
"The Project of Apostolic Life: the Way to be Faithful to Don Bosco's charism"

*Address of the Rector Major to the Fourth World Congress
of the Salesian Cooperators*

*«Show me Lord your way
so that I may walk in your truth.
Guide my heart to fear your name».
(Psalm 85:11)*

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After the words of welcome to this important assembly of the Association of the Salesian Cooperators, it is my pleasure to address you, with this wish from the start: that you will have a good, serious and fruitful experience of the Salesian spirit in action.

I should like to begin by giving a short commentary on the text of Psalm 85:11 because it seems to me that it will provide the key to the understanding of what I have to say and it sums up what I really want to say to you from my heart. Also, it is a text that I like very much, and which I usually say both in the morning and in the evening: «*Show me Lord your way so that I may walk in your truth. Guide my heart to fear your name*». The Psalmist asks that he may walk in God's ways - in the «truth»; i.e., fully and faithfully observing the Covenant. He therefore feels the need to ask for the gift of a heart that is simple, a heart that is pure, one that ensures that what a person professes and declares is also what he lives. A single and an undivided heart is the sign of fidelity and of total love. It is precisely because the law of God is an expression of His love, as Psalm 118 puts it so magnificently, that there is no better response than to love it, accept it in our hearts, and make it our life. The same applies to your *Project of Apostolic Life*.

Introduction

I have been asked to give a reflection on the subject "*The Project of Apostolic Life: the way to be faithful to Don Bosco's charism*," and I do so very willingly. First, because it is the main topic of your Congress, which has precisely as its main aim the final approval of your Constitutions. Also, this is happening at a very critical stage in our history as a result of the great crisis - cultural, social, economic, political, scientific/technological, media and religious - that the human race is experiencing.

In addition, this period coincides with the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, a veritable pentecost for the Church, which led her to discover herself more as a mystery than as a 'perfect society;' more as the servant than as the mistress of the world; more as the good Samaritan, fully involved in the "joys and the hopes, the sorrows and anxieties" (*Gaudium et Spes* I) than as an institution regulated by dogmas, rules and norms; more as a communion of all those who believe in the Lord Jesus with a variety of charisms and ministries, than as an institution in the form of a pyramid in which some members have the power to teach, to rule, to sanctify, with others merely on the receiving end.

Today, this Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, feels herself once again challenged by the world, which she is called to serve, as the "Sacrament of Salvation" and "Light of the Peoples." It was precisely in this context that the Synod on New Evangelization took place and the Year of Faith began, with the conviction that the most precious gift we are being called to give is the communication of the love of God, the joy of His

being united and close to us to the very end in the incarnation of Jesus, who was born, died, and rose for us so that in Him we might have life and life to the full.

In our own Salesian circles, we are in the three-year period of preparation for the Bicentenary of the birth of our beloved founder and father St. John Bosco. Together with the whole Salesian Family we are committed to arriving at 2015 having followed the path of a profound spiritual and charismatic renewal and a pastoral conversion so that the Salesian mission, undertaken in different ways by the various groups, and in the varied contexts in which they find themselves living and working, may respond to the needs, the desires and the rights of the young people of today.

Here then, dear friends, are the challenges, the opportunities and the stimuli that the Lord is offering to us in order to enlighten this Congress of ours, which, being docile to the Spirit and with wide open hearts, is responding to whatever the Lord is expecting from this Association.

The Cooperator in the mind of St. John Bosco

Before dealing directly with the subject, I feel the need to say something to you about what the Cooperator was in Don Bosco's mind. This will help us to understand what his original insight was, clearly expressed in the beautiful phrase, repeated more than once: «I always needed the help of everybody»!¹

To describe his helpers who were not Religious, St. John Bosco hesitated quite a while before making up his mind and arriving at the name of «*Salesian Cooperators*», which appeared only at the end of a long chain of events.

The introduction to the text of the Regulations, published at Albenga in 1876, opened with the words: «To the Reader. No sooner had the work of the Oratories begun in 1841, than some pious and zealous priests and lay people came to their help in cultivating the harvest which, since then, has been abundant among young people at-risk. These Collaborators or Cooperators were always the support of the Pious Works which Divine Providence placed in our hands ».

