

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE BROTHERS

**ASSOCIATED WITH THE GOD
OF THE POOR**

**Our consecrated life
in the light of the 4th vow**

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Superior General
December 25th, 2003

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The Nativity of the Lord

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me
To bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor”
(Lk 4: 18-19)

Dear Brothers,

The feast of Christmas, and the New Year just beginning, are very special times to send best wishes to those whom we love. That is why it seems to me that the message of Jesus at the beginning of his public life is such an appropriate wish for all of you. May you experience a year of the Lord's favor, a year of grace, in which each of you might be an instrument

of salvation and liberation for those children and young people entrusted to you by the Lord.

The Spirit of the Lord is also upon us and has anointed us “to conduct, together and by association, schools for the service of the poor” (*R. 25*). He has anointed us to free young victims from so much oppression, and from so many situations in which they are at risk, by helping them find the light which gives meaning to their lives. Thus, these words of Isaiah, which Luke places on Jesus lips, seem to me to be a very appropriate greeting and introduction to this Pastoral Letter in which I want to share some ideas with you about our Consecrated Life in the light of the 4th vow. We are called to live associated with the God of the poor revealed by Jesus in the Gospel. It was this God who inspired the Founder to live a style of religious life at the service of children and young people who were poor - and from that starting point, to be at the service of all young people - for the glory of the Trinity.

Education for justice

The educational theme proposed by the Institute for this year is that of *Education for justice* (*Cir. 448, p.29*). This is an essential theme that I will develop in one of the points of this Pastoral Letter. I hope that we can share these ideas with the whole educational community so that this important dimension of our

mission might be one of the characteristic traits of the education we give. Our Rule clearly and powerfully summarizes this commitment: “The Brothers are entrusted with their mission by the Institute, a mission especially to the poor. As a community they become increasingly conscious of the reasons for the poverty that surrounds them and so become earnestly involved in the promotion of justice and human dignity through the educational service they provide” (R. 14).

UMAEL

The Third Congress of Former Students was held in Mexico City from May 15 - 18 with the theme *Called to Serve*. It was a very rich and impressive experience which should make us aware of the fact that our former students are a force that we should use to build a better world. This impression was further strengthened during my visit to the Districts of Asia where I experienced how former students, many of them coming from other religions, identified with our Lasallian values. During the Congress in Mexico I called on former students to commit themselves to six particular challenges, challenges that I repeated to young Lasallians in my message to them this year. It is my hope that these six challenges will play a significant role in the lives of our former students and young Lasallians. Here I would once again like to recall those challenges:

- Called to serve children by defending their rights
- Called to serve young people by helping them find meaning in their lives
- Called to serve the poor and marginalized by promoting their active participation in the benefits of globalization
- Called to serve the world by creating bonds of fraternity
- Called to serve the cause of peace and to be builders of peace in a divided world
- Called to serve in the cause of unity for the human family by means of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue

Pastoral visit to PARC (Pacific-Asia Region)

At different times over a period of almost three months I had the opportunity, or rather I should say I had the grace, along with Brother Victor Franco, Councilor, to visit the Brothers and other members of the Lasallian Family in 15 countries in Asia-Pacific where our Institute is present. This Region has an extraordinary Lasallian missionary history that began more than 150 years ago. I was powerfully struck by the fact that our schools are places where different cultures and religions come together in harmony, respect, tolerance and fraternity. I was also very impressed when I saw how Lasallian values are accepted by different cultures and religions and how these values are a source of inspiration for all.

Our Institute has been extraordinarily creative in responding to the needs of young people. These responses include everything from nursery schools to universities, different models of Boys Town, the Australian Kid Help Line program (which each year receives one million phone calls from young people searching for help in solving problems of all kinds), programs that help young people find jobs, missionary work and work with indigenous populations, catechetical training centers, help for young people in trouble with the law, non-formal programs for the poor, and many other apostolic initiatives. In general the prestige of our schools and esteem for the Brothers is enormous and I was especially impressed by the affection of our former students and their active collaboration with, and support for, our institutions. This is all the more striking given the fact that, in many areas, the majority are non-Christians.

I was also impressed by many expressions that I heard during my trip: “I feel proud to be a Brother” (said by many young Brothers); “Pray for me as I will for you” (said by a good number of Brothers); “I am happy to work with the poor” (said by Brothers); “The Brothers are different because they are always available to help us” (said by students in a rural teacher-training school); “God bless you!” (the standard greeting from our students in Pakistan, most of them Muslims, as they offered a handshake). This was an unforgettable trip filled with rich personal

discoveries since I come from a different culture. The spirituality, kindness, respect and tolerance, the affection of our former students, the creativity and new initiatives are for me, and I hope for many others, a source of inspiration and a reason to give thanks to God to whose work we are committed.

Pastoral visit to Italy

This year I also had the opportunity to visit the Region of Italy accompanied by Brother Juan Pablo Martín. Over the course of three weeks I visited a variety of schools and communities. At the end of my visit, on June 15, the Districts of Rome and Turin merged to create the new District of Italy as a result of an exemplary process. In addition to visiting many of our schools I was fortunate to visit other works that have incorporated the Lasallian charism in a creative way, such as: the San Giuseppe University Residence, the Arco Centro which cares for drug addicts, and the Casa di Carità of the Union of Catechists with its excellent professional training center in Turin. I also visited the Centro Don Gnocchi for the handicapped in Parma, the “Community of Faith” in Massa, and a primary school with a great tradition in youth ministry in Santa Maria, Capua Vetere. Other works that I visited included a center in Pompeii for children with family problems, a youth center in Regalbuto along with the ceramics co-operative sponsored by the Brothers, and the Acireale

School which accommodates a center for children with family problems.

