

## II. COOPERATORS IN THE SALESIAN MISSION

*The first text (no. 272) included here is an extract from a long conference which Don Bosco gave at the opening of the Patronage de St Pierre in Nice, on 12 March 1877. After summing up the events which led to the founding of the first Salesian House in France, thanks to the involvement of a group of lay people belonging to the St Vincent de Paul Society, supported by Bishop Pietro Sola, the saint said that the work was only set up because of the fruitful cooperation between the Salesians and the Cooperators. Then, pointing out the principal purpose of the Institution (“the good of humanity and the salvation of souls”), he concluded with the reflection that we offer here, focused entirely on practical charity, works of mercy, essential features of true Christian discipleship and on the eternal reward that comes from it (cf. Mt 25:34-35).*

*The second document (no. 273) is a transcription of the first conference Don Bosco gave the Cooperators in Turin, on 16 May 1878. The text is important because the founder, going back over thirty five years of history of the Oratory, shows the decisive role cooperation played (understood in its broadest sense) in realising the providential works which could not have been set up without the substantial contribution of a group of generous collaborators, benefactors and Cooperators. From the moment he settled in the poor house at Valdocco, directed to “troublesome boys” in the area, until Salesian work expanded worldwide, “with the help of many people, Cooperators, we could do things that someone alone could never have done.” Now that Divine Providence had broadened the horizons of the the Salesian mission, the function of the Cooperators was more decisive than ever: without them, Don Bosco said, the Salesians “could not exercise their zeal” since “individuals are not enough, we need means” and these are entrusted to Salesian cooperation. The vibrant concluding appeal defines the vocation of the Salesian Family in a complete way: “Do you want to do something good? Educate the young. Do you want to do something holy? Educate the young. Do you want to do something very holy? Educate the young. Do you want to do something divine? Educate the young. Indeed this is the most divine of things.”*

## 272. Charity to the poor and the little ones

Critical ed. in Giovanni BOSCO, *Inaugurazione del Patronato di S. Pierre in Nice. Scopo del medesimo ... con appendice sul sistema preventivo della educazione della gioventù*. Torino, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana 1877, pp. 34-40 (OE XXVIII, 412-418).

[12 March 1877]

God is infinitely rich and is infinitely generous. Since he is infinitely rich he can give us immense recompense for anything done out of love for him; as a Father who is infinitely generous he repays everything we do out of love for him with good and abundant measure. The Gospel says that you will not give a glass of cold water to one of the least of mine, in my name, without having a reward.

Almsgiving, God tells us in the Book of Tobit, frees us from death, purges our soul of sin, and brings us mercy in God's sight and leads us to eternal life. "*Elemosina est quae a morte liberat: purgat peccata, facit invenire misericordiam et vitam aeternam.*" [Tob 12:9].

Amongst the great rewards there is also this, that the Divine Saviour regards as done to himself any act of charity done to some poor unfortunate. If we saw the Divine Saviour walking begging in our squares, or knocking on the doors of our houses, would there be a Christian who would not generously offer him every last penny in his purse? The Saviour is also represented in the person of the poor, the most abandoned. Everything you do even for the most despicable, he says, you do for me. So it is no longer poor children who are asking for charity but Jesus in the person of these poor children.

What can we say then of the exceptional recompense that God reserves for that most important and difficult moment when our fate will be decided with a life of eternal bliss or eternal unhappiness? When we, gentlemen, present ourselves before the judgement seat of the Supreme Judge to give account of our actions in life the first thing he will lovingly remind us of will not be the houses we built, the savings we made, the glory we gained or the wealth we procured; of those things not a word, but he will only say: "Come, O blessed of my Heavenly Father, come and possess the Kingdom that has been

prepared for you. I was hungry, and you gave me bread in the person of the poor; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was naked and you clothed me; I was out on the street and you gave me shelter. *Tunc dicet rex his qui a dextris eius erunt: Venite, benedicti Patris mei, possidete paratum vobis regnum a constitutione mundi. Esurivi enim et dedistis mihi manducare; sitiivi et dedistis mihi bibere; hospes eram et collegistis me; nudus et cooperuistis me.*” (Mt 25, 34-35).

