

A brief history of laymen in religious life.

There have been many forms of lay-religious over the centuries.

In the earliest times most monks were laymen with a few priests. The early monasteries were mainly filled with laymen.

But as time passed the older orders became more clerical, more members were ordained priests, and the laymen were given to the material care of the monastery. Gradually they became like servants.

At the Council of Trent in the 16thc, with this increase in the numbers of priests in monasteries, the office of superior was eventually reserved specifically to priests. During this time the new orders were mainly priests but included some lay members. The lay members worked alongside the priests but with different tasks to perform. This continued into the 19th century.

So there was a gradual progression over the centuries from being mainly lay religious to being mainly priest religious.

19th century:

In some parts of the world, the mid 19thc was a time of suppression against the older religious Orders and Congregations because they had accumulated too much power and influence over the civil affairs of society.

The Church was being persecuted and was facing a crisis. At this time the Church was in search of a new identity.

Some new congregations were formed. Some were trying to re-create the traditional style of monastic life. Others were attempting to begin a completely new type of religious life more in touch with the period of history.

Well perhaps that is happening now! Again the Church is facing a crisis and looking for a new identity!

Around this time there was a new understanding of the role of the *laity* in the Church. Holiness was everybody's call, regardless of any clerical or lay status.

Holiness or "Devotion" was for St Francis de Sales everyone's vocation. Holiness can be gained in every occupation. He gave examples of holy people in their everyday life. One of these is St Joseph. He attained holiness doing his everyday job in the carpenters' workshop.

Don Bosco chose St Joseph as one of the first patrons of the Salesian Society.

Joseph was a simple layman who was Jesus' teacher!

St Francis de Sales (1567-1622) wrote and worked on the idea of the call to holiness of everyone without exception.

The Salesian Society:

This was the environment in which Don Bosco began forming his ideas of a new Society. He wanted to have both priests and lay people striving towards holiness by working as equal partners for the salvation of the young.

But his idea of the Salesian Brother formed gradually, and is still evolving today.

The aim of the congregation is to unite its members, priests, clerical students and laymen, for the purpose of perfecting themselves by imitating our divine Saviour, especially in charity toward the young: Don Bosco, 1858 draft of Constitutions.

In the years 1858 to 1862 Don Bosco was working on his draft of the Salesian Constitutions and he speaks of lay people, not of coadjutor brothers.

Society of St F d Sales

The Congregation was founded on 9 Dec 1859 with 19 members. All were clerics. There were laymen working with Don Bosco all this time.

By 2 Feb 1860, only two months later, the first layman took vows as a Salesian. His name was Joseph Rossi.

Two years after this, on 14 May 1862 twenty-two members were admitted into the Society two of whom were laymen

In 1867 Don Bosco used the term coadjutor meaning lay helpers or domestics, not religious.

Constitutions...

In forming his Constitutions, Don Bosco was influenced in part by the Congregation of the schools of Charity and the Vincentians who had lay members, but they had a subservient role. Don Bosco wanted his laymen and priests to share the same consecration and apostolate. Don Bosco was thinking of one Salesian religious vocation that would be open to members who might opt either for the priesthood or for the lay state. This is the originality of which Fr Cavaglia speaks.

The Salesian Brother, without any outward sign lives by the evangelical counsels, exemplifies in his life the pattern of the Christian person according to the example of Jesus. (Paraphrasing Fr Cavaglia)

However clear Don Bosco's idea was, it still took many years to conceptualize and express in practice the nature and apostolic task of the lay Salesian. (A. Lenti)

Problems already!

Even at this early stage in the history of the Society, there was a tendency for some to regard the Brothers as lower class!

On the 31 March 1876 in his Good Night Don Bosco said:

“There is no distinction between members of the Congregation. Everyone is treated the same, artisans, young clerics and priests. We consider ourselves brothers”

In 1877, in a new hand written edition of the regulations for the House and the Oratory, Don Bosco used the term “coadjutor” for the first time to describe both the domestic helpers and lay-religious members of the Salesian Congregation.

The coadjutors who belong to the congregation must keep the practices of piety listed in their rule. So there is now a clear distinction between the domestic helpers and lay Salesians. But the term coadjutor was still used for both.

Again!

In 1883 only seven years after the above statement of Don Bosco, somebody said at the third General Chapter held at Valdocco,

“Coadjutors must be kept low...” !

Don Bosco reacted sharply,

“Not at all. Our Brother Coadjutors are like everyone else.”

At the same Chapter of 1883 Don Bosco wanted the lay members to continue to be called coadjutors as well as the lay helpers. However the idea of calling the coadjutors “Brother” was discussed for the first time.

Soon after this Chapter the term “coadjutor” was used only for the lay religious members of the Society.

The role of the Brother:

Don Bosco had to clarify his ideas further.

He said to the Brothers in a conference sometime later after mentioning many fields of work from workshops to classrooms to financial management and others:

“You are not the ones to take the manual chores directly. Your task is to direct. You ought to act as the master supervising the workers, not as a servant...

You ought not to be servants but masters; not subjects but superiors.”

Now I shall tell you my second point. Since you are helping in such important work, you must be men of great virtue...

For Don Bosco his idea of the Brother evolved gradually, but he always spoke of **unity and equality**, where all are bound by the common life, common charity and the simple vows.

From “Don Bosco: History and Spirit” by Arthur Lenti:

An early draft of the Constitutions by Don Bosco:

“All the gathered members lead the common life, bound together only by fraternal charity and by the simple vows, which bind them to form one heart and one soul in order to love and serve God.”