Not just Cooperators with their promise, but a vast network of cooperation, support, sympathy, and generosity..., very carefully cultivated. I say this because I think this particular insight of Don Bosco needs to be rediscovered, one that was developed by Don Rua and his Successors, which made the world-wide expansion of Salesian work possible.

Recently an attempt has been made to give greater depth to the Cooperator, giving due weight to one aspect of Don Bosco's vision - that of the "extern" Salesian. Don Bosco had the ideas of: re-organizing Catholics for the re-Christianization of society; the laity's giving material support to Salesian works; Catholic lay "voluntary service" in pastoral work (teaching catechism, cooperating with the parish clergy) and in social work (education, assistance, training, safeguarding).

Both the things Don Bosco did and his conferences indicate the nature, the various forms, and the significance of this cooperation. They were directed not only towards cooperators and benefactors but also towards people involved in various forms of apostolate (as an individual or as part of church activities). *Practical forms of Charity* are dealt with in a considerable part of his activities and words, as he makes ever growing insistent and demanding appeals.

¹
BM I, p. 275

In the special conference which he gave on June 1, 1885, Don Bosco declared: "To be a Salesian Cooperator means to cooperate with other people in the support a work founded under the auspices of St. Francis de Sales with the purpose of assisting Holy Church in her most immediate needs. By so doing, one helps to promote an undertaking warmly recommended by the Holy Father since it will educate the boys in virtue and guide them towards the sanctuary. Its main purpose is to educate the young who are today the target of evil people and to promote the love of our religion in the midst of the world in schools, hospices, festive oratories, and the family circle and to promote also morals, prayer, the approach to the Sacraments, etc."²

Approved by the Holy See on May 9, 1986, promulgated by the Rector Major Fr. Egidio Viganò on the following May 24th, and revised in November 2006, with the promulgation of the Rector Major Fr. Pascual Chavez on April 8, 2007, the *New Regulations* describe the revised image of the Salesian Cooperator at the dawn of the 21st century, in regard to the identity, spirit, mission, and organization of the Association.

This is what article three of the Statutes approved in 2007 says: «The Salesian Cooperators live out their faith in their own secular reality. Inspired by St. John Bosco's apostolic project, they feel themselves to be in living communion with the other members of the Salesian Family. They are committed to the same mission to the young and to ordinary people as associates, brothers and sisters. They work for the good of the Church and society, in a manner adapted to their circumstances and actual possibilities».

Those who drew up this article wanted to refer back to the original intentions of Don Bosco, according to which the Cooperator is a real Salesian in the world; i.e., a Christian, lay person or priest, who, without the ties of religious vows, carries out his/her vocation to holiness in the service of the mission to youth and to ordinary people according to the spirit of St. John Bosco. The identity of the Cooperator described in this way has three distinguishing characteristics: he or she is a Catholic Christian, is in the world, and is a Salesian.

The Project of Apostolic Life

Coming directly now to the subject which is that of the *Project of Apostolic Life*, I would presume to say that it is not in the first place a project that we have thought up, as though we ourselves were proposing our own way of carrying out the Salesian apostolate, but it is the heartfelt and grateful taking up of God's plan to put into effect His work of Salvation. Making it our own and taking it up fervently, we become *God's Cooperators* and companions of Jesus, at the school of St. John Bosco.

This point of view is not insignificant since it means taking as our living Rule the person of Jesus Himself and His Gospel. Only in this way does the *Project of Apostolic Life* of an Association of the lay faithful - that of the Salesian Cooperators - become a Salesian way of reading the Gospel. Its validity is confirmed by the official recognition of the Holy See, which declares the evangelical authenticity of the text and therefore considers it a way that leads to holiness for those who take it up and live it as a "Rule of Life" since it starts from love and leads to love. In addition, it is a way of being faithful to Don Bosco, to his charism, and to his mission.

