



SOCIETÀ DI SAN FRANCESCO DI SALES

SEDE CENTRALE SALESIANA

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Il Rettor Maggiore

“BEING YEAST TO BE FRUITFUL”
6th WORLD CONGRESS
ASSOCIATION OF SALESIAN COOPERATORS
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Introduction – A little leaven for a great story

Heartfelt thanks for this opportunity to come together as a worldwide Association. We are here for the 6th World Congress of Salesian Cooperators, at the heart of the celebrations marking the 150th anniversary of the Association’s foundation. As we have been reminded, this Congress is intended to be a time for reflection, assessment, and renewal of our journey as an Association, in the light of our 150-year history, and at the same time a moment to “formulate together the guidelines that will direct our path during the six-year period 2026–2032, enabling us to respond with creative fidelity to the challenges of our time.”

The theme guiding us – *“To be leaven in order to be fruitful”* – is simple and radical. Yeast is small, almost invisible, yet it transforms the whole dough. This is how Don Bosco envisaged the Salesian Cooperators: lay men and women immersed in the daily lives of their communities, their families, their workplaces, capable of bringing the power of the Gospel and the Salesian charism from within, so that the lives of young people may grow and mature.

We are living through a historical period marked by major cultural changes, social crises, wars, migration, and new forms of material and spiritual poverty. The temptation to be pessimistic is strong: “nothing can be done anymore”, “young

people don't listen", "society is lost". And yet, precisely today of all days, the Lord calls us to be leaven: small, mixed into the dough, hidden, yet alive and capable of bearing fruit.

The reflection I would like to share with you has three parts. In the first part, we shall return to the original project that the Holy Spirit inspired in Don Bosco's heart, to understand how the Cooperators were conceived from the very beginning as 'leaven' within the Church and society.. In the second part, I shall present some aspects of this original project which today strongly call for our attention and guide our action. In the third part, drawing on the Gospel story of the wedding at Cana, we shall explore four verbs – to look, to listen, to choose, and to act – as concrete attitudes of a Salesian leaven called to bear fruit today.

PART I

DON BOSCO AND THE COOPERATORS

1. The original project: a broad community for the salvation of young people

From the very early years of the Valdocco Oratory, Don Bosco realised that the dream of 'saving young people' could not be a solitary endeavour. We see him surrounded by priests and laypeople, men and women, adults and young people, benefactors, friends, craftsmen, and teachers. What he offered to young people was not merely a social service or a pious devotion, but a holistic experience: education, work, friendship, and faith.

To achieve all this, Don Bosco did not simply seek 'help', rather, he **involved people in a genuine educational community**: what we now call the Educational-Pastoral Community. The community itself, bearing witness to communion, becomes the first message to reach young people: a group of diverse individuals, united by a shared vision and a single desire: to welcome, listen to, accompany, and educate young people.

In this project, the Salesian Cooperators were not conceived as an 'add-on', but as an integral part of this extended community. On 9 May 1876, one hundred and fifty years ago, when Pope Pius IX approved the Statutes of the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators, Don Bosco's bold dream took on canonical form: a lay apostolic movement at the service of young people. A movement of people acting as **leaven of the Salesian spirit in the world**. Not everyone can live in a religious community;

not everyone can devote themselves full-time to the mission; but many, very many, can bring the spirit of Valdocco into their families, their work, their society and their civic engagement. Like leaven, the Cooperators are called to be within the dough, not separate from it.

One hundred and fifty years on, the relevance of this project remains undiminished, responding not only to the needs of Don Bosco's time but also to those of our own. The 'peripheries' of which Don Bosco spoke have changed location, but not their nature. There is no shortage of vulnerable young people; on the contrary, they are to be found in digital as well as geographical peripheries, in the loneliness of the large cities, in school drop-out rates and in the loss of meaning that afflicts entire generations. The mission of the Salesian Cooperators continues to be a response that is more relevant and urgent than ever.

