The lay vocation within a charismatic family: the experience of the Salesian Cooperators

Communion, co-responsibility and challenges of a lay reality within the Salesian Family

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Dearest brothers and sisters, good morning

First of all, I wish to thank the President and the whole World Council of the Guanellian Cooperators for this invitation.

I receive it with gratitude, but also with some emotion. It arises not only from an institutional relationship between two Associations. It arises from a closeness built over time with some members of your World Council. It arises from faces, meetings, conversations, mutual esteem. Before structures, there are always people. And very often the Spirit begins precisely in this way: through a simple relationship that little by little becomes an opportunity for communion and service.

I would not want my talk to be heard as the lesson of an older Association to a younger one. I am here to share a stretch of road, with its lights and its struggles. One hundred and fifty years do not make us teachers: they make us more responsible for the gift received.

The letter of invitation entrusts three words to this talk: **communion, co-responsibility and challenges**. I would like to add a fourth, which gives meaning to the other three: **mission**.

I find it very significant that the preparation of your Assembly began with a simple and demanding verb: **to listen**. Before defining priorities and programs for the next six-year term, you asked the Local Groups to tell their story, their difficulties and their hopes. The responses that arrived from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas were gathered around three areas: belonging, participation and mission.[16] I am therefore not here to speak before a blank page. I enter with respect into a listening that has already begun.

Communion, in fact, is not simply being comfortable together. Co-responsibility is not only distributing tasks. And challenges are not only problems to be solved. Everything becomes clear when we remember that a charismatic family exists for a mission received from God and entrusted to the Church. It is the mission that brings us together. It is the mission that makes communion necessary. It is the mission that transforms participation into co-responsibility.

The question that will accompany us, then, is very concrete: **how can a lay vocation, within a charismatic family, safeguard the gift received and make it fruitful in today's world?**

Don Bosco and Don Guanella: a closeness that does not erase originality

This dialogue between us does not begin today. It has deeper roots. Before our Associations met, our Founders met.

Don Luigi Guanella knew Don Bosco personally. In 1875 he entered the Salesian Congregation and made temporary profession. He lived in Turin, in daily contact with Don Bosco, until November 1876. He was director of the Oratory of San Luigi, in the San Salvario neighborhood. Later he was sent to Trinità di Mondovì. His experience in the Salesian Congregation ended in September 1878, when he returned to the Diocese of Como.[4]

It was therefore not a casual acquaintance. It was a real time of life, of service, of formation and of discernment. Salesian documentation recalls a deep affinity between the two: apostolic

resourcefulness, fatherliness, love for the Eucharist, for Mary and for the Pope, the decision not to remain indifferent in the face of poverty. At the school of Don Bosco, Don Guanella deepened an educational approach that was both loving and firm, the will to prevent evil and the momentum of a great apostolic charity.[4]

Don Guanella would later write very beautiful words: “When I was with Don Bosco I felt as if I were in paradise.” And, many years later, he would describe himself as his “devoted admirer and pupil.”[5]

But right here there is an important lesson for our meeting. The closeness between the two saints did not produce a copy. Don Guanella did not become a second Don Bosco. The Salesian experience helped him to recognize his own calling more clearly. Paul VI, in the homily for the beatification, said that Don Bosco was for him a “great teacher and friend” and that, with his teaching and example, he helped him to determine his vocation as Founder.[6]

This expression is precious: **he helped him to determine his vocation as Founder**. True friendship does not absorb the other. It helps him to become himself. Communion between charisms does not produce uniformity. It brings each one’s originality to maturity.

I believe this should also be the style of the relationship between our Associations. The history of the Salesian Cooperators can offer you questions, experiences, criteria. But the answer will have to be Guanellian. It will have to be born from the gift that the Spirit entrusted to Saint Luigi Guanella and from the mission of charity that characterizes you.

The most fruitful communion does not say: “Become like me.” It says: **“I give you what I have learned, so that you may become more fully what you are called to be.”**

The Salesian Cooperators: a vocation, not an additional service

To tell the story of the experience of the Salesian Cooperators I must start from a conviction that took a long time to mature fully: **being a Salesian Cooperator is a vocation**.

