and witness to God.

The Church’s Social Teaching

All this is to be done in the light of the Church’s Social Teaching, which in turn is based on a Christian anthropology with a vision of the dignity of the human person and of his relationship with the other members of society.

The Human Person

The human person is the hinge on which all the Church’s social teaching depends. The person is central to society on account of his eminent and inalienable dignity. This dignity of the human person derives from the fact that he is created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen 1,26-27). We can say that, on this point, the biblical truth coincides with that of human reason, which also affirms the value and dignity of the human person.

The human person is always a value in himself and of himself (or herself), and can never be used as a means or treated as a thing, by the State or any other institution, political party, etc. Indeed, “the person in his individuality is not a number, nor a link in a chain, nor a cog in a system.” The human

person has priority over the State and society. The person is a “subsistent human right” and therefore the basis of all law. Therefore, it is not the State that confers rights on the person in a kindly paternalistic fashion, nor can the State deny the rights of the person. Rather it has an obligation to defend, promote and favour the development of the natural rights of every person, without any discrimination. Discrimination, if it were to occur, would constitute “an absolutely intolerable injustice, because of the offence committed against the dignity of the human person.”

4. Honest citizen and Good Christian today

Honest citizen

From what has been said it is clear that what we mean by honest citizen now in the third millennium is different from what Don Bosco meant. He lived at a time when there was no understanding of active politics except as the work of a wealthy privileged minority. Even then, it was understood in a passive sense – obeying the law, keeping out of trouble and minding your own business.

When the Bible speaks of the poor and oppressed it does so to portray a particular notion of God, a God who cares for the poor and defends the oppressed. “To oppress the poor is to insult his creator” says the Book of Proverbs (Prov 14.31), for the Lord espouses the cause of the poor. Work for justice and the care of those whom society tends to marginalize are not based only on a desire for peace and harmony, or on proper relationships, but on the will of God who reveals himself as the defender of the oppressed.

Good Christian: the Church as a community

The Church of tomorrow will have to be a Church that gives witness. We need to find ways of “imagining” the Church of the third millennium. By this we mean an ability to build a bridge between the dream of the future and the present reality, between a far-sighted vision for the future and the patience to transform the Church of today from a missionary perspective.

Witness, in practice, means that Christian life is a way of acting that can find expression in the many different spheres of human life. It would be a mistake to think that “the world” is merely a passive place, where Christians are engaged in the work of salvation on behalf of others. “The world”, when it refers to the way in which people of today desire, suffer, struggle, dream, love and hope, is the context and the language in which the gospel is proclaimed. As you can see, dear Salesian Cooperators, no matter where you find yourself anywhere in the world, there is an immense amount of work to be done. Many workers are needed. But in this great work we are not alone. Jesus is with us. “Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time” (Mt 28.30). The second Vatican Council says: “appointed Lord by His resurrection and given plenary power in heaven and on earth, Christ is now at work in the hearts of men through the energy of His Holy Spirit, (GS 38) . The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and of civilization, the centre of the human race, the joy of every heart and the answer to all its yearnings” (GS.45).

Be true Salesian Cooperators among the people and especially the young people of today, living with the Spirit of the Risen Lord, and fortified by the example of Don Bosco. May the motherly presence of Mary strengthen you. She was, in a special way, the first cooperator of her Son. From Nazareth and Bethlehem, to Calvary and the Upper Room, she cooperated above all others and in a singular

way in the work of the Saviour (cf LG 61). Now she too is risen and she cooperates with motherly affection in the birth and education of the brothers of her Son (cf LG 63), and is rightly called our Helper (cf LG 62). Don Bosco was absolutely convinced of this and experienced it directly, from the dream he had at the age of nine, right to his death.

Mary has always been the inspiration and support of every Salesian work. May she also be the inspiration and support of our Association, helping us to be faithful to the charism of Don Bosco and to carry out responsibly our Salesian mission.

D. Giuseppe Casti