2. The salvation of young people: the criterion of fruitfulness

Don Bosco's second great insight concerns the objective: **the salvation of young people**. For him, this means helping young people to become fully human men and women, capable of work, affection, faith and responsible citizenship. For salvation is life in its fullness, here and now, while remaining open to eternal life.

If today we ask ourselves what it means to 'be fruitful' as an Association, we cannot use any other criterion than this: How do our presence, our communities, and our choices truly help young people to live and to hope? Numbers, structures, and activities are important signs, but they are not the ultimate criterion. The primary criterion is that our lives and our actions be good news for young people.

We must keep this characteristic alive – the most distinctive one that Don Bosco gave to the Cooperators. Going beyond the model of the traditional third orders, which offered the laity a path to holiness above all through piety – prayer, penance, and the interior life – Don Bosco added a new dimension: active life, especially in support of young people at risk.

This choice was not a concession to pragmatism. It was a profound evangelical affirmation: that the holiness of the laity is achieved through action in the world, not in spite of it. That taking a young person off the streets, offering them the gift of faith, and accompanying them through life is an integral part of a life of deep evangelical commitment. That giving away a good book, supporting a vocation, or attending a conference is, in itself, a way of participating in the coming of the Kingdom of God. The result was a movement of lay people who live the Salesian

spirit within their daily lives, applying that spirit to address the concrete challenges of their time and place, participating fully in a single apostolic project, to which they contribute with gifts, sensibilities, and spheres of influence that religious alone could not reach.

Looking at the present day, we see a world facing a multitude of challenges. A world in which many young people have not received the faith within their families, or have encountered it in fragile forms; others have never even heard of it. And yet, these are young people who carry within them a deep longing for meaning, authenticity, and community. In quite a few countries, we encounter young people facing material poverty, war, and violence; in others, we see a level of affluence that risks emptying the heart. It is precisely here that the Salesian leaven is called to play its part: not on the surface, but at a deeper level, within the daily fabric of young people's lives. Don Bosco's vision remains as relevant as ever: to be leaven that bears fruit patiently. It is a mission that cannot be measured immediately, but its fruits become visible in the freedom, responsibility, faith, and hope that spring up in the hearts of the young people we meet.

PART II

A LIVING YEAST IN HISTORY

To better understand what it means to be Salesian leaven in history, I would like to highlight four characteristics that emerge from Don Bosco's vision and that must be upheld if the experience of the Association today is to remain a much-appreciated gift.

1. Active collaboration and shared responsibility

The first is **active collaboration and shared responsibility**. Don Bosco called the Cooperators 'true Salesians in the world'. Not merely sympathisers or benefactors, but people who share in the mission and feel responsible for it. Leaven does not remain on the sidelines: it mixes with the dough and allows itself to be used up. Thus, the Salesian Cooperator is not content merely to 'lend a hand', but becomes involved in decision-making processes, takes part in discernment, and brings his or her lay perspective to the Salesian Family and the Church.

The conviction that guided Don Bosco and became the guiding principle of the entire Association is that the strength of unity is infinitely greater than the strength

of the individual. Don Bosco understood that, to be effective, goodness requires a network. A single thread breaks; a braided rope holds firm and is unlikely to snap. The Salesian Cooperator is not a solitary hero of charity, an isolated benefactor acting alone. Rather, Cooperators live as part of a living network that connects religious and laypeople, priests and families, young and old, rich and poor, in a shared endeavour.

In an age such as ours, dominated by individualism and fragmentation, this insight remains a powerful call, a prophetic cry. Charity that is not built together is scattered. Good that is not shared soon loses its strength. The 150 years of the Salesian Cooperators are historical proof that the network holds firm. The challenge for us today remains the same: to safeguard and promote a communion of spirit, charity, and zeal amongst ourselves, overcoming the danger of factions and divisions. To provide a response capable of inspiring initiatives and processes of integral growth for young people, we must all play our part so that communion remains the foundation that lends credibility to our witness.