Among the things I appreciated most during this visit was the affection and close relationship that our Brothers had for their students, as well as the adult volunteers who collaborate with such an admirable sense of gratuity. The Italian Lasallian Family with its many groups, activities and national structures is a support that will ensure our educational mission.

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**Our consecrated life in the light
of the 4th vow**

There is your footstool
And yet you rest your feet
Among the poor,
The humble and the lost.

I want to bow before You,
But my inclining will never reach the depths
Where your feet rest
Among the poor,
The humble and the lost.

Pride cannot approach You
Since You walk
With the clothing of the wretched,
Among the poor,
The humble and the lost.

My heart does not know how to find your path,
The path of those who walk in solidarity,
Where You go among the poor,
The humble and the lost.

Rabindranath Tagore
Gitanjali, Song Offerings 10

Introduction

I am personally convinced that our 4th vow captures the Founder's original intuition and that is why it is so important and current. Contemporary thinking on the theology of religious life as regards the 4th vow, which exists in various congregations, indicates that it “makes explicit the original, founding commitment of a particular way of following Jesus along with a new and voluntary obligation by vow with regard to the Church. In other words, it is an act of religion through which one lives out religious consecration and all other commitments that emerge from it as an expression of hope in him.” (*Theological Dictionary of the Religious Life. Claretian Publications, 1989*)

It is for this reason that we can speak of the centrality of our 4th vow which refers us to the Founder's charism and to the spirit of the Institute. This vow enables us to have a global view of the other vows which are defined by it in a special way. We can apply to this what Henry Bergson says about the entire philosophical system which he sees as being nothing more than orbiting around a central idea that expresses itself in various ways and spirals out in concentric circles. It seems to me that this was the reason why the 43rd General Chapter asked us to devote a year to deepening our understanding of this vow: “The General Chapter decides that, following

the Chapter, a year be devoted to our vow of association for the educational service of the poor. Formation programs organized by the Center of the Institute, Regional Centers, Brothers retreats, communities, Districts, Sub-Districts and Delegations will organize programs for deepening an understanding of this vow. This will be a priority in personal and community annual programs” (*Proposition 19*). It is my hope that this letter will give an initial impulse to a discussion which will prepare us to celebrate 2005 as a year devoted especially to our vow of association for the educational service of the poor. I hope that it will help us to reflect on this vow in greater detail from an experiential rather than a theoretical perspective so that, in the light of our lived experience, a new impetus might be given to our consecration to God.

However, I had another reason for choosing this theme as the topic of this letter. During 2004 we will have an important meeting called for by the 43rd General Chapter to “evaluate the degree to which the institutions of the District, Sub-District or Delegation contribute to the educational service of the poor. The analysis of this evaluation should lead to a plan of action... The evaluation and the plan of action will be the object of a report, which will be studied at a later date at a meeting between Visitors, Delegates and Presidents and the Brother Superior General and his Council” (*Proposition 12*). Finally, I

had a more practical reason. This year I led a retreat for a group of Brothers from ARLEP (Spain-Portugal Region) on this very topic and it seemed to me that is was a well-timed opportunity to share this with all the Brothers of the Institute.

What also makes our 4th vow so contemporary is the fact that it opens our horizons and moves us beyond ourselves so as to be open to the needs of poor youngsters. It is a call to creativity and new initiatives on their behalf, not just on a personal level but also on community and District levels since we are associated for that purpose. This movement beyond ourselves is all the more necessary today given the difficulties that we are experiencing. These might easily lead us to turn in on ourselves in pursuit of our own security. In a talk given to the Union of Superiors General during a recent meeting, Professor Andrea Ricardi, the founder of the Saint Egidio community, warned us against this temptation in these words: “In the context of the contemporary world, we run the risk of feeling out of place, dominated by tremendous challenges and by the complexity of problems... Further, in spite of our Christian history, we can be prey to this sense of confusion, preventing us from reaching out to others in love or, in the last analysis, spending years immersed in the problems - and there will always be problems - of our institutions. In other words, being wrapped up in self-preservation rather than dealing

with present challenges.” At the same time, it seems to me that as we revitalize this constitutive dimension of our vocation it will enable us both to capture what is essential and return to our roots. In this context it is important to realize that running good institutions does not mean, in itself, that we are evangelically significant.

The original idea and the historical evolution of our 4th vow

At this point I would like to give a brief historical overview of our 4th vow starting from, in particular, our vow formulas and the interpretation given in consecutive Rules of the Institute. I will limit myself to a number of texts of our formulas of vows that may shed some light on the meaning of our 4th vow and enable us to capture its centrality and importance. Before doing that, however, I would like to refer to a prior text in which the contents of the 4th vow are already outlined. I am referring to the Memoir on the Habit written, it seems, at the end of 1689 or the beginning of 1690. In it the Founder says: “This community is usually called the community of the Christian Schools, and at present is founded only on Providence... The members of this community are occupied in teaching in gratuitous schools...” This text is interesting because on the one hand it speaks of community and, on the other, of running gratuitous schools, the two elements that

will give rise to the idea of association for the educational service of the poor and the young.

