**SALESIAN COOPERATORS: THOUGHT TO LIVE SYNODALITY IN THE CHURCH**

**SYNODALITY: communion, participation, mission.**

The word "synodality" has now become an “everyday” expression, used in the ecclesial community complying with what is expected.

The will of Pope Francis is very evident. On October 9, 2021, the world path of reflection and study "For a Synodal Church" began in the Vatican. That will culminate with the celebration of the Plenary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023, and then proceed to the application phase.

The objective of the synodal path is to involve the entire People of God in an extensive fashion, to listen within the Catholic Church and outside the other Churches, as well as different believers and those who do not believe.

The themes identified for this path are: communion, participation, mission.

Referring to the theologian Yves Congar***, the Pope states that: “There is no need to create another Church, but to create a different Church,”***

There is a great need to renew the ecclesial fabric, innovating without breaking with the past and identifying new ways of living and belonging without going over the heads of believers.

In fact, there is a real risk that high-sounding expressions remain in somewhat abstract terms if a synodal practice is not cultivated.

Is it really possible to establish in practice an increasingly participatory and communitarian style in ecclesial life, at all levels?

How to combine the different feelings, different gifts and approaches to truly become "fellow travelers" in the adventure of the Church and of all humanity?

And what about our role as the Association of Salesian Cooperators and the Salesian Family?

The work to be done is not a short or medium term project. It takes years and possibly generations.

It is about spreading in all the groups of the Salesian Family specifically what concerns us more closely and more generally, in the movements, parishes, a style of challenge capable of accepting different ideas, sometimes even opposed, but without losing that evangelical spirit. of respect for the person that prevails over the defense 'independently' of personal, political and religious ideas.

However, we must be honest in saying that we began this path with the awareness that true believers are not used to this, neither is the ecclesiastical hierarchy nor the lay faithful.

That is why we try to understand how, as lay people, we can make our contribution.

**THE ORIGINS - A DREAM PARALLELED WITH PROPHECY**

From an article published in ANS in November 2020 entitled: "Don Bosco, the man of God who always asked everyone for help"

***“I have always needed everyone”,*** *Don Bosco often said.*

*Unforgettable, that cold afternoon of November 3, 1846, that priest and his mother who arrive after walking forty kilometers. He with the breviary under his arm and a little luggage, she with a basket with some things. His mother follows him on the somewhat crazy adventure. He hadn't forced her. He loved his mom. But his mom loved him even more. And she did not hesitate: "John, I'm going with you."*

***He was helped by lay men and women, and by friendly priests, who collaborated with him in many ways.***

*Above all, he had the invaluable help of his beloved mother, Mamma Margherita. I like to say, I think with historical value, that together they founded the Oratory, because to the maternal delicacy of the mother who gave feminine warmth to that house, was added the creative and apostolic genius of Don Bosco. She accompanied and encouraged her son in the difficult beginnings of the Oratory and work with the boys who knocked on the door of their house.*

*Next to Mamma Margherita was the mother of Michele Rua, one of the first Salesians and his first successor. There was also the mother of Archbishop Gastaldi and the father of Domenico Savio.* ***A good group of people, who knew and loved Don Bosco, and gave his work a completely different tone from that of the other institutions of the time: a clearly perceptible mark characteristic of the "family atmosphere".***

The involvement of the laity is always present throughout Don Bosco's life to the point of imagining a mixed congregation, made up of "consecrated persons and lay people together for the salvation of vulnerable youth". He wished to have this idea of a congregation approved by the Holy See, but the Church at the end of the 19th century did not approve it, but rather strongly urged Don Bosco to desist from his thought, inviting him to modify the norms that referred to this joint presence of consecrated persons and laity.

However, after the approval of the constitutions of the Society of Saint Francis Sales and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, in May 1876 the Holy See approved the Regulations for Salesian Cooperators.

**From the Project of Apostolic Life Art. 4 §1**. *“The Association of Salesian Cooperators is approved by the Apostolic See as a public Association of the Faithful and shares in the spiritual patrimony of the Society of St. Francis de Sales. The members actively collaborate in its mission, in the name of the Church, under the authority of the Rector Major as Don Bosco’s Successor, in a spirit of fidelity to its Pastors and in collaboration with other ecclesial forces.”*

Therefore, this association formed mainly of lay people is "disconnected" from the congregation but intimately "connected" to the spiritual heritage of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales.