2. The centrality of young people's education as the cornerstone

The second aspect is the **centrality of young people's education as the cornerstone**. Don Bosco had a keen social insight. When he wrote to his confreres in Buenos Aires in 1876 that young people without a proper education “would end up filling the prisons” and would be “the scourge of civilised society”, Don Bosco was expressing a conviction that stayed with him throughout his life. He was convinced that, with the right formation, “they become good Christians, honest citizens, and the glory of the towns where they live.” This was not mere rhetoric, nor simply a theoretical concept. It was the culmination of decades of practical experience in the oratories, the colleges, and the streets.

His work was not simply about the salvation of individual souls, but about the total mobilisation of the Church's resources in favour of the most vulnerable. The Salesian Cooperators were an integral part of this mobilisation. They represented the extension of Don Bosco's conviction that the mission to young people cannot be confined to institutional structures and walls, but must involve as many people as possible.

In his final circular letter to the Cooperators, dated 8 December 1887 – the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception – just a few weeks before his death, he entrusted to them the mission he was about to leave in their hands. He concluded with words that every Cooperator, in every generation, has taken to heart: “I

particularly commend to you the care of the poor and abandoned young people, who have always been the dearest part of my heart, and who, through the merits of Our Lord Jesus Christ, I hope will be my crown and my glory in heaven.”

These are words that resonate with greater relevance today than ever before.

3. The spirit of pastoral charity as a path to personal holiness

The third aspect is the **spirit of pastoral charity as a path to personal holiness**. Yeast is consumed to make the dough rise: it does not remain intact; it loses its form to give shape to something greater. In the same way, Salesian pastoral charity is a love that gives itself completely, quietly, in everyday life.

This call is more urgent today than ever before. And its urgency must contend with the danger that, in the face of growing needs, the desire to respond generously to poverty may easily take precedence over the educational and pastoral motivations that define and characterise the Salesian experience. Our dedication to the good of young people must be the fruit of a heart passionate for God.

It is not, then, merely a matter of human generosity. We are called to keep alive that grace of unity inherited from Don Bosco: the unity by which our actions are rooted in and spring from our participation in the love of Christ the Good Shepherd. It is this love we have received that must be shared – a love that lays down its life for the sheep. For this reason, the life of faith, prayer, listening to the Word, and the sacraments are not ‘optional’ for a Salesian Cooperator: they are the sacred space where the Lord transforms our hearts into good leaven, capable of giving life to others.

In the absence of such a unified journey, which nourishes and sustains the life of every Salesian Cooperator, we risk becoming mere providers of services, devoid of the original, evangelical, and charismatic spirit that Don Bosco has given us.

4. Presence in society for the common good

The fourth characteristic is **presence in society for the common good**. Yeast works from within. Thus, Salesian Cooperators are called to be present in the places where the future of young people is decided: schools, the workplace, youth politics, the economy, culture, and the media. The Association, now present on every continent, brings a wealth of experience ranging from running youth clubs to managing schools and reception centres, from involvement in diocesan youth ministry to a presence in social, civil, and political spheres. To be leaven means

bringing the principles of the Gospel and the heart of Don Bosco into these spheres, with discretion and courage, intelligence and prudence.

We can respond to this call in a credible way only if we do so strengthened by a clear identity of faith and charism. Our 'love' for Don Bosco must be enriched by our 'knowledge' of Don Bosco. His legacy is not limited to the stories we heard when we were teenagers or young adults, but lies in a deeper understanding of the charismatic gift that has shaped – and continues to shape – so many lives throughout the world.

It also calls for serious and profound discernment, so that sharing the riches contained within the charism may become a source of hope and guidance for many. The wisdom Don Bosco imparts to us is to always and everywhere to seek the good of young people. Consequently, professional training is, and will increasingly be, a gift that we carry with us and share in places where collaboration begins in settings characterised by professional convergence, yet which always leave room for growth. There the prophecy of apostolic charity, with prudence and discretion, with respect and charity—can leave its mark on the hearts of young people and of so many others who come into contact with the Salesian Cooperators.