The last General Chapter tells us that “the original vow for the service of the poor, which associated the Founder with 12 Brothers in 1694, is the source of Lasallian associations of lay persons and religious who wish to be part of the Lasallian mission...” There is no doubt that this refers to a public and perpetual vow. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the heroic vow of 1691 should be kept in mind because it involved the Founder associating himself with two Brothers to ensure the development of schools in favor of the poor even in the most difficult of circumstances. This very moving text expresses an irrevocable commitment: “Most Holy Trinity... we consecrate ourselves entirely to you to procure, with all our powers and with all our endeavors, the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools, in the manner which shall seem to us to be most pleasing to you, and most advantageous to the said Society... (We) bind ourselves by a vow of association and union to effect and maintain the said act of establishment, without power to abandon the task, even should we remain the only three members of the said Society, and should be obliged to beg for alms and live on bread alone...”

This is a vow which looks to the future. At a time of crisis, this vow was an invitation to continue on the

journey with renewed enthusiasm, creativity and hope. As Brother Michel Sauvage wrote: “The vow of 1691 opens this experience to a future still to come. The vow indicates a clear program but one that is not written in stone. The focus is not on a specific set of obligations simply to be observed. In this way it expresses fidelity as a type of on-going search rather than as a patrimony to be preserved. All the more reason, then, that the substance of this vow contains no prohibition but rather involves a specific commitment by discovering what is best through community discernment...” (*Lasalliana* 49). This is also a comprehensive program for us today as we, too, find ourselves heading into a crisis that is also a moment of grace. This can enable us to renew our charism by means of creative responses to new forms of poverty in our society and among the young.

I was struck by the fact that, in the vow of 1694, “...to procure... the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools” is replaced by “to procure your glory”. In other words, for the Founder and the first Brothers, the glory of God was procured by the establishment of popular schools in favor of children and the young who were poor.

Another interesting point is to notice how each of those who makes the vow mentions his 12 companions with whom he is risking his life in favor of schools for the poor. Association is not something

abstract. Rather, it is about real faces and, in consequence, our last Chapter preferred to speak more about associates rather than about association. Nor is this really about a 4th vow. It is the first of the three vows to which the Brothers committed themselves: “And for this purpose I promise and vow to unite myself and to remain in the society with the Brothers... to keep together and by association gratuitous schools...” It is a fact, then, that our current fourth vow was the first vow for the Founder and the first Brothers and it represented for them the expression of the charism and the purpose of the Institute.

Once again, association and gratuitous schools, which fundamentally meant the educational service of children and young people who were poor, seem to be indissolubly united. Unfortunately, beginning with the Bull in the formula of 1726, association as a vow disappears and, while it is expressed explicitly, the vow is restricted to teach gratuitously and appears as a 5th vow following that of Stability: “I promise to unite myself and to remain in society with the Brothers of the Christian Schools, who are associated to conduct, together and by association, gratuitous schools. Wherefore, I promise and vow poverty, chastity, obedience, stability and *to teach gratuitously...*” It would not be until the Chapter of 1986 that what the Founder had united at the very beginning would once again be united: *association*

for the educational service of the poor.

In fact, in all our vow formulas until 1986, the vow of association is omitted and reduced to teach gratuitously. In 1901, and subsequently up to the Rule of 1947, the expression the poor was added. This was a response to a casuistical concern taken from the rescript of January 12, 1901 which reduced the vow to “not requiring or receiving...from the children of the working people and the poor...any remuneration for teaching according to the Rules” (*Short Treatise on the Religious State, 1949, p.335*).

In fact juridical considerations seem to have absorbed the foundational intuition and this was the case almost from the very beginning. The problem seems to have revolved around the issue of whether one can receive something and, if so, from whom. This can be seen in the multiple rescripts such as those which Brother Bruno Alpagò refers to in his study, *The Institute in the Educational Service of the Poor*, which gathers together the circuitous history concerning this point. In spite of everything, in defense of gratuity there is an original intuition which is defended as essential. It is expressed in the Rule of 1718 in the following way: “The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is a Society in which members profess to keep gratuitous schools...and this is essential to their Institute...”

In spite of its juridical rather than pastoral orientation that was common to that time, the same *Short Treatise on the Religious State*, known as the Catechism of Vows, ends the explanation of what was then our 5th vow by stating quite forcefully: “In the thought and plan of St. John Baptist de La Salle, the principal work of the Institute, its primary mission, is to give a Christian education to children “of workers and the poor.” It is above all for them that we are established. This work of caring for them and of training them effectively is the special field confided to us by the Church, in which she expects us to sow and harvest... These ordinary, elementary schools commanded the unstinted devotion and attachment of our predecessors. These schools were the honor and glory of our early Brothers, who in consequence elicited esteem and sympathy from all ranks of society. To move these schools now from the forefront of our attention and place them somewhere to the rear; to prefer them to other works, if not more necessary, probably more interesting and humanly brilliant; to attempt to multiply to their detriment, boarding schools and secondary schools, and in general to forsake the humble clientele of the ordinary schools - all this would mean leading the Institute onto a dangerous road and turning it from its one primordial end...” (pp. 347-348)

The 1966-1967 renewal Chapter was to make a significant change which would respond better to the

original intuition. In spite of the fact that a group in the Chapter was promoting the idea of suppressing our specific vows, the Chapter strongly defended their importance to the extent that a section appeared on this in the Chapter document: *Religious Consecration and the Vows*. Two significant changes were made. For the first time there was a 4th vow, especially significant as we have seen when speaking about the 4th vow in the theology of religious life and, more importantly, it transformed this vow into a statement of *educational service for the poor*. Nevertheless, it was not until the 41st General Chapter and the Rule of 1987, our current Rule, that association and the educational service of the poor were united once again as at the beginning of the Institute: “Therefore, I promise and vow chastity, poverty, obedience, *association for the educational service of the poor* and stability in the Institute...”