These and other words are what the Divine Judge will say since they are written in the Gospel, and then he will give you his blessing and lead you to possess eternal life.

But God the Father of kindness, knowing that our spirit is willing but our flesh is very weak, wants our charity to be rewarded a hundredfold even in this life. How many ways, gentlemen, does God give us a hundredfold for our good works? A hundredfold are the special graces of living and dying well, the fertility of our fields, peace and harmony in our families, good results for our temporal affairs, the health of our relatives and friends, the preservation and good upbringing of our children. The reward of Christian charity is the pleasure each one has in his heart for doing good works. Is it not a great consolation when one reflects that with a small item of almsgiving one contributes to preventing people from being a danger to civil society and helping them become people who are of some advantage to themselves, their neighbours, to Religion? People who are on the brink of becoming the scourge of the authorities, people who break public laws and end up living off other people’s sweat, in prison, but instead you make them able to honour their dignity as human beings, take up work and through their work earn honest sustenance, and this to the honour of the country they live in as well as the families they belong to?

Beyond all these recompenses that God grants in the present life and in the future one, there is one yet that those who have received charity will give to their benefactors. Yes, gentlemen, we do not want you to miss out on the recompense that is completely in our power to give. All the priests, clerics, all the young people who live in and are educated in the houses of the Salesian Congregation, and more especially those of the Patronage de Saint-Pierre raise

their minds in prayer morning and evening for their benefactors. Morning and evening, those you have been charitable towards will invoke divine blessings on you, your families, your relatives and friends, with appropriate prayers. They will ask God to keep peace and harmony in your families, grant you stable health and a happy life, keep misfortune far from you in spiritual and temporal things and add to all this perseverance in doing good, and for as long as it has pleased God to give you life, at the end crown your life with a holy death. If then, gentlemen, in the course of your mortal life you will have the good fortune to meet one another in the streets in the city or in any other place, oh yes, then we will joyfully recall the benefits received and we will respectfully doff our caps as an indelible sign of gratitude on earth, while the merciful God will assure you of a just reward in Heaven. “*Centuplum accipietis et vitam aeternam possidebitis.*” [Mt 19,29].

### **273. “Do you want to do something divine? Educate the young”**

ASC A0000205 *Cronachetta*, Quad. V, 1877-1878, ms by Giulio Barberis, pp. 48-61<sup>108</sup>.

16 May 1878

I do not know, worthy Cooperators—I do not know if I should first thank you or invite you to thank the Lord together for having brought us into this compact body and put us in the position of being able to do great good, and for having brought us here together this evening for the first conference for Salesian Cooperators in Turin.

But before coming to anything else, I want to tell you a little bit of the history of what the Salesian Cooperators here in Turin have already done and what their task is at this time. So listen.

Thirty five years ago, the area presently occupied by this church served as a place for gathering young people at risk. They came here to fight and curse. There were two houses nearby which gave great offence to the Lord: one was a tavern where drunkards and all kinds of bad people came, the other, right

<sup>108</sup> This is the first conference Don Bosco gave to the Salesian Cooperators in Turin; he gave it on the afternoon of May 16, 1878, in Valdocco, in the church of St Francis de Sales (cf. MB XIII, 624-630).

here where the pulpit now stands and extending off to my left, was a house of ill-repute and immorality. Then a poor priest arrived and rented two rooms in this very house at an exaggerated price. The priest was accompanied by his mother. Their aim was to see if they could do some good for the people in the vicinity. All the assets they had were a hand-basket they carried, with a number of items in it. Well then, this priest saw young people coming here to get into mischief, and he was able to approach them and the Lord saw that what he said was listened to and understood. He immediately saw the need for a chapel for divine worship. Starting from the epistle side of this high altar and going off to the right as you look, there was a shed that served as an outhouse. He was able to get hold of it and having nothing else, adapted it as a church. These problematic youngsters, little by little were attracted to and came to church, and their number soon grew so much that it was filled, and in the little square where this church is now, we taught catechism, since the church couldn't hold them all.