The role of the laity as an association, being well defined right from the beginning.

From the Preface of the First Regulations of the Salesian Cooperators: *“From the very beginning of the work of the Oratories in 1841,* ***there were enthusiastic and keen priests and laymen who came forward to help*** *for there was a great harvest to be reaped among boys in danger of losing both faith and morals.* ***These co-helpers, or Cooperators, were to be found throughout our history to support and sustain the works God gave us to do.*** *All endeavored to work and fit into our way of life and customs, but there was a general request for a set of Regulations that would serve as a basis and a bond to help preserve uniformity and the spirit that prevailed in our institutes. We hope that this desire will now be satisfied by the present booklet. These are not rules for the Festive Oratories or for educational institutes (which can be found elsewhere): they are a bond by which Catholics who so wish* ***may join the Salesians and work according to a uniform and stable pattern (thus preserving these qualities in the scope and traditional practice of their work).****.. May God, so rich in grace and blessings grant many favors to all those who help to win souls for our Divine Savior, doing good to young people so much in danger, preparing good Catholics for his Church and good citizens for society, so that all may one day find themselves eternally happy in heaven. Amen. Turin, 12 July 1876,*

The Cooperators with the Salesians of Don Bosco and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians give life to what will later be called the Salesian Family. It is interesting to notice that the first time this term is heard is on April 3, 1934, two days after the canonization of Don Bosco, when Pope Pius XI, addressing the pilgrims who came to Rome for the occasion, stated:

*“You represent all those you have left behind in the various places you come from, the entire great* ***Salesian Family****”.*

**IDENTITY AS A LAY PERSON IN THE CHURCH**

It could be said that Don Bosco's intuition of asking for help from many, including the laity, to carry out his work of saving the young, continues even after his death and, in an almost prophetic way, gains new impetus precisely thanks to the Second Vatican Council, which introduces a new perspective regarding the laity.

No longer exclusively recipients of the evangelization of the clergy, but equally responsible, therefore co-responsible, with priests and with the whole Church, in common pastoral action, each according to their specific vocational characteristics.

This renewal began in 1961 with the advent of the Second Vatican Council and is still continuing.

That is why today the synodal attitude to be assumed in the Catholic Church, with respect to the laity, is an important moment of discernment on the many questions that concern the internal world and the Church itself at the beginning of the 21st century.

The novelties of the Council refer to the liturgy by making it closer to the people, just think of the masses in the people’s language, the new way of teaching catechism, the structures of government of the Church intended to serve the Church and not portray an exercise of power. Ecumenism therefore is the awareness of the need for interreligious dialogue and, last but not least, the reaffirmation of the dignity of the laity.

The figure of the lay person that the Second Vatican Council gives us is outlined in:

Lumen Gentium [31]: *The term* ***laity is here understood to mean all the faithful*** *except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are* ***by baptism made one body with Christ*** *and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made* ***sharers in the priestly, prophetical, and kingly functions of Christ****; and they carry out for their own* ***part the mission of the whole Christian people*** *in the Church and in the world.*

The identity of the lay person seems clear to me, but the term "lay person" continues to be, even today in some areas, misunderstood, above all because of its theological basis and because of its lack of correlation with the pastoral reality.

And again, according to the Apostolic Exhortation **Christifideles Laici [n. 9]**, we, lay people belong to the Church, as we are the Church, which already places us in a privileged position.

Being and belonging implies much more than being simple listeners receiving instructions from the pastors or participating in some other function.

It is noteworthy that this number of the Apostolic Exhortation proposes a positive description of the vocation and mission of the lay faithful, which demonstrates the attempt to overcome a certain negative understanding of the concept.

**CHARISM, VOCATION, SECULAR NATURE**

The lay person is a person of the three belongings.

***Belonging to Christ.***

It is not because of a particular role in the parish, in the CEP (Educative and Pastoral Community) or CE (Educating Community), or in a group of the Salesian Family, that we are lay persons. It is not the function that makes us lay people, but we are lay people because at the origin of our mission there is the vocation.