I believe that the preceding historical overview provides a necessary background to present and future understanding of how we should be faithful to our roots and to the original intuition of the Founder and the first Brothers. We cannot separate these two elements because the first Brothers associated with the Founder to give birth to our Institute.

I think that we can sum up the previous ideas by saying that, although we have recovered the vow of association for the educational service of the poor, the

fact is that all the formulas from 1694 until 1986 clearly stated that: *keeping together and by association, gratuitous schools* (1694 - 1947) *or in service of the poor* (1967 - 2000). For us, this is the way to procure the greater glory of God.

When faced with the disastrous situation of the children of artisans and the poor, the Founder described association as the best way to remedy so great an evil: “God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian schools, where the teaching is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God” (*Med.194.1*). This is the gospel ideal of an earth without evil.

Living the vow of Association for the educational service of the poor - among the Brothers.

This was the topic of my second pastoral letter (2001) so I will not spend too much time on this now. We can say that our vow of association is the central axis that unifies the Brother's life and enlightens its various dimensions. In fact, we consecrate ourselves to God, *associated together in community*, for the educational service of the poor and, from that starting point, for the educational service of all young people. Consecration and mission revolve around our association.

This implies that community should be for us the primary place where association is experienced. It is there that we feel supported by our Brothers while, at the same time, supporting them to live their consecration and develop our mission together.

The purpose of our association is *to respond to the needs of youth who are poor and far from salvation*. This enables us see that the community does not exist for itself but is dependent upon a mission. Our community association will continue to be meaningful in the measure that our communities respond to the concerns of the young and of the world through being attentive to marginalized youngsters by means of an affectionate availability, active solidarity, and rich creativity. At the same time the community is the place for discernment which will allow us to shape a collective identity in our apostolic service.

Living the vow of association for the service of the poor - shared with the laity.

The Founder, in his *Memoir on the Habit*, after defining what community is and who its members are, adds: “Provision is also made for training schoolmasters for rural districts in a house, separate from the Community, which is called a normal school. Those who are trained here remain for only a few years until they are well prepared in religious spirit

as well as for their work” (4). I like to think that this was the first form of association with the laity and a complementary way of living the same charism.

It is interesting, or perhaps it would be better to say providential, to see how the movement undertaken by both the Church and by Religious Life in recent years has proposed a spirituality of communion that opens the potential of our common charism to others. In our case, in addition, this experience has been reinforced by our vow of association which today we are called to broaden - not necessarily by a vow but always with a particular attitude - to include all those who want to make De La Salle's charism their own within their particular state in life.

Three factors have influenced this new way of looking at things:

- An ecclesiology of communion and the rediscovery of the role of the laity.
- A new awareness of the potential of the charism.
- Ageing and the decrease in vocations which are making it difficult to maintain certain apostolates.

While normally the last criterion has been the starting point of these developments, fundamentally it is the least important. What is most important is the call to live an ecclesiology of communion, rediscovering the role of the laity and promoting the

charism. I will speak about each of these briefly.

- **An ecclesiology of communion and the rediscovery of the role of the laity.**

Almost forty years ago, the Declaration invited us to give to the laity the positions that are rightfully theirs in Lasallian schools: “For this reason the Brothers are happy to collaborate with lay teachers, who bring to the teaching community a contribution that comes from their knowledge of the world, their experience in family life, civic affairs, and labor organizations. The Brothers act in such a way as to guarantee that the lay teachers are involved in the whole life of the school: with catechesis, apostolic movements, extra-curricular activities, as well as in administration and matters of policy” (46.3). It is good to see that this is actually happening in many Districts today. At the same time, we were also invited to help awaken and encourage a committed Christian laity (*Dec. 26.1; 31.6; 32.1; 38.2; 47.4*).

In terms of the ecclesiology of communion, we can see how the Church's recent document on the consecrated life, *Starting Afresh from Christ*, gathers together the teaching which John Paul II expressed particularly in *Christifidelis Laici* and in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. The Church today invites us to live first and foremost a spirituality of communion: “To make the Church the home and the school of

communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings" (*NMI 43*). The Church is counting on us and calls us to be "experts in communion" (*VC 46*).

This should be the background to our association with lay persons as we establish a new type of communion and collaboration with them. As the document says: "Whereas at times in the recent past, collaboration came about as a means of supplementing the decline of consecrated persons necessary to carry out activities, now it is growing out of the need to share responsibility not only in the carrying out of the Institute's works but especially in the hope of sharing specific aspects and experiences of the spirituality and mission of the Institute. Reminding us of the values that the laity gives us, the document concludes: Communion and mutuality in the Church are never one way streets." (*Starting Afresh from Christ, N° 31*)

- **A new awareness of the potential of the charism**

A charism is a gift of the Spirit to the Church and therefore we cannot "hijack" it and keep it only for ourselves. Our relationship with lay persons helps us discover this new sense of charism which, in reality,

is not so new because the original charism of many ancient orders was shared by the laity as in the cases of Third Orders. In fact we are not talking here about religious sharing a charism that belongs to them and which is now being adapted to a lay reality. Charism precedes its incarnation in a lay or a religious sphere. Consecrated and lay people are all called to “drink from the same well” and to live the same charism based on their own specific vocations (*c.f. Antonio María Sicari, Gli antichi carismi nella chiesa. Per una nuova collocazione, Jaca Book, Milano 2002*).