It is not only volunteering, helping with works or recognition given to generous people. All this can be precious, but the vocation of the Salesian Cooperator is something deeper.

Our Project of Apostolic Life states:

> *“Commitment as Salesian Cooperators means responding to the Salesian apostolic vocation, a gift of the Spirit, by taking on a specific way of living the Gospel and of participating in the mission of the Church.”[1]*

These words contain the essential. **Gift of the Spirit. Way of living the Gospel. Participation in the mission of the Church.**

The starting point is Baptism. In the Salesian Family there are consecrated persons, ordained ministers and lay people. It is not a ranking of importance. It is a diversity of vocations and services. Equal dignity is not granted by a superior or by a council. It is already given by God in Baptism.

The Second Vatican Council recalled that the laity are called to seek the Kingdom of God by dealing with temporal realities and ordering them according to God. They live in the ordinary

conditions of family and society and contribute, “as it were from within like leaven,” to the sanctification of the world.[2]

Our Project of Apostolic Life translates this perspective with a simple expression: **Salesians in the world**. It says that lay Salesian Cooperators live the Salesian spirit “in the ordinary situations of life and work with lay sensitivity and characteristics.”[1]

The decisive adverb is **ordinarily**. The lay vocation does not take us out of common life. It sends us more deeply into it.

Family and work are not time taken away from mission: they are places of mission. I say this also from my experience. The kindness, listening, and educational patience I breathed in at home and at the oratory I tried to bring into my work. Lay witness is often discreet: an honest word, time given to a young person, a home that welcomes, expertise placed at the service of the common good. The leaven does not put its own name on the dough. It transforms it from within.

Here I see a deep closeness to what you yourselves say about the Guanellian Cooperators: the charism must be translated daily into a lifestyle and practices of evangelical charity, in the family, at work, in society, in the Church and in institutions.[12]

Your worldwide consultation expresses it through very concrete voices. From Brazil, belonging is described as entry into the great Guanellian Family and active participation in the mission of Saint Luigi Guanella. From India, the Association is defined as “a spiritual home, a place of love and service.”[16] It is not simply a matter of doing something for others, but of allowing oneself to be formed by a style that unites faith, charity and responsibility.

The words are different. The charismatic accents are different. But the conviction is common: **being lay is not a diminished vocation. It is a vocation with its own place, its own voice and an irreplaceable mission**.

Within a Family: belonging, autonomy and communion

A lay vocation set within a charismatic family experiences a fruitful tension. It must safeguard both **belonging and autonomy**.

The first result of your listening can be summed up like this: **before being an organization, we want to be a family**.[16] Not an ideal family without difficulties, but a reality in which we experience prayer, mutual support, spiritual accompaniment, and shared mission. It is significant that, when asked about the Association, the Cooperators spoke first of relationships and only later of structures.

If belonging is lacking, the Association closes in on itself. It forgets the source of the charism and loses its link with the other branches of the Family. If autonomy is lacking, the laity remain dependent. They are called to execute, but not to discern. They collaborate on projects conceived by others, but struggle to feel like responsible agents of the mission.

In our history we have had to learn that autonomy does not mean independence and communion does not mean dependence.

The Project of Apostolic Life says that the Association of Salesian Cooperators brings to the Salesian Family the specific values of its secular condition, "with respect for the identity and autonomy proper to each group."[1] The Charter of the Charismatic Identity of the Salesian Family of Don Bosco adds that communion in mission does not weaken the autonomy and originality of each group, but clarifies and strengthens them.[3]

This balance is not achieved once and for all. It must be learned in concrete life.

Dependence arises when the laity are asked for availability, but are not given space in discernment. Immature autonomy arises when a group thinks it can do without consecrated persons, Pastors, or the rest of the Family. The path is an **autonomy in solidarity within communion**: every vocation brings a specific gift and no one alone possesses the totality of the charism.

This is why the word **co-responsibility** has become central in our journey. But we have to understand it well.

