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ASSOCIATION OF SALESIAN COOPERATORS

ST. PHILIP THE APOSTLE PROVINCE

EASTERN UNITED STATES OF AMERICA - SUE

**AUTONOMY AND SENSE OF BELONGING:**

**CO-RESPONSIBILTY IN THE ASSOCIATION OF SALESIAN COOPERATORS**

**INTRODUCTION**

Dear brothers and sisters,

*(Nick and Bernie introduce themselves, their role, and level of animation)*

**NICK**

Our SDB delegate, Fr. Tom Dunne recently brought the following to our attention. He spent many years working in youth ministry and they consistently stressed the benefit of one 9-hour program, instead of nine 1-hour programs. We have spent the last two years looking at each other only through screens and listening to our voices only through speakers or headphones, and usually for a period of 1-2 hours at time. Now we finally start to come back together and go back to these longer gatherings – and what a blessing to be able to do so, right?

Many heroic efforts have been made to ensure formation throughout the Interamerica Region. Now that the burden of the pandemic starts to decrease and measures start to become more lenient, we can come back together again. We can start rebuilding and enkindling the accompaniment and the bonds that were threatened by physical distance.

The Regional Consulta asked the Province of the Eastern United States of America to offer a brief talk about autonomy and the sense of belonging. Many of you are aware of the SWOT analysis done in most Provinces of our region. Many are aware of the obstacles and threats that call upon our attention.

One of our threats is that many brothers and sisters have distanced themselves from the life of the Association. Another threat is the fact that often, we tend to over-burden our Delegates, neglecting certain responsibilities that correspond the Cooperators ourselves. One final threat for the purpose of our talk is the lack of the sense of belonging.

Since this audience is comprised of the leadership of the Association in the Region, we understand that you are examples of who a Salesian Cooperator should become. Therefore, we kindly ask you to take the outcome of this talk to your Local Centers, countries, and Provinces. Let us start a healthy discussion about formation in the sense of belonging and autonomy.

**BERNIE**

**CONTENTS**

Let us address the topic from the three dimensions with which we already are all familiar: the human dimension, the Christian, dimension, and the Salesian Dimension.

**Human Dimension – 5 minutes**

Every human being, regardless of culture, beliefs, or position in society, is subject to a natural course. All of us, our children, the youth we tend to, will go or have gone through what experts call “social development”. The lovely smiles we see in babies are, in the early weeks of their lives, mere reflexes. They later develop the capacity of smiling “socially.” Ever since childhood, every human being displays the yearning to belong. Whether belonging to a family, to a professional college, to a neighborhood committee, or to volunteer in an institution; all of us have the need to belong. Belonging is what many people use as an indicator for success. Many people also understand that the importance of making other people feel like they belong is also paramount in our social development. No man or woman can be an island.

I have been a volunteer firefighter for 35 years. In all of my training, me and my fellow firefighters have literally walked through fire together. This is not an experience that you can have on a zoom call. You must walk it in person. The bonds I forged with my fellow firefighters cannot be broken. It comes from years of enduring mutual dangerous experiences. Such are the bonds that we need to re-forge with our centers and provinces.

**NICK**

Another aspect of the natural course of our human nature is that when we grow and develop, responsibilities multiply. When a young man or woman grows to become a teenager, they start taking on responsibilities at home. They can go pick up their younger siblings from school, or help in chores, or do homework with the youngsters. When we emancipate, bills start to come. We need to pay rent, or a mortgage, utilities, a car, insurance, food. We are now independent and autonomous. We use our talents and skills to provide for our families. And if we find ourselves in a calamitous situation, we step up and find ways to move forward in life.

*Just a quick introduction to my family – my wife Jen and my son Nico, and the one I want to focus on is my daughter April. One of her favorite movies is Tangled, the story of Rapunzel. I enjoy watching it with her – but not for the reason you think. While sometimes, my dream is to drop her off at the steps of the convent the moment she is old enough to join the Salesian Sisters, one of my other dreams for her is to lock her in a tower so I don’t have to worry about her – but that might take the “sense of belonging” concept too literally, right? As her father, I need to form and accompany her as she grows up, equipping her with the knowledge and the basis so that she can go out into the world, and someday live autonomously from my wife and me. At the same time, the hope is that she knows she will always be connected to her family and always feel a part of that family – much like we as Cooperators are called to be formed and be part of our Association and community, but still go out into the world and have a positive impact on that world.*

*Invite them to remember their own experience regarding their social development – 30 seconds*

**Christian Dimension – 5 minutes**

Jesus is true God and also true man. He too, wanted to be a part of a community. He called upon 12 men from different walks of life to walk the walk with him. Not only to be their teacher, but to be their friend and servant. He had many other friends outside of this small community. His own Mother, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, and many others for sure. Jesus too, felt the yearning to belong. Jesus wanted to be with and amongst them, not apart from them, he did not mean to impose an authoritative figure towards them, but rather, to be their friend, their brother, and their servant. He wants to be near to us. He longs for us to relate and share with Him and with our community our feelings and struggles, our joys and sorrows. He does not want us to experience anything alone.

One of the accounts from the Gospel of St. Mark: 6; 7-9 reads:

*“Then He summoned the Twelve and began to send them out in pairs, giving them authority over the unclean spirits. And He instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a staff – no bread, no haversack, no coppers for their purses. They were to wear sandals but, he added, ‘Do not take a spare tunic’.*

Don’t take anything but go together. He may have been thinking of the power of shared ministry, the added impact when two or more people work together toward a shared goal. This co-responsibility is not only effective, but also a witness to the nature of community. Furthermore, they would have to be autonomous in this mission. He would not be physically present with them. They would have to find the creative way to accomplish the mission.