The PAL has a three-fold aim: to ensure the *identity* of the Association through a dynamic fidelity, one which always refers back to the original intuition and motivation of the Founder and at the same time tries to remain up-to-date according to the changing historical circumstances; to strengthen the *unity* of its members in the variety of their backgrounds, ages, formation, sensitivities, languages, and cultures, but united by Love, by Faith, by Hope and by a common charism and a shared project; and promoting their *vitality*, bearing in mind

² BMXVII, 426

that behind every vocation there is always a mission to be carried out, in the name of the Church and on behalf of the people, so that personal growth and the development of the Association become the criteria for authenticity and for assessment.

The anthropological, theological, ecclesial and Salesian richness of the PAL

The current *Project of Apostolic Life* is not a simple set of regulations valid and useful, indispensable and necessary in order to regulate the life of the Association. We recognize that already the previous text, in a post-council spirit, had been carefully revised in an attempt to add to it an anthropological dimension that would make clear the importance of individuals, their needs, their formation, and their development so as to reach holiness. At the same time it highlights the irreplaceable value of the group (which I would prefer to call 'community') as a place for fraternal relationships, for an experience of God, and for apostolic commitment. The previous text already had a post-council theological vision which pointed out that the foundation of the *Project of Life* was baptismal faith and the exercise of the Christian life as an expression of the Love of the Father Who, through the action of His Spirit, makes us His children and disciples of the Lord Jesus, urging us to conform ourselves totally to Christ. In addition, the previous PAL expressed its concern to insert the Association within the Church, so as to work in her, with her, and for her in order to avoid any sense of being a sect or an independent entity and to make us understand that our communion and mission are a participation in the communion and mission of God and of the Church: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you" (Jn. 15:9). "As the Father sent me, so I have sent you." (Jn. 20:21). Finally, the previous text was fully imbued with the spirit and with the spirituality of Don Bosco: first, because the Association of the Salesian Cooperators had been founded directly by St. John Bosco, and second, because it had always occupied a central place within the Salesian Family together with the other groups he founded. Nowadays, all these elements have been gathered together and highlighted in the *Charter of Identity of the Salesian Family*, which needs to be known and studied together with your own particular document.

The new *Project of Apostolic Life* wanted to make sure that once these indispensable riches were safeguarded, the *lay identity* of the Association could be better ensured at this time in history when, ever more clearly, the vocation and the mission of the lay Christian are recognized and now more than ever are irreplaceable. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that this is the time of the laity and that, especially in certain parts of the world, the future of Christianity depends on it. Personally, I would like nothing better than to see lay the groups, starting with the Salesian Cooperators, form and act as a real movement, with great conviction, dedication, and social and political commitment. In my opinion, this goal has been achieved, at least as far as this document is concerned, for it is the fruit of a long period of work by everyone.

With that said, no text is perfect; all texts can be improved. To tell the truth, one has to say that perfection is to be found in a life lived in the light of the PAL. Nevertheless, the text we have is already very good for the reasons given above. From this point of view, it is important to take on its spirit and to make the text a real "Project of Life" rooted in the Gospel, with the spirit of Don Bosco, in order to collaborate in building the Kingdom through personal witness, formation, and apostolic commitment.

The structure of society

- There is a Latin dictum which says *Ubi societas ibi ius*. "Where there is a society, there has to be a law"; in other words, there is something - written down or not – which is a code to regulate relationships between people, their rights and duties, and the way it operates. The purpose of the above is to arrive at a peaceful, calm, and fruitful co-existence. In the case of the Association of the Cooperators, from the very beginning, Don Bosco himself gave it a set of Regulations to facilitate its functioning and ensure the mission entrusted to it.

What had been a local Association at the service of the work at the Oratory in Turin, developed and continued to develop, constantly adding new members from different parts of the world. This led to the Association's having an organization which, more and more, became coordinated and structured at various levels:

- World Level: this has the two-fold role of animation and government. It promotes the identity, the vitality, and the effectiveness of the Association in its various contexts - wherever the members live and carry out the mission.
- Province Level: this has the special care of the various local groups to ensure that there is good integration between a high quality of formation and the practical nature of involvement in the different fields of the mission.
- Local Level: this is the place where the individual member lives out his/her life, is welcomed in the Association, and is accompanied in his/her human, spiritual, and Salesian development in the three-fold work of integration, formation, and action.