Co-responsibility does not mean that everyone does everything. It does not mean erasing roles, competencies, and responsibilities. Nor does it mean multiplying meetings.

Your consultation uses a very clear formula: **"We do not want to be spectators. We want to be co-responsible."** And from the Philippines comes a synthesis that could also belong to our Project of Apostolic Life: "We are all co-responsible, in different ways, for a single mission."[16]

Co-responsibility means precisely this: **to feel responsible together for the mission received**. It means moving from "doing for" to "thinking with," to "discerning with," to "reviewing with." It means sharing not only tasks, but also questions. Not only execution, but also vision.

Our Statute states that every Salesian Cooperator feels responsible for the common mission, according to his or her life conditions, competencies, and possibilities. And it adds that this co-responsibility is expressed in planning, evaluation, and the choice of leaders.[1]

The mission, then, is not a chapter that follows co-responsibility. It is its criterion. **We are co-responsible not to have more space, but because the mission needs everyone's gift.**

The question is not: "How much power has been distributed?" The question is: "Have young people, the poor, families, and vulnerable persons been better reached because we discerned and acted together?"

If co-responsibility does not make the mission more alive, it risks becoming a discussion about roles. If instead it is born of the mission, then organization, formation, communication, and finances also become concrete forms of service.

Safeguarding the charism: a fire, not a library

At the recent Meeting of the Italy–Middle East–Malta Region I proposed an image that I would like to take up here as well: **to safeguard a living charism means to safeguard a fire, not a library**.[8]

A library is preserved by protecting the books from dust, humidity, and time. A fire, instead, is preserved only by feeding it. You have to add wood. You have to let the air pass through. If we close it in a display case to protect it, it goes out.

A charism too can be treated like a museum piece. We can repeat the Founder's words without letting ourselves be wounded any longer by the poverties that wounded him. We can carefully preserve the forms of the past and lose the movement of the Spirit that generated them.

Charismatic fidelity does not consist in reproducing every response given by the Founder. It consists in allowing ourselves to be reached by the deep questions to which he responded. Don Bosco saw young people alone, poor, without a home, without work, and without a future. Don Guanella saw fragile humanity, abandoned, neglected. Both let themselves be moved. Both understood that faith had to become presence, education, home, bread, dignity, family.

To safeguard the charism then means to receive the same eyes. It means asking ourselves: **who today risks being left without a home, without a voice, without bonds, without hope?** Where today are the abandoned young people? Where are the vulnerable persons whom no one sees? What new poverties ask not only for a service, but for a trustworthy relationship?

The charism is alive when it makes us able to see what others do not see and to draw near to those others avoid.

In this sense, leaders are not owners of the charism. They are its custodians. And the charism does not pass only through superiors, presidents, or councils. It passes through the communion of disciples. It passes through the concrete fidelity of each person called.

This is also the reason why formation is so important. It is not only for learning the history. It serves to receive a way of looking, of feeling, and of acting. Formators should not limit themselves to explaining the charism. They should make it perceptible in the quality of relationships, in listening, and in the way they accompany.

On this too your listening offers a precise indication. Ongoing formation is indicated almost everywhere as a priority. From Congo comes a proposed human, Christian, and Guanellian path; from the Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe comes the proposal of a school to prepare lay people capable of guiding and accompanying other Groups.[16] It is an important step: not only to form lay people, but to form **lay people capable of accompanying other lay people**.

Our Project of Apostolic Life recalls, in the same sense, that the Salesian Cooperators are primarily responsible for their own human, Christian, Salesian, and professional formation. The Association supports this journey through qualified persons and in collaboration with the other members of the Salesian Family.[1]

Authentic formation does not only fill the mind. **It shapes the heart, enables the hands, and makes discernment freer**.

The 150th anniversary: a grace for the whole Salesian Family

2026 is a special year for us. On May 9 we celebrated 150 years since the pontifical recognition of the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators, which took place in 1876.