**BERNIE**

The Acts of the Apostles offers a deep understanding of what the early Christian community looked like: (Acts 2; 42; 44-47)

*“These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of the bread, and to prayers.*

*The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed.*

*They went as a body to the temple every day but met in their houses for the breaking of the bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved”.*

Our sense of belonging finds its foundation in the fact that we are heirs to the experience of the first Christian communities. We are not just a part of the Church; WE ARE THE CHURCH. Our Christian experience and the faith gifted to us have brought us to the Salesian Family, a place where we have the opportunity to live God’s call fully.

*Invite them to compare and contrast their experience in Community with the accounts of the Scripture – 30 seconds*

**NICK**

**The Salesian Dimension – 10 minutes**

The word “belonging” is mentioned quite a few times in our PVA, and certainly in many of the official documents of the Association.

The foundation of the Association is the Cooperators’ firm belief and understanding that we belong to each other. The strength of the Association is the identity, the richness of the experiences, and the talents of its members.

When we go back to our origin, we should remember the original name given to us by Don Bosco: “Pious Union of the Salesian Cooperators.” This name implies something deeper than just associates. We are united in spirit, we are united in a same gift and charism, and in a same mission.

From the PVA, Statutes, Art. 21. Brothers and Sisters in Don Bosco - *(include in the slides verbatim)*

*Their common apostolic Vocation and membership in the same Association makes Salesian Cooperators spiritual brothers and sisters. Indeed, “united with one heart and one soul alone,” they live their communion with those bonds characteristic of Don Bosco’s spirit.*

*They joyously take part in the “family life” of the Association through getting to know each other, growing together, exchanging faith experiences, and working on apostolic projects.*

*They foster the associative life by welcoming each other reciprocally.*

*From the Official Commentary to the PVA - (bullet point core themes in the slides)*

Salesian Cooperators are, before all else, brothers and sisters in Christ. This Christian fraternity of theirs is enriched by the strength of their common Salesian vocation.

As our charismatic Founder, Don Bosco is at the center of the charismatic constellation formed by those who have received the Salesian Vocation. He is called "father" by the vocational Groups of his apostolic Family. For this reason also, the Salesian Cooperators are brothers and sisters in Don Bosco, their Spiritual Father.

This fosters in the Salesian Cooperator a profound sense of belonging to the Association and nourishes the conviction that each one is a living part of a communion of persons committed to a common mission. Following the example of the Early Christian Community, they live the Gospel values which, among other things, are fraternity and communion. How? By imprinting upon their relationships with every brother and sister sentiments of respect and sincere affection and by assuming behaviors which effectively manifest such sentiments; therefore, the sharing and the exchange of spiritual values, such as ideas, projects and plans, joys and sorrows and sufferings, and reciprocal help, even as concerns economic aspects, are perceived as shared participation: all of this is part of the Salesian Spirit.

The Salesian Cooperators are invited to live fraternal communion in their everyday life by remaining in communion of thought, affection, and prayer with the other members.

**BERNIE**

From the PVA, Statutes, Art. 28. The Value of Membership - *(include in the slides verbatim)*

*§1. Salesian Cooperators are aware that membership in the Association nourishes their faith experience and that of ecclesial communion. It represents, moreover, a vital element in support of one’s own apostolic Vocation.*

*§2. Membership demands concrete signs which are expressed both in an active participation in the life of the Association and in a fitting demeanor on the part of the member in his/her daily and professional life.*

*From the Official Commentary to the PVA - (bullet point core themes in the slides)*

Belonging brings with it many consequences. It implies a life of communion with the other members, the sharing of one and the same spirit, and collaboration in a common mission which is translated into actions which are adequate to meet the needs of a specific place, area, or territory. It is expressed in active and joyous participation in important initiatives but also in simpler, everyday ones. Communion among all the Salesian Cooperators makes it such that each one feels part of one same living "body" – just as happens in the Church, in which all the baptized live their belonging as brothers and sisters in Christ the Lord.

*Invite them to take a time to meditate – 30 seconds*

**NICK**

**CONCLUSION – 5 minutes**

A strong sense of belonging to our Association might be the answer to many of our current obstacles and threats. It will yield inevitable fruits. For example:

* The fulfillment of our own Salesian vocation.
* The conviction that we are the first ones responsible for our formation.
* A stronger sense of co-responsibility for our common mission that will allow us to reach and better accompany more youth.
* A greater number of Salesian Cooperators ready to step up to the needs of the Association, unburdening our Delegates from tasks that correspond to us.
* A better understanding of our autonomy.
* An attractive community that will not go unnoticed to many others thinking about their calling.
* A more robust awareness of the need for economic solidarity.
* And many more…

Our common vocation has many gifts. One of many, and to some, the most important, is the conviction that we walk together, co-responsible in the mission. The firm belief that a three-ply cord is hard to break. The gift of working together, as a Salesian Family to contribute to the salvation of youth, “the most delicate and most precious portion of human society.”

Just as a quick note to add – we spoke about the fruit of our works and our mission, but in light of Don Angel’s strenna for next year, we now need to speak about yeast, so instead of gardeners or famers, now we’re bakers. Or as Bernie pointed out to me – maybe we can be winemakers since that’s what you get with fruit and yeast, and that’s what Jesus made at the Wedding in Cana, so that’s got to mean something, right?

**Q/A, interventions? – 5 minutes**

Thank you!