Our journey towards the poor in the light of the Founder

Giving a Christian education to children of artisans and the poor, which is our primary purpose, is not only a way of directing our apostolic mission primarily towards them but, following in the footsteps of our Founder, it also ought to be an authentic school of spirituality. Consequently, I would like to shed some light on our own journey based on the example and lived experience of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

The spiritual value of serving the poor is expressed beautifully in *Vita Consecrata* as follows: “Serving the poor is an act of evangelization and, at the same time, a seal of Gospel authenticity and a catalyst for permanent conversion in the consecrated life, since, as

Saint Gregory the Great says, when charity lovingly stoops to provide even for the smallest needs of our neighbor, then does it suddenly surge upward to the highest peaks. And when in great kindness it bends to the most extreme needs, then with much vigor does it resume its soaring to the heights.” (*VC 82*)

– The poor are our teachers. In practice, what is most important in our following of Jesus is not to be a prophet who criticizes from the outside, based on statistical data or biblical texts, but a prophet who proclaims, in his own humble and reconciled person, that a new way of living is possible. “Do you have these sentiments of charity and tenderness toward the poor children whom you have to educate? Do you take advantage of their affection for you to lead them to God?” (*Med.101.3*)

– The poor are our judges as we see in Mt 25. How often have we evaluated works or institutions from their perspective, based on their opinions, or have we based our evaluation solely on operating efficiency? “You can say the same thing of your disciples, namely, that on the day of judgment they will be your glory, if you have instructed them well and if they have profited from your instructions, because the lessons you have given them and the profit they have made from them will be unveiled before the whole world. Not only on that day, but throughout all eternity you will receive the glory of having instructed

them well, because the glory that you have procured for them will reflect on you.” (*Med. 208.1*)

– Serving Christ's poor strengthens our vocation and our following of Jesus: “The more affection you show for them, the more you will belong to Jesus Christ” (*Med.173.1*). Moreover, the 42nd General Chapter stated that experience indicates that involving young people in ministries among the poor is a good environment for vocational discernment to occur. (*Cir. 435, p. 60*)

– Ask for the grace to encounter Jesus Christ in the face of the poor. This is a gift from God. How often has it been granted me to contemplate the Lord in that way? Saint Vincent de Paul, for his part, loved to say that, when one is obliged to leave prayer to attend to a poor person in need, that prayer is not really interrupted, because “one leaves God to serve God” (*VC 82*). Our Founder's thought was similar: “Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to instruct.” (*Med. 96.3*).

– The values of the poor are more Christian than are those of the consumer society in which we live. Their solidarity, their ability to celebrate, their fragility, their lack of financial accounts or the benefit of insurance makes them disinterested, generous and free: “The poor were the ones who most frequently followed Jesus Christ Our Lord, and they are also the

ones most disposed to profit by his teaching because in them it meets with fewer external obstacles” (*Med.166.2*). In his meditation on Saint Francis of Assisi, the Founder adds: “You are required by your work to love the poor, since the task you have in this work is to devote yourself to their instruction. Look upon them with Saint Francis as images of Jesus Christ, and as those who are best disposed to receive his Spirit in abundance.” (*Med.173.1*)

– Believe that the poor are the creators of the future. Be aware that they are the true agents of change, the source of dynamism for everyone. Love them fully, collaborate with them in changing the structures of history. Am I doing all that I can, and in the best way possible, to alleviate and root out injustice in the world? “Consider that it is a practice only too common for the artisans and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over like vagabonds as long as they are not able to put them to some work; these parents have no concern to send their children to school because their poverty does not allow them to pay teachers, or else, obliged to look for work outside their homes, they have to abandon their children to themselves. The results of this condition are regrettable... God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools, where the teaching is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God.” (*Med.194.1*)

– It is personal poverty which makes our work credible (R.32) and witnesses to real coherence in our calling: “For poverty should be dear to you who are responsible for the instruction of the poor.” (*Med. 96.3*)

– The poor take priority. Do the needs of the poor and the less gifted really take priority in our practical criteria (R. 40)? What are our criteria for admission? “Every day you have poor children to instruct. Love them tenderly as Saint Cyprian did, following in this the example of Jesus Christ. Prefer them to those who are not poor, for Jesus Christ does not say: “the Gospel is preached to the rich, but to the poor”. These poor are also the ones God has entrusted to you, and to whom you are obliged to proclaim the truths of the holy Gospel.” (*Med.166.2*)

– Try to be available to the poor and open to persecution. This is the real way of evaluating our activity. It is a good sign if the poor choose us and feel comfortable with us. “We are poor Brothers, forgotten and little appreciated by the people of the world. It is only the poor who come looking for us; they have nothing to offer us but their hearts, ready to accept our instructions” (*Med. 86.2*). It is a good sign that the enemies of justice persecute us: “The only thanks you should expect for instructing children, especially the poor, is injury, insult, calumny, persecution, and even death... Do not expect anything else, if you have God in view in the ministry he en-

trusted to you.” (*Med.155.3*)

– One important and indispensable criterion in our continuing formation should be the educational service of the poor, as stated in the Rule: “Following the example of their Founder, the Brothers, as persons and in community, look upon their intellectual and spiritual development in terms of a progressive conversion to the poor.” (*R.40b*).