Now this priest was alone, though he had the very zealous priest Fr Borel, who had done so much good in Turin, come to help. But working as he was in the prisons, helping those condemned to death, in work at the Cottolengo with the Marchioness Barolo, the Refuge and other things, he could only be there for a while since his life lay elsewhere. The Lord provided for what was lacking and gradually various worthy members of the clergy joined the poor priest, some hearing confessions, some preaching, others teaching catechism, lending a hand. And that is how the work of the Oratory was supported by these worthy members of the clergy. But this was not enough. Given the growing need also for Sunday and evening schools, a handful of priests was not enough. Then various gentlemen also began to lend a hand. It was Divine Providence that sent them and through them good work was multiplying. These first Salesian Cooperators, priests and lay people, were not concerned about discomfort and effort, but seeing the good that was done and how many rough boys set out on the path to virtue, they sacrificed themselves. I saw many of them leave their comforts and come not only every Sunday, but even every day in Lent, even at very inconvenient times for them, but the best time for the boys, and they came and helped the work of the Oratory.

Meanwhile time passed and there was an even more felt need to help these children, including materially. Some had their pants and jacket in tatters and hanging off them, even at the expense of their modesty; some had no change of clothing, just the torn shirt on their back. This was when the kindness and usefulness of the Cooperators began to shine out. I would now like, to the glory of these good people from Turin, to tell you how many of them, even though their families were hard up, saw no shame in taking those jackets and pants and patching them with their own hands; they took the torn shirts, which had maybe never seen water before, they themselves took them, I say, and washed them, patched them up to give them back to the boys again. The boys were attracted by this Christian charity and stayed on at the Oratory and persevered in the practice of virtue. Many of these worthy people then sent clothing, money, food and whatever else they could. Some of them are here at the moment listening to me and many others have already been called by the Lord to receive the reward for their labours and charitable works.

So this is how, with the help of many people, Cooperators, men and women, things could be achieved that each one separately could never have done. With such powerful help of priests, men and women, what happened then? Thousands of boys came for religious instruction to the very same place where earlier they had learned to curse; they came to learn virtue in this very place that had been the focus of immorality. We were able to open Sunday and evening schools and the poorest and most neglected of the boys were taken in, and in 1852 the little square became this church and the house became a hospice for poor boys. All this is your work, my worthy Cooperators.

They continued to help and others were added to their number every day. We were able to open another two Oratories in two other parts of the city, one in Vanchiglia called the Guardian Angel which, after the parish church of St Julia was built, moved next to the parish; the other, called St Aloysius, was opened at Porta Nuova. The church of St John the Evangelist is being built next to this.

But these deeply felt needs in Turin were beginning to be felt in other cities and towns too and given the constant help of the Cooperators, they were able

to establish a rule and then expand beyond Turin. It was necessary for the great lack of clergy felt throughout Piedmont and beyond to be compensated for by the Cooperators. How could they do that? The Catholic religion does not look to just a place, city, town; it is universal and wherever it wants good to be done and wherever the need is greater, there the religion asks for greater efforts. So a House was opened at Mirabello, then another at Lanzo, then more and more elsewhere. There is now a hundred or more that have been opened, counting Churches and Houses and more than 25 thousand boarding or day boys receiving religious instruction in our Houses. Who does all this? One priest? No! Two, ten, fifty? Not even that. They would not have achieved so much. There were so many Cooperators who banded together to help these few priests in every town and city. Yes, it was them, but not only them. Ah yes! We need to recognise God's hand. He wanted so much good work to come out of nothing. Yes, it is Divine Providence that sent so many means to save so many souls. If it hadn't been the Lord who wanted this, I would say that it would have been impossible for anyone to have done so much. But the need was real and great and the Lord sends great help for great needs. And these needs are growing greater and more demanding by the day. Will the Lord abandon us?