We prepared for this anniversary with a three-year journey. We expressed it with three verbs: **remember, renew, relaunch**.[7]

To remember not to take refuge in the past, but to recognize the source. **To renew** not only the structures, but the Promise and life. **To relaunch** not to make more noise, but to rediscover missionary drive.

The theme of the journey was “A dream, a promise and the future.” The VI World Congress, celebrated in Sacrofano from May 7 to 10, 2026, took on the motto “To be leaven in order to be fruitful.”[7]

Why do I consider this anniversary **an event of grace for the whole Salesian Family**?

Because it reminded us that Don Bosco’s charism, from the beginning, grew thanks to consecrated persons, ministers, and lay people united by the same educational passion. It made the lay vocation more visible and asked of us a conversion: the true fruit of an anniversary is not the success of the celebrations, but a clearer vocation, a deeper communion, and a more courageous mission.

For this reason the 150th does not belong only to the Salesian Cooperators. It belongs to the Salesian Family, because it shows that a charism is fruitful when it generates different forms of life, keeps them united, and sends them together.

During the Congress we used the image of leaven. Leaven is small. It does not put itself at the center. It is mixed into the dough and almost disappears. But, if it is alive, it transforms everything.

This is perhaps one of the truest images of the lay vocation. Lay people live immersed in the life of all. They share the same schedules, the same family concerns, the same professional responsibilities, the same social struggles. They do not observe the world from the outside. They inhabit it. And it is precisely from within that they can bring the power of the Gospel.

The challenges of the six-year period 2026–2032: the test of daily life

The VI World Congress opened the path for the six-year period 2026–2032. The World Council has already identified seven guidelines to be translated into the Animation Plan and into choices made in the territories: young people as protagonists; family spirit; Salesian identity; synodal co-responsibility; formation; mission and social impact; autonomy and sustainability.[9]

I do not wish to present a program here. I would rather share a conviction that holds them together: **the future of the Association is decided in daily life**.

The final message of the Meeting recalled that the future depends on the quality of evangelical life and relationships.[11] The Manifesto puts it this way: “The joy of the Gospel is transmitted first of all through everyday life.”[10] A lay vocation becomes credible when the Gospel enters work, education, the use of money and technology, conflicts, and the care of relationships.

The first challenge, then, is **an identity that becomes witness**. It is not enough to know who we are. Someone needs to be able to encounter, through us, a trace of God’s goodness. From Congo came a very powerful phrase: “Charity is not preached first. It is lived, and then it spreads.”[16] Kindness, the ability to listen, hope, honesty, and attention to the least are not lesser virtues. They are the daily language of the charism.

The second challenge is **lifelong formation**. The world is changing rapidly. Think of digital culture, artificial intelligence, transformations in work, new emotional fragilities, wars, migrations, loneliness. We cannot face new realities with answers learned once and for all. We need formation rooted in the Gospel and the charism, but also capable of reading the present time.

The third challenge concerns **the new generations**. In many parts of the world our Association is experiencing aging and the difficulty of generational renewal. We will not solve the problem with a recruitment campaign. Young people must not become the replacement needed to maintain our structures. They must find spaces in which they can be heard, make proposals, decide, experiment, and also make mistakes.

The Manifesto asks us to dwell in the places of their daily lives: the oratory, university, work, and digital spaces.[10] I would like to underline the verb **dwell**. It is not enough to organize initiatives for young people. We need to share a stretch of life with them. Presence comes before projects.

The fourth challenge is **real communion**. In a worldwide Association we speak different languages and live in cultural, social, and political situations that are very far apart. From Congo you received a simple expression: “To communicate means to create communion.”[16] Digital communication helps us, but it does not automatically create bonds. It becomes communion when it allows experiences to circulate, more fragile communities not to be left alone, and decisions to mature through participatory processes.

The fifth challenge is **missionary outreach**. We need vibrant Local Centers, but a Center cannot become a refuge. Associational life supports the mission; it does not replace it. Faithfulness to the Local Center is important precisely because it prevents personal apostolate from becoming isolated and keeps every initiative in harmony with the wider community. At the same time, the Center remains faithful to the charism only if it looks beyond itself.

