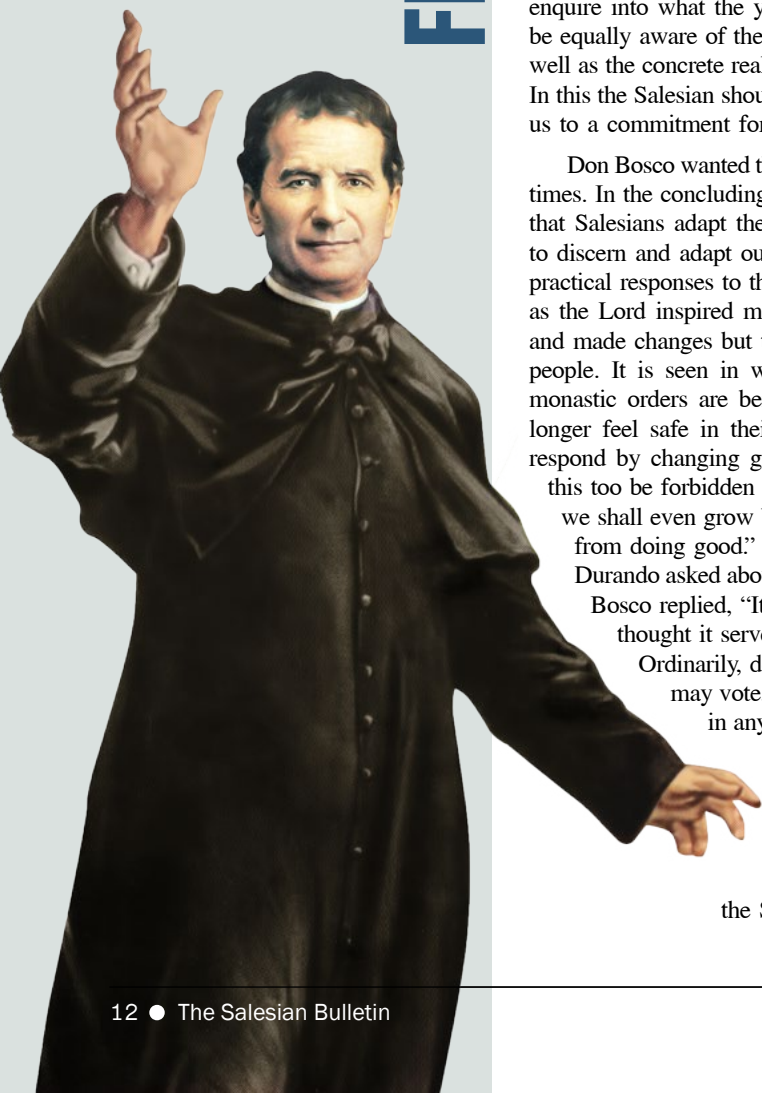




SALESIAN SPIRIT

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# INITIATIVE AND FLEXIBILITY



Another characteristic of the Salesian spirit is ‘initiative and flexibility’ in those things which benefit the young people and serve to save their souls. The Salesian should be a realist (practical, down-to-earth) being attentive to the changes (new trends) in people, society and environment. The Salesian should be convinced that the Lord manifests His will also through the demands of time and place. The Salesian should periodically evaluate his work and meet new trends with well-balanced creativity. When we do not have the spirit of initiative and flexibility adapting ourselves to the signs of the times, the congregation will have run its course!

## PRACTICAL RESPONSE TO THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

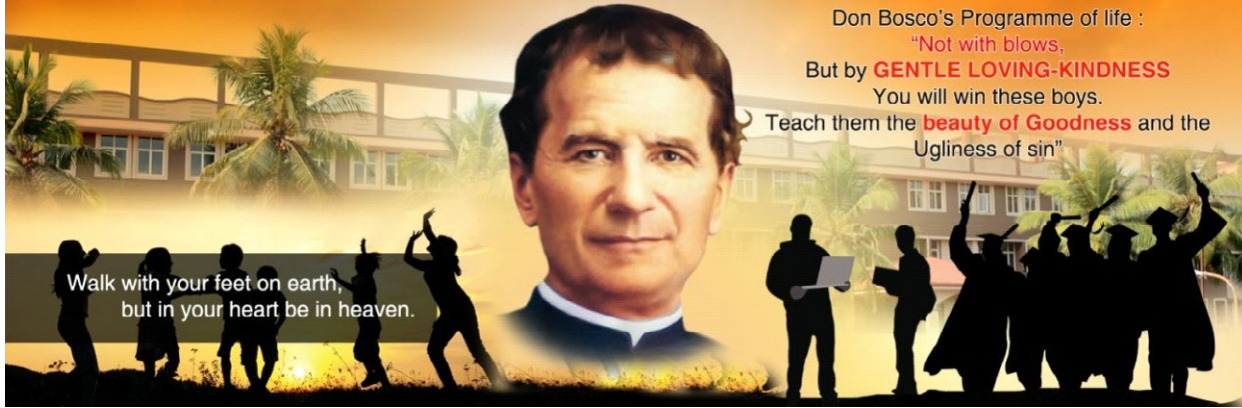
The Salesian should live in the present (neither in the past nor in the future) with his feet firmly planted on the ground. It means that he should become aware of what is happening to people (especially to youth), society and world (e.g., pluralism, relativism, fragmentation, secularization, technical orientation, inability to make long-term commitments, etc.) and enquire into what the youth need in that situation. The Salesian should be equally aware of the global situation such as new thought patterns as well as the concrete reality of the people where the ministry is exercised. In this the Salesian should prudently discern the voice of the Lord calling us to a commitment for the kingdom.