– Besides the work assigned one must also look for work in the world of those in need. In the Gospel it is always better and more secure to be connected to that world (*cf. Mt 25; Lk 4: 17-20; Mt 11: 2-7*). For us Brothers this is a concrete way to live our 4th vow when we are not lucky enough or rather, when we are not blessed, to work directly with them. “You have the happiness to labor for the instruction of the poor and to be engaged in a work which is esteemed and honored only by those who have a truly Christian spirit... Thank God for this.” (*Med.113.1*)

Our Consecration in light of the 4th vow

Clearly our vows can only be understood based on our total consecration to God and not for ethical or merely functional reasons. Today, the theology of the religious life speaks to us about one vow in three (in the Trinitarian sense) since, in fact, the radical vow is that of our total consecration to God. If there is one

thing that is striking in the document *Vita Consecrata* it is its Trinitarian foundation which corresponds to what Lasallian theology has always taught us about consecration. But, as we have seen from the beginning of the Institute, the best way of procuring God's glory for the Founder was by means of association for the service of the poor.

For Saint Augustine, a religious was a person *consecrated in God's name and devoted to Him*. Consecration involves the idea of totally giving oneself to God. But, if through our consecration we give ourselves to God, it is in order to be sent again in his name to the world. Hence, this radical or **total consecration** implies being **missioned** in the world in God's name. According to the Rule, the origin of our mission was the fruit of the Founder's spirituality as “he became aware, by God's grace and in faith, of the human and spiritual distress of the children of the artisans and the poor who were abandoned.” (*cf. R. 1 and 11*).

Our chastity in light of the 4th vow

Fundamentally, chastity is not a denial of human love but rather an affirmation of love. This only happens when a person feels possessed and transformed from within by the Kingdom, that is to say, by love for Jesus Christ. This is an integral love which embodies the thinking, options and preferences of Jesus. Therefore the Rule speaks to us about a kind of chasti-

ty which permits the Brothers “to follow Jesus Christ and to express the total gift of themselves to him personally... Consecrated chastity is a mystery of death and resurrection, of sacrifice and of fruitfulness, it witnesses to the value of a life in which love places itself at the service of all... They live this call progressively, developing humanly by reason of their tender regard for everyone, especially the poor.” (*R. 28*)

Inspired by God, chastity is a special love for the person of Jesus Christ in the Brother's heart. It is not a vow to be lacking in affection but rather to be radical in love. It comes from the very experience of human love which, in its deepest dimension, is inclusive and radical. Our challenge is to experience in a similar way a love that is centered on the person of Jesus. “He loved me and gave himself up for me” (*Gal 2: 19 - 20*) and his love establishes and sustains my existence forever as well as my ability to continue his commitment in favor above all of those who are loved the least and who need my love all the more. Our heart should love as his did. Our affective and personal relationship with the Lord should bring us to love those he loved the most: the poor and marginalized.

Understood in this way, celibacy is not an escape from the world in the pursuit of personal perfection. Nor can it be simply reduced either to a counter-cultural value in the midst of a sexual, consumeristic

and hedonistic world or to a financial resource which facilitates the mobility of the missionaries. “In the perspective of the Kingdom, as lived personally by Jesus, celibacy was for Him and should be for those called to follow Him on this same journey, a presence which is inclusive and which strains forward as a transforming action (*Ph 3: 13 - 14*), an existence lived in solidarity with those who most need that transformation in their lives, in society and in the world in which we live. That dynamic of solidarity and transformation is nothing other than the expression of a powerful and fecund love towards one's neighbor... Jesus was very clear in the eschatological sermon in Matthew that our love for God identifies this God with the little ones who are abandoned. There is no more exact code which clarifies consecrated celibacy in its global and radical Christological perspective than that of a coherent solidarity with those who have been abandoned.” (*Marcelo Azevedo*).

Universal love for all people is simply a conceptual abstract if it does not become concrete love for particular individuals. Péguy talks about the contradiction of those who think they love everyone because they love no one. Concrete love develops in concentric circles. Chastity is a widening of the spaces of charity. It is a fine-tuning and a strengthening of love. It is love in the concrete, not in the abstract. The first circle, certainly, is our community but should

not the second one be children and the young who are poor for whom we have associated ourselves?

Chastity allows us to integrate gratuitous love with effective love. As Archbishop Romero said: “The world of the poor teaches us how Christian love should be... it should be truly gratuitous, but it should also be effectively practical. Love that comes from chastity is a reflection of Trinitarian love which is both *gratuitous* and *effective* at the same time. Chastity... is a reflection of the *infinite love* which links the three Divine Persons in the mysterious depths of Trinitarian life; it is a love witnessed by the incarnate Word to the point of giving His life; it is a love that has been “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (*Rm 5: 5*), which evokes a response of total love for God and the brethren.” (*VC 21*)

Our poverty in light of the 4th vow

Salvation has been defined as the mystery of poverty and we know that God's weakness is the most marvelous manifestation of his omnipotence. Children and the young, whom we educate in association, are the sacrament of this reality. They discover in us the power of God in our weakness and they allow us to live our poverty more authentically. Our vow of poverty should really be called a vow of richness because what it defines is the discovery and the cultivation of the abundant richness of God and of his

Kingdom in the small things of a life, lived in sharing, joy, humility and in openness to the poor. To be poor means recognizing our own limitations to find salvation in ourselves or to give it to others. The Founder repeatedly tells us that our service to the poor should lead us to live in a posture of poverty. Poverty of spirit and personal poverty, having a heart that is poor, is what sometimes makes us feel the void in men around us, that existential solitude that makes us search for and find in God our only authentic support during life's tough times. Poverty of spirit and personal poverty is what sustains and nurtures interior freedom within us. The principal fruit of this is peace because it leads us to accept peacefully the certainty of our own limitations.