The mission begins where people already live. It begins in wounded families, in workplaces, in schools, in the peripheries, in parishes, in informal places, in institutions, and in digital spaces. Your listening names material poverty, loneliness, family difficulties, youth distress, and new forms of exclusion. And it calls for a charity made of presence, listening, fraternal closeness, and accompaniment. From Congo there even arises the image of small **“cells of charity”**, capable of identifying the needs of the territory and coordinating concrete responses.[16]

The sixth challenge is **the capacity to network**. No charismatic family can respond alone to all forms of poverty. Networking with the other groups of the Family, with the local Church, with institutions, and with social realities does not weaken identity. It tests it and makes it more fruitful.

All these challenges have a common point: they do not ask first of all for extraordinary people. They ask for faithful people. People capable of transforming an ordinary gesture into evangelical presence.

The youthfulness of the Guanellian Cooperators: a grace, not a limitation

I would now like to speak directly to you.

Your Association is younger than that of the Salesian Cooperators. But this statement needs to be clarified. The collaboration of lay people belongs to the roots of Don Guanella's work. The statutory form of the Association, however, is more recent: the first Statutes were promulgated in 1999, and ecclesial recognition as a work belonging to the Guanellian Family came in 2003. The 2015 General Statutes consolidated a journey that had by then become international.[13]

Today you are about **860 Cooperators**, organized into five Provinces and five international or national Coordinating Bodies, present in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas.[16] This is not a number to display, but the sign of a family already truly worldwide. Different cultures and ecclesial situations speak different languages and yet, in the listening process, the same words return: family, vocation, formation, co-responsibility, communion, witness, and mission.

You therefore have **ancient roots and a young form of association**.

This should not generate deference toward Associations with a longer history. You can listen to our experience, but you must not imitate our forms. And above all, you must not think that maturity is measured by the number of years.

An Association with a long history can have solid structures but become slow or nostalgic. A young one can have organizational fragilities but possesses freedom and the ability to experiment. The beauty of your youth is that **many things have not yet become rigid**: you can embrace the wisdom of our experience without reproducing its forms and mistakes.

Youth, however, is not only enthusiasm. It requires a work of consolidation. It requires a clear identity, serious formation, known rules, participatory processes, continuity in transitions of responsibility, and real ties between the local and worldwide levels. The Church's magisterium recalls that a form of association born from a charism needs time to pass from initial enthusiasm to a stable configuration.[14]

Stability does not mean rigidity. It means creating the conditions for the gift to continue even when people change.

Among these conditions, your listening gives particular value to the **Promise**. In several countries it is perceived as the gesture that makes the vocational choice public and concrete. Someone even proposed a world day to renew it together.[16] The Promise is not a ceremony to be remembered: it is a pledge that asks to become everyday life.

Your Statute says something very strong: together with the Daughters of Saint Mary of Providence and the Servants of Charity, the Cooperators too are **bearers of the charism**; united by the bond of charity, they constitute the third branch of the Guanellian Family.[13]

Take these words seriously. To be bearers of the charism does not mean to possess it. It means to receive it, live it, and offer it. It means bringing into the Guanellian Family the specific gift of the lay condition. It means not merely being willing hands in the works, but being eyes capable of reading the world, offering skills and relationships, and being present in places where religious women and men cannot be present in the same way.

Your youth offers you a precious possibility: to build from the beginning a non-defensive co-responsibility. A co-responsibility in which each branch knows how to say clearly what it can give and what it must receive from the others.

For the Salesian Cooperators the long history has taught that the most difficult step is often the one from **collaborating** to **feeling co-responsible**. One can collaborate even while remaining external. One becomes co-responsible when the mission of the entire Family is felt as one's own.

For you this mission has the face of Guanellian charity. It has the face of the poor, of fragile people, of those who live in abandonment, of those who need to feel welcomed as children and as brothers and sisters. Your associative maturity will not be measured first of all by the number of groups or by the perfection of structures. It will be measured by the ability to make this charity present, credible, and generative in different contexts of the world.