The profile of the Salesian-Cooperator

The *Project of Apostolic Life* defines the profile of the Salesian Cooperator in such a way as to make him or her suited to the vocation and mission. It is the result of a process of identification which gradually builds up the identity and the nature of each member among the members of the Association. The more characteristic features are the following:

- a person full of humanity: the typical element of the optimistic humanism of Saint Francis de Sales, which leads someone to have a positive view of himself, of reality, of the Church, and of the World, having learned to see God in everything and to see things through God's eyes.
- a baptized person with a great love for the Church: who lives his being a child of God with joy, with a clear identity, with gratitude, and with responsibility, according to the Christian way of life, as a disciple of Jesus in the temporal sphere.
- a Salesian in the world according to St. John Bosco's original insight: a person who is a fully-committed collaborator of God in all the key aspects of the Salesian mission - the family, young people, education, the preventive system, social and political engagement.

The historical-cultural context: social – economic – religious – academic – media

So, this world which “God loved so much as to send his own Son so that those who believe may have eternal life” (cf. Jn. 3:16), is going through one of the most exciting and challenging phases in its history. And it is in this world that we are being called to live our lives, to give witness to our faith, and to collaborate with the Salesian charism in building up the Civilization of Love.

In fact, the situation of the economy's being put to the test today by a crisis without precedent is the cause migrations, tension, of various forms of violence, and of a renewed and ever more marked division between the rich and the poor. The world political situation is being put to the test by the presence of new protagonists, such as the Islamic world, and by the emerging strength of the large states in Asia. Scientific and technological research, while beneficial in many aspects, seems not to acknowledge any limits or moral frames of reference. Sometimes it harbors illegitimate pretensions, not bothering to question itself about the important values which are the foundation of human morality; rather, it presents itself as almost a kind of new religion. Finally, we face the challenge of the world of social communication. On the one hand, this

offers more access to information and greater possibilities for acquiring knowledge, for sharing, for new forms of solidarity, and the ability to promote a culture more and more on a world-wide scale. On the other hand, one sees the fostering of much more interest in personal, individual needs. This circumstance contributes to the weakening and the loss of the objective value of profoundly human experiences so that morality and politics are reduced to being a means of entertainment. All of this leads to our running the risk of fostering a culture of the ephemeral, of the immediate, and of mere appearances, with neither a memory of the past nor with any future.³

I don't want to give you a negative picture of today's world, but we cannot ignore the realities around us. In opening the Year of Faith, Benedict XVI declared that «Recent decades have seen the advance of a spiritual “desertification”. This void has spread. But it is in starting from this experience of desert, from this void, that we can again discover the joy of believing and its vital importance for us men and women... Also, in the desert people of faith are needed who, with their own lives, point the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive».⁴ We have to learn to see God in everything while at the same time considering that all these challenges are also opportunities. This is how the Church wants to confront them. In fact, she is trying to respond with a "new evangelization" marked by the effort to give a positive response to the needs of the human race. She really wants to transmit the good news which fills life with light, with meaning, and with hope. From this follows the need to be generous, joyful, and convinced believers who are capable of transmitting the faith because they are certain that only in Christ can mankind achieve the fullness of life, the long-lasting fruitfulness, and the happiness to which it aspires.

The important communication of the faith by word of mouth can never be imposed. It takes place in an atmosphere of great freedom and dialogue which opens the way to a process of interaction with all cultures, to inter-religious dialogue with men and women of all beliefs, to ecumenism among Christians of the different confessions, and inculturation wherever we are living.

A Historical project for these times

In practical terms, how do I see the Salesian Cooperators today? I see them as people dedicated to the common good who are working in the political, social and humanitarian fields:

- with special attention for the poor, the excluded, the sick, and the marginalized of all kinds, all of which requires an open heart;
- engaged in giving vitality to the Church by putting into practice the beneficial projects of the Association, at the different levels, with a real attitude of service;
- with a strong lay spirituality so as to become holy educators who know how to form others to a gospel lifestyle and to participation in the Sacraments.

To sum up: a new kind of Salesian Cooperator is needed today – one who, in the changed historical circumstances of today, will respond better to the insight and the original intention of our beloved founder and father.

