**The Salesian Cooperators**

**Oriented to live synodality in the Church**

The term *Synodality* (walking together) is connected to synergy (working together), is no longer a phrase unknown to all of us. We hear it frequently in the Church and from Pope Francis. Synodality is a term that the Church, for some time, has been pursuing with commitment to rediscover its profound meaning, to reappropriate a way of life constitutive of the people of God and to reawaken the fascination to be walking together.

The synodal journey is not rigid, in a pre-packaged, strictly designed path. But it is defined and unfolds itself over time through constant listening, confrontation, discernment, and mutual trust to be renewed day by day.

Don Bosco took on the same path in searching for his vocation, in listening to the voice which was calling him to follow. We know his story well. I would like to underline the important moment when the young priest, John Bosco, who allowed himself to be guided by the Holy Spirit through Fr. Giuseppe Cafasso.

Fr. Cafasso saw the love and the concern of Don Bosco for poor young people. Don Bosco dreamed of an immense Sunday Oratory for the young people whom he wanted to gather. Fr. Cafasso saw in Don Bosco the one who was destined by Providence to become the Apostle of Turin.

Before giving the final answer to Don Bosco as to what to do after the completion of his ecclesiastical studies, Fr. Cafasso asked him:

- *At this moment what occupies your heart? What disturbs your mind?*

Don Bosco answered:

- *At this moment I seem to be amid a multitude of children, who ask me for help.*

This is how his mission was born... starting from the meeting with Bartolomeo Garelli (on December 8, 1841). Then, the number grew even bigger. The little courtyard of the church of St. Francis of Assisi could not contain them. Then, they gathered in the streets, in the fields, in the cemetery... or in any space where they could gather. Finally, they arrived at the Pinardi shed.

We can say that Don Bosco made a good journey of “synodality” together with his poor boys and his collaborators. Don Bosco went against the current, against the thought of his fellow priests to the point that they thought Don Bosco was crazy.

**What did Don Bosco do at Valdocco?**

We know well that Don Bosco, from the very beginning of his mission in Valdocco, involved many lay people, friends and collaborators, so that they would be participants in his mission among the young. He ensured sharing and co-responsibility for this task from priests, employers, simple people of good will, theologians, the rich nobles, popular politicians - both men and women.

We (the Salesians) were born and grew up historically in communion with the laity, and they with us. Indeed, we must emphasize the importance of the role of the young people in the development of the Salesian charism and mission: Don Bosco found among his young people, his first collaborators, who thus turned out to be the co-founders of the Congregation.

*(The Dream – The Second Sunday of October 1844) Vol II, Ch. 26: Animals changed into lambs; many lambs turned into shepherds; these shepherds took care of the others. As the shepherds grew in great numbers, they divided, and went elsewhere to gather other strange animals and guide them to other sheepfolds.*

With this introduction I invite you, my dear Salesian Cooperators, to live the synodality in the Church in the “Salesian style”.

I would like to share with you 3 points of synodality by taking them from the Salesian Charism:

1. The Salesian Sacrament of Presence

2. Familiarity – ‘Prophets of Fraternity’

3. Journeying and accompanying Young People in the Mission

1. **The Salesian Sacrament of Presence**

We are Salesians, and our vocation is marked by a special gift from God for young people. The article 8 of PAL (Project of Apostolic Life of Salesian Cooperators) talks about apostolic commitment. The second paragraph says:

“§2. *Animated by the Salesian spirit, they give special attention to young people, especially to those who are poorest or victims of any kind of marginalization, exploitation, or violence; to those setting out in the world of work; and to those who show signs of a specific Vocation.*”

Pope Francis in his message to the General Chapter members spoke about “the Valdocco option and the Charism of Presence.” He wrote that above all, the Salesian is the living monument of a Presence, where availability, listening, joy and dedication are the essential aspects to awaken the educational process. Our Rector Major, Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, qualifies this as the “Salesian Sacrament” of presence.

First and foremost call of a Salesian is to be joyful and free presence in the midst of young people. Our being disciples of the Lord, of being authentic and profound apostles of the young people implies our staying among the people and especially in the midst of the young people. The secret of assuring a joyful presence consists in being convinced of your vocation and to be happy Salesian Cooperators.

Presence is not just about spending time with young people as a group. But about meeting them individually, in a personal way, to establish a relationship which allows you to know and listen to their desires, their difficulties and struggles, and sometimes their fears and uncertainty.

Remember that you are the Salesians in the Church and in the world. The article 16 speaks about the Salesian Presence in the world:

“§1. *Salesian Cooperators know they are “in intimate solidarity” with the society in which they live and for which they are called to be light, salt, and leaven. They believe in the interior resources of a person. They share the values of their own culture, and they commit themselves to work so that it may be guided by Christian humanism. They promote new realities with a critical Christian sense. They integrate into their life “all that which is good,” adopting a listening stance, especially as regards the young, in discerning the signs of the times.*

§2. *Faced with socio-cultural challenges and difficulties, they adopt a critical and constructive attitude. They work with commitment to spread a Christian culture and ethic of welcome and solidarity in society*.”

By your daily lives, you bear witness at your workplace, in the parishes, and in the society. We are called to be “the salt of the earth and the light of the world” (Mt. 5:13-14).