Some fraternal recommendations

Allow me to gather what has been said into some simple recommendations. They are not recipes. They are questions born of our experience.

Continue to listen before you plan. Listening was not only the first phase of preparing the Assembly. It can become a stable style: listening to the Word, to people, to Local Groups, to cultural differences, and above all to those who live in fragility. A program born of listening will perhaps be less rapid, but more shared and closer to life.

Safeguard the primacy of the charism. Before roles, before structures, before debates about autonomy, there is a gift of the Spirit. Return often to the question: what gaze upon the fragile person has Don Guanella handed on to us? What image of God? What style of relationship? What urgency of charity?

Cultivate formation that touches life. Do not form only experts in Guanellian texts. Form people capable of feeling, discerning, and acting with the heart of Don Guanella. Unite the Word of God, the charism, ecclesial life, social doctrine, educational competence, and a reading of new forms of poverty.

Give the new generations real space. Our experience suggests not limiting yourselves to inviting young people just to listen to them. Ask them to help you understand the world you inhabit together and entrust them with real responsibilities. Accompany them with trust, without replacing them, and accept that some forms will change so that the fire keeps burning.

Live co-responsibility as a culture. Do not limit it to councils. It must shape the daily style: shared information, mutual listening, well-reasoned decisions, common evaluation, trust, the possibility of expressing dissent without breaking communion.

Stay rooted in local groups and, at the same time, breathe the world. The local group sustains the vocation and prevents isolation. The global dimension keeps us from absolutizing our own habits. Meetings, twinnings, exchange of experiences, and participatory communication can transform a sum of Groups into a network of communion. The two forms of belonging need each other.

Let the mission test everything. A structure is useful if it supports the mission. Formation is good if it makes us more capable of service. Communication is effective if it builds bonds and reaches those who are far away. Co-responsibility is authentic if the poor, the young, families, and fragile persons receive more attention, dignity, and hope.

Conclusion: roots, wings, and a shared road

Dear brothers and sisters, I began by thanking you for an invitation born from personal relationships. I would like to conclude by returning to the same conviction: God makes charismatic families grow through real bonds.

Don Bosco and Don Guanella met. They esteemed one another. They shared a stretch of the road. Don Bosco was for Don Guanella a teacher and a friend. The Salesian experience, which ended when the Bishop of Como called him back to the diocese, helped him to recognize more clearly the path to which God was calling him.

Perhaps this is the most beautiful image to hand on to our gathering: **a closeness that generates freedom, a communion that strengthens identity, a fraternity that opens to mission**.

We Salesian Cooperators are celebrating 150 years. We give thanks for a history that has given us roots. But we know that roots are not for standing still. They are for nourishing a life that grows.

You Guanellian Cooperators are living the beauty of a young associative reality. Do not look at our history with fear or with reverence. Look at it with freedom. Receive what can be useful to you. Set aside what does not belong to your call. Above all, trust in the gift that the Spirit has entrusted to you as well.

The synthesis of your listening says that the face of the Guanellian Cooperators in the world has “many colors, but one heart.”[16] It is a beautiful image for this Assembly: not erasing differences, but recognizing in them the same charism and the same passion for those who are most fragile.

You are not being asked to become similar to the Salesian Cooperators. You are being asked to become ever more fully **Guanellian Cooperators**.

Be guardians of a fire, not of a library. Be a lay presence capable of bringing Guanellian charity into the family, the workplace, society, and the Church. Be co-responsible not to occupy a space, but so that no gift is lost and no fragile person is forgotten.

The future of a charismatic family does not depend first of all on its structures. It depends on the evangelical quality of relationships, the clarity of the vocation, and the courage of the mission.

The witness of charity has been called “the great prophecy of the present time.”[15] This is an expression that I feel is deeply Guanellian and, at the same time, capable of uniting us.

May the Lord make us united enough to support one another, distinct enough to give one another what we are, and humble enough to serve where life is most fragile.

Thank you for your attention, and good journey to us all.

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