Don Bosco wanted the Salesians to adapt themselves to the signs of the times. In the concluding talk at GC03 (1880), Don Bosco recommended that Salesians adapt themselves to the times: “We must make an effort to discern and adapt ourselves to our times.” He is our model in giving practical responses to the signs of the times: “I have always gone ahead as the Lord inspired me and circumstances required.” He was ready to and made changes but the target was always the salvation of the young people. It is seen in what he said in 1874, “In these days, when all monastic orders are being suppressed by the state, when nuns can no longer feel safe in their cloisters and monks have disappeared, ... we respond by changing garb. We carry on dressed as priests, and should this too be forbidden we shall use civilian garb and continue the good we shall even grow beards if we must; these things can never stop us from doing good!” In the talk at the conclusion of GC03 (1880) Fr. Durando asked about participating in political elections to which Don Bosco replied, “It has always been my principle to abstain. I have thought it serves no purpose. This has been the norm followed.

Ordinarily, do not go to vote. If it is deemed convenient, you may vote, but in a very private capacity. If a house depends in any way on the city government, it is better never to vote.” It was a practical response to the problem at that time.

The early Salesians were known for their practical response to the signs of the times.

Cardinal Parocchi presided over the meeting of the Salesian cooperators in Rome on May 8th, 1884



and spoke on the physiognomy of the Salesian: "its nature lies in the charity it exercises in accordance with the requirements of our day and age. ... The world seeks or recognizes nothing outside what is material at the present day. It knows nothing and desires to know nothing of spiritual things. It turns a deaf ear to the beauty of faith, ignores the grandeur of religion, repudiates the hope of an afterlife, and even denies God Himself. ... We, therefore, have to adapt ourselves to the days in which we live, ...". And he presented the Salesians as those who had already adapted themselves to those times and were working for the salvation of the young in various works! In the same way the Bishop of Milo gives the following description of the Salesian: "The Salesian is the man of self-denial and humility, the man who lives dead to himself, without even noticing it; ... He goes wherever he is sent; he takes and adapts himself to things as he finds them, building his nest in either the exuberant branches of a tree rich in foliage, or amid the most sharply pointed, craggy stones or bare rock." He rightly observes that the Salesian adapts himself to things as he finds them.

#### A SPIRIT OF INITIATIVE

Spirit of initiative means that, desiring to provide timely answers to youth needs, the Salesian begins as soon as possible to do what seems to need doing, without waiting for the ideal conditions and without waiting to be told.

As an example, we can quote the initiative of the publication of the Catholic Readings from 1853. Don Bosco wanted to counteract the heretical publications of the protestants with a series of booklets on the Catholic faith reaching all the Catholic families. Many well-intentioned people felt its dire need. So, he started it with the encouragement from Bishop Luigi Moreno of Ivrea. Of course, it was not all perfect, in spite of all efforts. In October 1853, about forty priests met together. All of them were interested in the Christian education of youth. Someone suggested that popular educational publications should be spread far and wide. At this point

Don Bosco urged them to help him propagate Catholic Readings, pointing out to them that this was one of the most effective means to counteract the false teachings of the protestants. Father Peyron, who presided over, said coldly that he had read the pamphlets carefully and that its grammar, vocabulary and style should be improved and that the proofs should be diligently corrected. None expected such harsh criticism. But Don Bosco replied humbly: "It is for this very reason that I entreat you to help and advise me in this matter. I beg you to point out to me whatever needs correcting, and I'll gladly cooperate." It shows that Don Bosco began as soon as possible what seemed to be the need of the hour, although it was not all perfect.

The young priest, Fr. Achilles Ratti, who was then appointed at the Ambrosian Library in Milan, desired to learn about Don Bosco's printing press. On visiting, he was captivated by it. He complimented Don Bosco on using the most up-to-date technology, who replied, "In these matters Don Bosco wishes to be always in the vanguard of progress." Another example of the spirit of initiative of Don Bosco is that of the Sons of Mary project for adult vocations. The entrants to priesthood were decreasing year by year. Don Bosco recognized this trend. And he wanted to bring willing young men and offer them a special programme to prepare for priesthood. He launched it in 1875. There was a lot of opposition but the project took root and contributed much to the Church.

#### CONCLUSION

The Salesian is practical and down-to-earth. He is aware of the changes in people, society and the world. He discerns God's voice in these changes. In the changing situation, taking a risk, he begins to act as soon as possible, to do what seems to need doing. He periodically evaluates his work. He brings in innovations in the work itself and in the ways of doing it.

Salesian Initiative and Flexibility: Raising all hearts to heaven, is initiative; walking with their own feet on earth, is flexibility. ■