With these two eloquent images, Jesus defines the mission of his disciples (that’s all of us): ‘to be salt of the earth and light of the world’. Two images tell us that it is not a matter of doing, but of being. And we are salt of the earth and light of the world when we make the Beatitudes, our project of life (Art.7: The witness of the Beatitudes). We are called to insert ourselves into this society as salt without losing our taste, giving it evangelical flavor and preserving it from ruin. We are called to enlighten, in a world in which God, the North Star, has been lost. Thus, we become a point of reference, a criterion for life’s choices for confused young people.

Salesian Cooperators live as “good Christians and honest citizens,” sanctifying their existence in their daily lives and root their actions in union with God.

1. **Familiarity - "Prophets of Fraternity"**

In order to live the synodality, we cannot miss the aspect of creating a fraternal environment where we all feel welcomed, where we all feel like brothers and sisters and at home.

While being with the poor, orphaned, and abandoned boys, seeing that they needed a mother to create a family, Don Bosco invited his mother to come to Valdocco. By her presence she gave the young orphans the sense of a true motherly love.

In Pope Francis’ letter to the participants of the 28th General Chapter, the Pope highlighted the maternal presence that makes the Salesian house a true home. “What would become of Valdocco without the presence of Mamma Margaret? Would your houses have been possible without this woman of faith?”

Where there is a Salesian community, an experience of faith is present, a network of relationship is built, and multiple forms of service are offered to young people. The community makes the Salesian presence visible among the young, animates it and promotes its growth. It is necessary, first of all, to return to the young and to be not only a community for the young, but also a community with the young. For this reason, the Salesian community builds a presence of communion and participation, involves the laity and the Salesian Family, and becomes part of the territory and the local Church. It thus transforms a presence that “educates and evangelizes,” creating environments with a great spiritual source, becoming aware of the situations of poverty of young people and responding to them with a pastoral mind and heart, implementing projects and processes for the maturation of young people.

We need to be a community that lives in fraternity, that gives a strong and clear evangelical witness, which becomes an animating presence among young people and in the Church.

My dear Salesian Cooperators, your presence (like the presence of Mamma Margherita) sweetens our structure and makes it a true home for the boys and the young...

There were so many good practices in various Salesian Cooperator centers around the world during the pandemic. There were initiatives, creative ways, and great fraternity among us. How many concrete interventions were executed… how many events were organized… many moments of prayers... We never stood still! Never felt like mere spectators. We did not just stand at the window to watch or felt left out of the “game”. But we remain an active and lively Association, walking together even in hard and difficult times. Indeed, when we encounter difficulties, we feel even more united, we share our fraternity even more. Each of us wants to do something even it is a very small or humble gesture but with great love and affection.

1. **Journeying and accompanying young people in the mission.**

The last point is the heart of our Charism which has made us what we are: The Preventive System, a Salesian educational method.

The Preventive System is a methodology of “kindness”. It is that which makes love visible and familiar, which knows how to arouse a response of love and creates a climate and environment of loving-kindness in view of the ultimate goal of life.

The Preventive System is the method devised and gradually matured by Don Bosco. As an outstanding educator, he based the system on his daily experience gave rise to a new method of education which develops the whole person: body, mind, heart and spirit. It fosters growth and freedom, placing the young at the center of all educational process.

The preventive method is expressed in an assiduous educational presence which, in the Salesian family spirit, establishes simple and positive relationships based on trust, commitment and daily joy.

It intends to form “good Christians and honest citizens” through an educational method which is summed up in the trinomial *“reason, religion and loving-kindness”,* moved by the certainty that “in every young person, even in the naughtiest one, there is goodness that awaits growth.”

Such a pedagogy creates a positive climate, an encouragement of trust and makes young people active protagonists, which in turn brings out their best resources and leads them on to choose what is good, healthy, joyful and makes them grow in life.

But more than a pedagogical method, the preventive system is a spirituality that leads to re-enacting God's way of being and acting toward humanity, which is the path of the Good Shepherd. The educator, the formator, the educational community and Christian communities who feel and act “preventively”, are called, like Don Bosco, to live the apostolic passion of Christ, the Good Shepherd: to be another “Christ - Good Shepherd” among the people with whom they share their mission and among all those in whom they are sent.

It proposes Jesus Christ to all young people as the ideal of life, and Mother Mary as their teacher in the journey.

The secret of education is the goodness and the constant but moderate presence of the educator who journeys with young people toward a high goal: holiness, as Jesus did with the disciples who followed him. Just as Don Bosco lived, acted and taught all those who were with him, the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Cooperators are invited to do the same as members of the Salesian Family. His heritage is in our hearts and in our hands today.

We are the Salesian Cooperators, and are the Salesians in the world as stated in Article 6 of the PVA: *“…They commit themselves to the same mission to youth and to the ordinary folk in a fraternal and united way. They work for the good of the Church and of the society in a manner adapted to the educational needs of their territory and to their own concrete possibilities.”*

In this mission we are called to “walk together” among ourselves and with the whole Church. As St. John Chrysostom says, “Church and Synod are synonymous.” Because Church means “walking together” with God’s flock on the paths of meeting Christ the Lord. We also understand that within it no one can be “elevated” above others. On the contrary, in the Church it is necessary for someone to “lower himself” to put himself at the service of his brothers and sisters along the way.

Walking together is not automatic, it is not taken for granted, it is not just wishful thinking, it is a continuous and patient learning of an art that allows us to synchronize our steps, to harmonize differences, to open ourselves to the creativity of the Spirit that directs our gaze toward great horizons. It is a dynamic proceeding, built with the contribution of everyone, even the smallest and most marginalized who continually lead us back to God’s ways.