This is what I tell you. It is a firm reality that the needs are growing by the day. Oh if you could only see how many requests from all over the world are answered because we can open houses for poor and abandoned youth. If you only knew how many places feel a need which in times past only seemed to be obvious in the big cities. You would be astonished. And how much the mission need is growing now. Note that it is no longer a case of life being challenged amongst the savages by the dangers of martyrdom or great suffering. Now they themselves are beginning to appreciate their miserable state and want to be educated. It is they themselves, I say, who are reaching out to us, asking us to go and civilise them, teach them the religion without which they acknowledge their life is unhappy. These requests for missions are coming from everywhere. From India, China, Santo Domingo, Brazil, the Argentine Republic, heart-rending requests are coming, such that if while talking to you now I were able to say I had two thousand missionaries, I would immediately know where to

send them, and would be sure of the results they would bring. So even in the missions good has been done through the work of the Oratories and we hope that with the support and help of the Cooperators this good work can be increased a thousand times for the greater glory of God.

Then there is another work done by these Oratories, a work that I don't want publicised, but it would be good for you to know about it. This is the work of looking for boys with good will and giving them the means to become priests. The number of the Lord's ministers, as you see, is decreasing daily by frightening proportions. So we have looked for boys everywhere that give real signs of hope, we have brought them together, got them to study and now, with the Lord's blessings on this work, hundreds and hundreds of priests have come from our Houses. Do you want me to secretly tell you how many clerics we had last year? Listen. From all of our Houses in Italy, France, Uruguay and the Argentine Republic last year we had 300 clerics. Most of these go back to their dioceses but just to tell you of one, look at the Casale diocese: out of 42 clerics in the seminary, 34 came from our Houses. Others become religious, others go to the missions or stay with us and help us with everything they can. So do you see where your alms, your help and charity goes?

Another and no small effort is to shore up against the heresy that threatens to invade our cities and towns. It is devastating Catholic countries and spreading further as freedom spreads in the world of politics; because when in the name of freedom we give open slather to evil to operate, and we put restrictions on the work of the good, there will always be sad consequences. So we sought to challenge heresy and impiety with books well adapted to this purpose, and with much effort and at great expense we printed them and disseminated them amongst the Catholic people. But the books don't achieve everything. We saw the need, like a sentry keeping watch in places where there is greatest danger, to place a squad of soldiers at least to paralyse evil, and so near the Protestant church, since 1847 we have opened the Oratory of St Aloysius, and now after so much research and effort we have managed to start building the church of St. John the Evangelist. Construction is under way.

At S. Pier d’Arena heresy was also threatening and here we built a hospice. In Nice, right next to the Protestant church, we built the Patronage of St Peter. Heresy had already made extraordinary inroads at La Spezia. Here we made every effort and now there are some appropriate schools. I don’t want to talk about everything along these lines but I want to tell you what happened at Ventimiglia. Here, given the increase in the population, a valley known as Valle Crosia filled up with homes. The number of inhabitants grew to a hundred, then to a thousand. Since they were all new homes, nobody thought of a church or they were unable to build one. The Protestants, seeing how convenient this was, built a nice centre or large building there which served as a hospice and school, and also a church. Given that there were no other schools, the inhabitants of the valley were attracted to them and many started attending their church. The bishop did not know what to do; building a church, setting it up as a parish are things that the private individual can no longer do these days. We were called on and we willingly began work. We did not have the means, but Providence helped us, and since we could not do anything else we rented a house, adjusted the ground floor a bit, made an altar and then we had a church. In the rooms off to the right and on the first floor we opened two classrooms for boys. In the rooms on the left of this little church we called in the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians and they opened classes for girls. What a change! The festive oratory attracted big and small alike, and all the people living around could attend Mass. The boys’ classrooms filled up immediately; those for the girls as well. Things then took such a turn that now the Protestant schools are absolutely closed because there is nobody, not a single boy or girl, attending them. Many who had started going to the Protestant church, able to come to the Sacraments for Easter, abandoned the place that had become a centre of heresy in Liguria.