Poverty is the ontological rule common to all humankind. To be a creature means primarily to be without. It means to receive continually one's essence and existence from God. Having received everything from God, belonging to God and being a gift from God, everything should turn then into a gift for others. A poor person is not only one who receives but also one who gives without limits. It is in this sense that our Rule states: "By their poverty lived according to the gospel, the Brothers become poor in order to follow Christ who was poor and in order to serve better all persons as their brothers and sisters, especially those most in need. They are convinced that if they were to fill their hearts with the

goods of this earth, they would close themselves off from God and become as strangers to the poor.”
(*R.32*)

Poverty should lead us to see everything from God's perspective and in the context of God's divine gratuity. Jesus tells us in the Gospel: “You received without payment, give without payment” and we know that for Saint John Baptist de La Salle gratuitousness is an essential element of who we are and forms part of our 4th vow. Moreover, we should not forget that our original name was that of the Brothers of the Christian and Free Schools. Applying the words of Saint Paul to our ministry, the Founder says to us: “Thank God, who has had the goodness to employ you to procure such an important advantage for children. Be faithful and exact to do this without any payment, so that you can say with Saint Paul: The source of my consolation is to announce the Gospel free of charge, without having it cost anything to those who hear me.” (*Med.194.1*)

To follow Jesus as a poor person in a society such as ours involves actively opposing the tendency to fall prey to a consumerist spirit. It means that we use things in such a way that constantly allows us to recognize that God is the only Absolute necessary and that our neighbors, especially the poor youth whom we educate, are God's presence in history. In a world such as ours, marked by ever greater inequality, in

which 40 to 50 million people die of hunger annually, where so many people are excluded from economic benefits, where new forms of poverty are emerging, we should be ashamed to apply too hastily to ourselves the title poor. Nevertheless, our being different does not prevent us from being poor and in solidarity with the poor but rather it invites us to use that difference in their service.

Following Jesus is not something which is simply done interiorly but it occurs in the real world with the attitudes of Jesus: “The way of Jesus shows a clear tendency towards the downtrodden... Jesus helped those who had been stripped of their humanity not as a kind of hero or philanthropist but by sharing their fate and immersing himself in their suffering, being in solidarity with them so that through it he could lead them to the Kingdom of God. The way of Jesus does not follow an upward movement nor does it aim at the anticipation of a better future. On the contrary, it is a downward movement that culminates in the grief-stricken part of humanity... It is creative love for those who are considered non-human, the marginalized, the crushed, the unappreciated, and the hated.” (*Moltmann*)

This is how the Founder understood fidelity to the Gospel. Speaking about poverty, the Rule tells us about “the spiritual journey of John Baptist de La Salle, our Father” (*R. 32*) and we know that his jour-

ney was incarnational. “From one commitment to another, the Lord led De La Salle and his disciples to take on fully the mission of the Son of Man, participating in his incarnation among the poor, in his obedience and abandonment to the Father, to serve poor and abandoned youth” (*M. Sauvage*). All of this is about identifying with the poor, freeing them from their dehumanizing situation, and proclaiming to them the saving message of Jesus. But all of this is accomplished from within.

By the vow of poverty, the Brothers follow Christ, passionately searching for the God of the Kingdom and the Kingdom of God as their only riches. It is to leave everything to follow Jesus where he is: with the poor, the marginalized, and the hungry (*Mt 25*). The vow of poverty is a sign of the Kingdom, having to do with the messianism of the poor and an ardent desire for their liberation. Of such was the pragmatic discourse of Jesus when he was in Nazareth (*Lk 4: 18-20*). Our vow of poverty has to do with the coming of the Kingdom. Service of the poor does not come from a generosity which is added to the object of the vow of poverty but is rather an integral part of the vow itself.

To follow Jesus is to continue his life and his cause. It is “to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (*Ph 2: 5*). His poverty translated into commitment. If, like Jesus, we want to live an incarnat-

ed poverty it is necessary to take on a commitment to justice for the great number of economically poor and for those who have been deprived of their dignity as men and women. In this sense our fourth vow of association for the educational service of the poor is nothing more than a concrete way of living our vow of poverty.

Our obedience in light of the 4th vow

We know very well the importance that the Founder gave to obedience as a community virtue and as a means for ensuring that schools serve the poor. In fact, it was one of our first vows. It had to do with being available for this service which was seen as the best way to procure God's glory and to be consecrated to God. What is most important about Lasallian obedience is the community's awareness of being called by God to do God's work by contributing to the salvation of young people who are poor and abandoned. This is its missionary character. Without financial, political, ecclesiastical support, it finds its strength in abandonment to God "who calls, consecrates, sends, and saves" (*R.21*). As they formed a community of Brothers to proclaim the Gospel to the poor, De La Salle and his disciples participated in a movement which is characteristic of every emergence of religious life in the Church. This movement turns naturally into a common will of radical obedience to the Gospel within a

particular situation, responding to God's call, discerned as a community, in the cries of the poor, the young, the world, and the Church. "It is through world events, through young people, the community of the Brothers and the Superiors, through the Body of the Institute and the Church, that the Spirit manifests His purposes." (*R. 36*)

Obedience should be for us a path of freedom in order to serve others better. It is within the paradox that obedience to God makes us free that the profound mystery of our vow of obedience is revealed. We know that Christianity transformed freedom into service and therefore the question that should concern us is how to live Christian freedom within a world that is unsupportive and selfish. It is a world in which there are so many things which prevent fraternal service and the awareness of others' needs, such as money, power, prestige, sex, self-preoccupation, and the pursuit of one's own comfort. So Christian freedom is the rejection of all this in order to live the liberating freedom of Jesus who is concerned for the poor and who gave himself unconditionally for those who suffer, for the little ones and for those in the lowest places.