A vocation that comes from the heart of God. It is God who, in the moment in which he created the world with its own autonomy, thought of secularity. So that someone in the world could bring the world to God.

For this reason, today more than ever, it is necessary for the laity to take back their own vocation.

***Belonging to the Church.***

Because the post-Council Church is not a monopoly Church of a few people, of a privileged caste, but it is a community-communion Church made up of charisms and ministries and among the charisms there is that of the Laity.

Charism means free gift of the Spirit, I like to define it as "the breath of the Holy Spirit", for the good of the community. The charisms are continuing to write the history of the Church and the charism of the laity plays a leading role in this history.

Let us think of our direct experience when we speak of the Salesian charism.

By choosing to belong to the Salesian Family, we undertake the commitment to safeguard Don Bosco's charism by continuing, with our work, to write pages of Church history that speak of the Salesian Movement.

***Belonging to the world.***

The world is where we are “called” to work, to fulfill the mission of the whole Christian people.

But what makes me a lay person? What is my secularism based on? and above all, am I aware that, as a lay person, I am called to carry out a specific task in the Church?

Because spending your life to live the mission in the world is not to imitate the priests or, as a lay person in the Salesian Family, I have neither to be the altar boy of the priest nor the servant of the Director, and especially not "delegate" responsibilities to the Delegates which are instead proper to the secular nature of the Association of Salesian Cooperators.

The pastoral action of the laity cannot and must not replace that of priests, rather it completes it, not because it is ineffective or poor in content, but because it is an expression of another vocational specificity in the Church which is the ministerial one.

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II FOR THE 40th WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS:** " *How can one not read in the story of the “servant Jesus” the story of every vocation: the story that* ***the Creator has planned for every human being****, the story that inevitably passes through the call to serve and culminates in the discovery of the* ***new name, designed by God for each individual?*** *In these “names”,* ***people can grasp their own identity, directing themselves to that self-fulfilment which makes them free and happy.”***

Vocations complement each other because each one expresses in its own way the richness of its own spiritual life, lets the Holy Spirit breathe for the good of the Church.

It is important to stop and understand this aspect in order to be able to talk about co-responsibility, otherwise we will continue to make responsibility of the role prevail over co-responsibility in the service.

This also applies to our governing bodies such as the councils at several levels and those of animation such as the Consultative Committees.

Just as there is a co-responsibility of the laity there is a co-responsibility of the clergy.

It is necessary that the laity overcome the laziness of living exclusively the specificity of their own task. Only by truly living their specific vocation, will they be an expression of the charism they received as a gift. And above all they will make use of the three great gifts received in baptism: the priestly, prophetic and regal offices of Christ.

These three gifts are not medals to be placed on the chest and displayed in solemn ceremonies or in the meetings we have. They cost sacrifice because when the Lord gives gifts they require commitment. They are not given, to compete, to those who are the best but to those who serve the Lord best in everyday life.

Another characteristic feature of the lay person is their secular nature because one is not a lay person because he is in the parish, in the Oratory, in the Centers or in the Unions, but more importantly, because he is outside of these places.

Inside it is easier to be Christian with those who already share our faith.

The difficulty is out in the world.

The laity is the outpost of the Church to allow the Church to get where it probably never would. The Church, through the laity, can get to where the laity already are. The lay person need not go into the world because he already lives in the world.

**Lumen Gentium [31]:** *“****What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature.*** *It is true that those in holy orders can at times be engaged in secular activities, and even have a secular profession. But they are by reason of their particular vocation especially and professedly ordained to the sacred ministry. Similarly, by their state in life, religious give splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transformed and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes.* ***But the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God.*** *They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world* ***from within as a leaven****. In this way* ***they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity****. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer.”*

The problem is that the laity, at times, escape from the world and see the Church as a refuge. They barricade themselves in their own groups and cut ties with the outside world.

But the lay person, by vocation, cannot escape from the world but must lead the world to God by dealing with the things of the world, otherwise the world moves away from God.

Those three belongings mentioned earlier cannot be separated. The laity cannot ignore belonging to the Church and to the world.

The life of faith cannot be separated from dealing with the things of the century.