All these various works would be impossible for one person alone. We need to have Cooperators. Their subsidies for example help us go out there and set up the early stages. Then the Cooperators come and set up in the place itself and things make progress. Without the work of the Cooperators, the Salesians would be stranded and unable to exercise their zeal. It is true that we

always encounter many difficulties in achieving these works but the Lord sees that they can always be overcome.

This year, then, the difficulties have multiplied; just the same we see that the Lord's hand is always supporting us. Our incomparable benefactor, Pius IX, died this year; it was Pius IX who approved the Cooperators, Association and enriched it with so many wonderful indulgences; it was Pius IX who wanted to be enrolled as the first Salesian Cooperator; it was Pius IX who never missed a good occasion to benefit us. He died, but the Lord saw that his successor was Leo XIII. I presented myself to him and spoke to him of the Salesian Cooperators. I asked him to allow his august name, like the name of his predecessor of happy memory, to appear amongst the Salesian Cooperators. And once he was well informed of their spirit, he added: "I do not intend to be only a Salesian Cooperator, but an *operator*. Should not the Pope be the first to contribute to works of charity?" So this is how, when we had lost a father, the Lord saw that we would have another no less kind than the first. This very year a number of worthy people have died who have been of great help to the Oratory but the Lord saw that others took their place and the charity of the faithful has not left us lacking what we need.

So now, here is what has to be the more direct purpose of the Salesian Cooperators; this is what they need to take up. They need to continue the works begun, the ones I have spoken of. Indeed these works need to increase a hundredfold. We need people and means for this. We sacrifice our people: every day the Lord sends us personnel who are ready for any kind of sacrifice, even giving their lives for the salvation of souls. People are not enough - we need the means. And this is your task, worthy Cooperators. I give you the task of finding the material means; see that they are not lacking. Note well how great the Lord's grace is. He puts the means in your hands for cooperating in the salvation of souls. Ah yes, the salvation of many souls is in your hands. We have seen, from what I have told you, that the salvation of so many souls results from the cooperation of good people.

So now it is time for me to thank you. But what thanks can I give? I cannot do it. If I were to thank you for your good works it would be too little a

recompense. So I will leave the Lord to thank you for it. Yes, I have said many times that he considers what is done for our neighbour as done to himself. and it is also certain that charity which is not strictly corporal but which also has a spiritual aim, has even greater merit. I could say that it not only has a greater value, but a divine one. The Fathers agreed with what St Dionysius said: “*Divinorum divinissimum est cooperari Deo in salutem animarum.*” And explaining this passage with St Augustine, we may say that this divine work is an absolute pledge of one’s own predestination: “*Animam salvasti, animam tuam praedestinasti.*”

Do you want to do something good? Educate the young. Do you want to do something holy? Educate the young. Do you want to do something very holy? Educate the young. Do you want to do something divine? Educate the young. Amongst divine things, this is the most divine.

Oh! If you are part of all this good I have been hinting at you can be sure of saving your own soul. So I leave him to give you special thanks. Just know that in the church of Mary Help of Christians morning and evening, and I could say all day, there are special prayers for you, that the Lord may be able to thank you with the words that he will say to you on that decisive day of judgement. “*Euge, serve bone et fidelis...*” [Mt 25:23]. Make sacrifices, but keep in mind that Jesus Christ sacrificed himself far more and that we will never ever get even near to the sacrifice he made for us. Those who make the effort to imitate him in making sacrifices to save souls can have the peace of mind that *animam salvasti, animam tuam praedestinasti* is no exaggeration and that they will certainly be crowned with the *intra in gaudium Domini tui* [Mt 25:23] that I so earnestly desire and pray for all of you.