PART III

FOUR VERBS FOR FRUITFUL LEAVEN:

LOOK, LISTEN, CHOOSE, ACT

To understand how this leaven can truly be fruitful today, let us be enlightened by the image of the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11). There we see a feast, a shortage of wine, a glance that notices it, a word that invites trust, and servants who listen and act. This scene also reflects the steps we are called to take as a worldwide Association.

1. LOOK – recognise where the dough is not rising and where the wine is lacking

The first verb is to **look**. Yeast does not work unless it is mixed into the right dough. We must therefore be able to see where young people's lives are struggling to 'rise', where relationships are growing cold, and where hope is fading.

At Cana, only Mary realises that ‘they have no more wine’. The others are caught up in the festivities or perhaps choose not to notice. Mary’s gaze is both contemplative and realistic: she sees the lack and allows herself to be moved by it.

How do we view the world of young people today? Through the lens of fear, judgement, or nostalgia for times gone by? Or through a Gospel-inspired gaze, one that recognises struggles and limitations but also discovers the signs of God, the deep longings, and the thirst for authenticity that dwells in young people’s hearts?

This Congress, which brings together representatives from every continent, offers us a precious opportunity to **broaden our perspective**. We cannot limit ourselves to our local viewpoint. We are called to look at the reality of young people in its global dimension: young people in urban and rural peripheries, those living in war-torn countries, migrants, unemployed young people, those immersed in the digital world, and those living in contexts of first evangelisation or as a Christian minority.

To look as Salesian Cooperators means looking with the heart of Don Bosco, allowing ourselves to be personally challenged, without remaining mere spectators. It means asking ourselves: where, today, is the Lord showing us that the wine has run out? Where is the Salesian leaven most needed? Where can our being believers and free people bear the most fruit?

2. LISTEN – allowing ourselves to be kneaded by the Word, by reality, by young people

The second verb is to **listen**. Yeast does not work if it remains hard and separate: it must allow itself to be kneaded into the flour. For us, this means embarking on a journey of deep listening.

First and foremost, listening to God. Without daily listening to the Word, we risk undertaking many generous initiatives that are, however, not truly evangelical. Listening to Jesus – in personal and communal prayer, in the liturgy, and through meditation on Scripture – enables us to recognise his voice amidst the clamour of the world.

Then, listening to ourselves. The mission does not erase our limitations, our wounds, our weariness. On the contrary, it often brings them to the surface. Listening to our hearts – to what dwells within us, to what brings us joy or causes us suffering – is part of discernment: it is precisely there that the Lord speaks to us and shapes us like yeast.

Listening to other Salesian Cooperators and the Salesian Family is the very essence of synodality. Without genuine listening, our groups risk becoming places of weariness or conflict. Through mutual listening, even our differences become a source of richness: diverse cultures, different spiritual sensibilities, and varied pastoral experiences can enrich our shared vision. This Congress – with its days dedicated to remembrance, identity, looking outwards, and the path ahead – is a great school of mutual listening amongst the Regions of the world.

Finally, listening to young people and to the cultural contexts. Without truly listening to young people, our leaven remains locked away. Don Bosco, with his Preventive System – reason, religion, and loving-kindness – taught us to always start from the concrete lives of young people, from their needs, their questions, and their abilities. Today, this means learning their languages, entering their environments – including digital ones – welcoming their concerns, and allowing ourselves to be challenged by their questions about the Church, faith, and justice.

Being leaven that listens means not rushing to ‘speak’, but remaining attentive until we recognise, amidst so many voices, the voice of the Spirit speaking through reality.

3. CHOOSE – deciding together into which dough to be kneaded

The third verb is to choose. Yeast cannot be everywhere at once; it must be kneaded into a specific dough. In the same way, the Association cannot do everything: it must discern and choose.