Unfortunately, all this often has in the background the difficulties that arise from a Church which, closed to secularism towards the world, becomes a clerical Church, where the laity is defined only as "non-cleric".

For a large part of the Church, the "lay person" is the inexperienced, the uninformed specialist.

Unfortunately, this has generated an attitude, in some lay people, who in pastoral practice feel inferior to priests, not being able to compete and contribute in the decisions of parish priests and directors to offer their own specific contribution as lay people.

More than half a century after the Second Vatican Council, it is necessary to renew ourselves, this is the appeal of Pope Francis.

**Communion, Participation, Mission EXERCISE of SYNODALITY**

As Salesian Cooperators to make our contribution to this synodal process for a different Church, we could do this exercise of Synodality by assuming these commitments in our Local Centers, so that our Association is also different.

1. **Knowing and recognizing each other** as brothers and sisters, possibly by name, knowing personal circumstances, and so on. Go far beyond “his face looks familiar; I only know him by sight”. Know who is there, who is on the outside, who on the sidelines. While always respecting their freedom of choice, continuously invite them.

2. **Listen**. It must be the first step, a step that requires an open mind and heart, without prejudice; listen to everyone, the elderly, young people, children, women, minorities, those put aside and excluded. Also be attentive to the social and cultural context in which we all live.

3**. Take the floor**. We can all speak with courage, integrating freedom, truth and love, looking for a communication that goes beyond formality, wanting to make a good impression or to make a statement, but always be cordial. See also to having inclusive relationships, not just with Catholics. (Get familiar with social media and other means)

4. **Celebrate.** Walking together is possible if, in addition to listening to each other, we listen to the Word of God together and celebrate the Eucharist and other celebrations. We must actively take part in them and resist passivity. These celebrations can and must go beyond, resulting in fraternal bonds where the fruits of the earth and the work of men and of the word can be shared.

5. **Co-responsible in the mission**: Synodality, being a Christian community, being the Salesian Family, is not something that ends with us, but is at the service of the mission to make present the Kingdom of God, the Good News of Jesus. We must support each other and support those members of the Salesian Family in the realities where we live, who are committed to a service to society, be it social or political, or in teaching, in culture, in the promotion of justice, in the promotion of dignity and human rights and in the care of the common home, that is, of nature and creation.

6. **Dialogue in the Church and in society**. We must rethink the places and ways of dialogue in our diocese, in parishes and communities of consecrated life, in different areas, collaborate with those of neighboring churches, with movements, old and new, with institutions, with other believers, with non-believers, with the poor and the marginalized. It is unimaginable that a Local or Provincial Center does not have relations with the dioceses. We need to know how to deal with differences, conflicts and difficulties. We need to see what we can learn from the world of politics, economics, culture, the poor ...

7**. Dialogue with other Christian confessions**, if possible. We are united by one Baptism, the same Lord. We need to strengthen our relationships, walk together, knowing that not all mountains are easy to climb, that there are difficulties.

8. **Authority and participation**. The synodal Church must be a participatory and co-responsible Church. Authority, in its various forms, starting with the bishop and continuing with priests, deacons and other officials, must be at the service of all. And we must examine how it works and the various bodies that channel co-responsibility - pastoral, presbyteral, parish, area councils, etc. -, analyzing their effectiveness. For our governing bodies it is necessary, I would say almost urgent, to have formation for its leaders. Strengthen the exercise of responsibility, not as a power, but as a collegial service.

9. **Discerning and deciding**: a step on the synodal journey is discerning and deciding on the basis of the consensus that arises from common openness and obedience to the Spirit. We need to see which system we use for consent, which method we use for consultation in the deliberative phase of the decision-making process and see if it can be improved and all within a decision of transparency and accountability. Recover the wisdom of time to discern. Not with the haste of the result but with the evangelical logic of the sower who sows the seed and waits patiently for the harvest.

10. **Be formed in synodality**. We have to be formed little by little. We are not used to it, but we have to start walking together; We all need it, but especially those in positions of responsibility.

Don Bosco wanted us: *"****Consecrated and lay people together*** *for the salvation of vulnerable youth".*

Courage! We have a synodal DNA.

Have a Good Congress.

Antonio Boccia

World Coordinator

Association of Salesian Cooperators