Saint John Bosco is the educator Saint, commonly called the "Father, Teacher, and Friend of Youth". For the whole Salesian Family, and, therefore, for the Association of Salesian Cooperators, today's challenge is focused above all on prevention: on breaking the vicious cycle which perpetuates the continuous violation of the fundamental rights and dignity of individuals, especially of the young.

³Cf. *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Faith. Instrumentum Laboris*. Vatican City, 2012. nos. 51-52.

⁴Benedict XVI. Homily of the Mass for the opening of the Year of Faith. Thursday, October 11, 2012.

As Salesians, we want to make a *significant contribution to the education of the young* and to take part in a committed way in the human development of both individuals and of society. We want to encourage them to make themselves active and responsible citizens of the world in order to promote a wide-spread culture of human rights, which will become the patrimony of humanity.

Too often education nowadays is a “market education”, aimed at maintaining the *status quo* which continues more and more to keep wealth in private hands on behalf of a few, at the service of existing *lobbies*, and in a few privileged countries. In reality, meanwhile, the only thing that they have in common is poverty.

One of the tragedies of modern humanity is precisely this split between education and society, the divide between school and citizenship. Therefore, we need to promote an education which civilizes by means of an education which offers an alternative to the present culture: to one of justice and of solidarity. We need to ask ourselves: what does it mean today to educate responsible citizens who have the destiny of society and of humanity at heart?

In 2015 we shall celebrate the Bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco. As Salesian Family we are preparing for this important occasion with a three-year period of preparation. The objective proposed for 2013 concerns the pedagogy of St. John Bosco, the *return to Don Bosco the educator* in order to deepen our understanding in historical terms of his educational method, his pedagogy of kindness, and his Preventive System – his educational and spiritual approach based on "reason, religion and loving kindness". Further, we aim to find their relevance for today in forming "good Christians and upright citizens." Today, this expression might be rendered as “formation for others” in our ever more multicultural world.

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”.

Therefore we need to think deeply about this, above all on the conceptual level. We need to take into account all areas connected with the issue of the human development of the young and of ordinary people, while at the same time paying attention to the pertinent and authoritative philosophical-anthropological, theological, scientific, historical, and methodological points of view. Then we need to focus on practical issues based on the experience and the reflection of individuals and of communities.

We need to move in the direction of an updated re-affirmation of Don Bosco's "socio-political-educational choice." This does not mean promoting an ideological activism linked to any particular political party or agenda, but it does mean educating to a social and political awareness that then leads to devoting one's life to the good of society; living one's life as a mission; and constantly bearing in mind the inalienable human and Christian values.

In other words, a reconsideration of the social aspect of education ought to encourage us to create explicit experiences of social commitment in the broadest sense and in an ever more inter-related way. Without a doubt, the choice of international voluntary service is an extremely significant form of this.

There is a very real fear regarding the future which in some ways is quite palpable, especially among the poorest people, in these times of crisis. We are faced with a new context of global interdependence in which the old polarizations between developed and developing countries no longer hold. All countries, without distinction, have to face new and old challenges in a new way - which can have repercussions and make an impact well beyond any national frontier.

From the start, the Salesian mission in its various works and among the groups who carry it out was never seen as being simply a matter of providing assistance, just "giving," "sending," "building." The Salesian mission represents, in the various forms of cooperation for development, a human bridge for inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.

St. John Bosco's educational System has a great social dimension: it is intended to collaborate with many other agencies in the transformation of society. It works to achieve change in criteria and views of life to promote a culture of concern for the other person; to live a lifestyle that is simple, with a constant attitude of generous sharing and of a commitment to justice and to the dignity of every human being.

To this end, an Association such as that of the Salesian Cooperators should support projects and development programs in poor countries, strategies capable of making an impact on public policy, and should promote awareness, information, and formation.

So my brothers and sisters, this is what I expect from you at this historic moment. I entrust the whole Association and each and every member to the guidance and motherly care of Mary, the Immaculate Help of Christians. May she be the one to teach us how to be Cooperators with God in the carrying out of His wonderful plan of salvation, especially of "the young, poor, abandoned, and at-risk".

Rome, November 8, 2012

Fr Pascual Chávez V., SDB