After observing and listening, we are called to ask ourselves: What priorities should we set as a worldwide Association for the next six years, so that our role as leaven may truly bear fruit? Which youth ‘peripheries’ do we wish to place at the centre? Which areas of social and ecclesial life do we feel are most urgent?

Choosing does not simply mean adding new activities, but also, at times, having the courage to let go of what no longer bears fruit or which drains our energy without truly touching the lives of young people. It means focusing on a few key areas: the vocational formation of Salesian Cooperators, our presence amongst young people facing new forms of poverty, collaboration with local Churches, our commitment to peace and the care of creation, and our educational presence in the digital world.

This Congress is called precisely to this: through presentations, group work, moments of prayer, and discussion, to define “proposals and lines of development for the six-year period 2026–2032”. The verb “choose” takes on a very concrete

meaning here: it asks us not only to reflect, but to make decisions, to take on commitments, and to identify common paths.

The guiding principle, once again, is that of leaven: not so much the quantity of things to be done, but the quality of our presence. Better a few shared choices, lived out deeply, than a thousand fragmented and ineffective initiatives.

4. ACT – working as hidden and fruitful leaven

The fourth verb is to act. At Cana, after listening to Mary and Jesus, the servants filled the jars with water, brought the water to the master of the banquet, and the miracle took place. They played their part; the rest was done by the Lord.

So too with our own actions. It is not we who save young people; it is Christ who works in their hearts. We are called to offer generously who we are and what we have, knowing that true fruitfulness comes from Him. This frees us from the anxiety of measuring success and allows us to work with serenity, humility, and joy.

To act as leaven means accepting that we often have to work behind the scenes. Many Salesian Cooperators live out their mission in a simple, everyday way: within their families, in a classroom, in an office, in a challenging neighbourhood, in a parish, or in a youth centre. They may never feature in the news, but their way of being, their presence, and their ability to listen and support others help to enrich the lives of so many young people.

At the same time, it is important that our actions reflect our identity as an Association. We do not act merely as generous individuals, but as a worldwide body with a history, a Rule of Life, and a shared mission. Our concrete actions – in different countries and cultures – are each a fragment of a great mosaic, a piece of the journey that the Association as a whole is undertaking.

In this sense, acting as leaven also means fostering communion: between the local and global levels, between Salesian Cooperators and other groups within the Salesian Family, with the pastors of the local Churches, and with other organisations working for young people. Leaven does not act in isolation, but in relationship.

CONCLUSION

BELIEVERS AND FREE LEAVEN FOR THE FUTURE

I would like to conclude by returning to two words that recur throughout our journey: **believers** and **free**. At this moment in history, being believers does not mean taking refuge in the past or defending oneself against the world, but entrusting oneself to the God of life who continues to act today in history, often in surprising ways.

From this faith springs inner freedom. A freedom that is not about doing whatever one wants, but about being open to what the Spirit suggests. Free from nostalgia, so as not to remain prisoners of models that no longer speak to today's young people. Free from fear, so as not to be afraid to enter the new peripheries, including the digital, cultural and existential ones. Free to be small and hidden, because we know that true fruitfulness is not ours but God's.

“To be leaven in order to be fruitful” therefore means accepting our calling to be this small remnant, this simple yet real sign of God's tenderness towards young people. Don Bosco envisaged his sons and daughters – both consecrated and lay – as “signs and bearers of God's love for young people, especially the poorest”. Today, this dream is realised in a special way through the Salesian Cooperators, the third group of the Salesian Family, present in many countries around the world.

May this 6th World Congress truly be a time of grace in which, as at Cana, Mary helps us to see where the wine is lacking, to trust in Jesus' word and to do “whatever he tells us”. May the Lord make our little leaven capable of great fruitfulness, so that young people, on every continent, may find in us brothers and sisters who accompany them as they grow, hope, believe, and love.

Thank you.