In forming his Constitutions, Don Bosco was influenced in part by the Congregation of the schools of Charity and the Vincentians who had lay members, but they had a subservient role.

Don Bosco wanted his laymen and priests to share the same consecration and apostolate.

Don Bosco was thinking of one Salesian religious vocation that would be open to members who might opt for the priesthood or for the lay state.

This is the originality of Don Bosco of which Fr Caviglia speaks.

However clear Don Bosco’s idea was, it still took many years to conceptualize and express in practice the nature and apostolic task of the lay Salesian. (A. Lenti)

What is the essence of Don Bosco’s idea which we must not lose?

For Don Bosco his lay Salesians were to work in the workshops and trade schools, in the office and in the city, in the classrooms, on the building site and the farm, and on the missions, in fact in all areas where work was to be found.

The Salesian Brother could fill any area of work.

But he must be properly trained. Both professionally and spiritually.

The only place the Brother could not go was that reserved specifically for the Priest by his ordination.

Michael Rua 1888 – 1910;

“Our Society is so constituted that it offers abundant possibilities for apostolic ministry not only to its priestly members, but also to its dear Salesian Brothers... the forming of personnel is vital to the work of our Society... many have high school diplomas, college degrees and teaching credentials...”

Paul Albera 1911 – 1921:

“In the older religious orders lay-brothers form a kind of second order... Don Bosco did away with such dualism. All Salesians share the same rights and privileges ... they are fully Salesian religious, with the same Salesian vocation,

and the same apostolate as the priests, except for that which pertains to the ordained ministry.

He was a Salesian presence representing Don Bosco where clerics were not able to go due to the anti-clerical atmosphere of the time.

What about now? Is there an anti-clerical feeling now? Where do we fit in today?

I think even in the Church today there is a new realization of the clericalism within the Church and the harm it has done.

Clericalism puts the Church hierarchy in a position of power over the laity, which can be abused.

Clothing:

From the very beginning Don Bosco wanted the Brothers to dress neatly as laymen.

Curiously in some provinces in the past and even today, there has been a tendency for the Brothers to dress almost as clerics wearing black and white and sometimes even a clerical collar! I have heard of Brothers dressed in albs and cassocks!

But Don Bosco wanted us to be religious in shirtsleeves.

So what is happening? Is there still confusion about who the Brother is?

Didn't Don Bosco make it clear?

It is not about what we wear or what we are called. Who we are and our Faith in Jesus Christ is all that matters.

Who we are is not what we wear or what we are called or what badge or medal we wear. We are not our trousers or our shirt!

The Salesian Brother is a man of Faith in Jesus Christ. He is a Salesian of Don Bosco.

We give witness to Jesus through the example of our life. We give witness to the existence of God through our relationships with everyone we meet.

We lead the young and the old to Faith by the example of our life of Faith.

The Salesian Brother today:

However!

The Salesian Brother is a consecrated layman striving for holiness by the practice of the simple vows. This brings the responsibilities and discipline of the religious life. Faithfulness to our call is the greatest witness we can give to the world.

We are men walking in the footsteps of Don Bosco dedicated to the salvation of souls, especially the young and those most in need, especially through education. We are called to work in whatever field is required for the work of the Congregation.

The Salesian Brother is a *prophet* speaking the truth with his life and being a sign of contradiction in the world. We challenge the consumerist and materialist societies in which we live.

The Salesian Brother is ready to be a visible witness to the existence of God by his life.

The fruits of his labours will be seen in the lives of those he has educated. He sows the seed and someone else reaps the harvest.

Crisis:

In Australia, due to the abuse crisis around the world, religious are experiencing a decline in status. No longer are we automatically held in high esteem. We must earn peoples' trust and esteem.

Some of our confreres are afraid to say they work at "Salesian College".

All religious are facing a hostile world today. Perhaps this is similar to Don Bosco's time.

Visible, Credible and Fruitful:

We are called as Salesians to be a sign of the reality of God for the young.

Our witness:

The questions young people often ask show me that my life makes them think.

They see what I represent and are confronted by it e.g. A boy states that he knows why I do what I do. I ask him to explain. He answers that I do what I do because I believe in God. He came to this belief only by seeing me around the school. Perhaps he will come to Faith through my example. I hope so.

Why did you become a Brother? They often ask.

This is always an opening for some fruitful conversation on the idea of religious life, Jesus and Don Bosco.

Don Bosco was a model of holiness because his work broke with the way of thinking and believing of his contemporaries. (Rector Major)

Don Michael Rua 1888-1910

Our Society is so constituted that it offers abundant possibilities for apostolic ministry not only to its salesian priestly members, but also to its dear Salesian Brothers...the forming of personnel is vital to the work of our Society...many have high school diplomas, college degrees and teaching credentials...

Don Albera: 1911 – 1921

In the older religious orders lay-brothers form a kind of second order...

Don Bosco did away with such dualism. All Salesians share the same rights and privileges... they are fully Salesian religious, with the one Salesian vocation, and the same apostolate as the priests, except for that which pertains to the ordained ministry.

What aspects of his holiness seem most interesting today?

Can we interpret Christ's Gospel for our own times, as Don Bosco did for his?

So can we be as dangerously imaginative today as Don Bosco was?

How must we respond to our current situation? And not just copy what others are doing?

How can we imitate Christ in responding to our particular situations today?

My references are: "The Salesian Brother" Rome 1989
"Don Bosco's Lay Religious" by Enzo Bianco
"Don Bosco" Teresio Bosco
"Introduction to the Devout Life" Francis de Sales