For Jesus, obedience to the will of his Father is his nourishment and it consists in doing the work of the one who sent him. In this work Jesus finds the meaning of his life. He also finds the criteria to discern his

decisions and the strength to live and to serve (*Jn 5: 19; 4: 34; 7: 16-18; 12: 49; 14: 10*). The Father's plan is a plan of integral freedom for all. It is a plan of total love for humankind which begins with the marginalized and the helpless and extends to all humanity. God offers life in abundance to all his children and he makes them all brothers and sisters. To obey God is for Jesus to love God by loving all people even to the point of giving his life for them. Our 4th vow also seeks the integral freedom of all young people, starting from the poor and abandoned, to the extent of even being prepared to give our lives for them: “Your zeal must go so far in this that in order to achieve it, you are ready to give your very life, so dear to you are the children entrusted to you.” (*Med.198.2*)

Our vow of stability in light of the 4th vow

The vow of stability almost disappeared during the General Chapter of 1966 - 1967. Nevertheless, this vow dates from the origins of the Institute and one of the most moving experiences in our history is directly related to it. In order to ensure the establishment of schools for the poor, the Founder, along with Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyart, committed themselves irrevocably to remain united, “without power to abandon the task, even should we remain the only three members of the said Society, and should be obliged to beg for alms and live on bread alone.” We

cannot forget this significant moment in our history which should inspire us with the necessary energy to continue united, with God's grace, to ensure schools for the service of the poor. The relationship with our 4th vow is, then, obvious and it should motivate us with renewed creativity to carry out, together and by association, projects which respond to the needs of young people. Today, faced with the significant number of dispensations that we have always experienced, I wonder if we cannot give our younger Brothers greater possibilities of fidelity if we were to offer them apostolic initiatives that are closer to the ideal of our origins? As I have stated elsewhere, our younger Brothers have the right to be creative in their responses to the needs of the young who are poor or who are at risk.

Brother José Pablo reminded us that the vow of stability was related to specific persons and not to abstract principles or distant ideals. We commit ourselves to “living beings whom we love with a heart of flesh and whom we will not abandon, just as a father will not abandon his own. Profession roots the one making it in a network of affective relationships and services.” (*Cir 406, p.133*).

Consequently, in association for the educational service of the poor, persons are the most important element - God, associates, young people beginning with the poor. Our options should refer to persons,

not to projects, structures, or even values. It is for persons that it is worth the pain of losing one's life in the sense of the Gospel. I believe that it is important not to lose sight of the mystical sense of our association for the educational service of the poor, which supports our stability and our fidelity. During a San Egidio community meeting that I attended, members from all parts of the world shared with a large group of religious what it meant for them to belong to this community. They expressed themselves enthusiastically and with conviction. One Sister, while asking a question, commented that it seemed to her that the San Egidio movement was going through a mystical moment which occurs before the setting up of formal structures. This moment was characterized by dynamism, creativity, enthusiasm and openness to the future. With a touch of sadness the Sister added that perhaps religious congregations have already passed that moment and that now these values are no longer so clear for them.

However, paradoxically, this is the deepest meaning of our stability. Stability does not mean remaining immobilized in the past but rather being faithful to persons and, in particular, to the young who are poor and for whom we came into existence. It is for them that we begin anew, recover strength, look ahead, and promote new projects. We came into being for young people and they should be the ones to show us the path to follow. If we are their teachers, we

should not forget that it is also appropriate for us to be their disciples and to have our hearts open to their teaching.

The promotion of justice and our 4th vow

“I have grown up chasing the illusion of making dreams come true. I believe now that I have achieved this. My dreams have become my life and my work. Years of sacrifice have allowed me to live in close proximity to problems - to those problems which have always been of interest to me and which have disturbed me. Those problems are today my problems also in the sense that finding solutions for them is my daily challenge. And so the dream that good health may reach the most disadvantaged areas of the population is my work today. I will bring my children up in the midst of these problems hoping that they will see them and become aware of the great horizons that surround them and that, as I have done, they will grow up pursuing dreams that are apparently unreachable.” (*Carlo Urbani, June 23, 2000*)

I wanted to begin this reflection with the words of Carlo Urbani, an extraordinary medical doctor, who lived and died while committed to bringing health and dignity to persons who were deprived of these fundamental rights. This Italian doctor alerted the world for the first time to the existence of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in Hanoi and

he died as a result of this disease on March 29.

On Good Friday his wife Giuliana and her son, aged 16, carried the cross for two of the stations. On this occasion his wife recalled Carlo's last words: "We cannot be selfish. I should think about others and you know that. His son Felipe said: When I am older I want to be a doctor like my dad, who was not a hero but a man who did his job. I would like to follow in his footsteps to help people who need it. He taught me not to be indifferent to the suffering of others. The cross that my mother and I carried this evening is the symbol of all those people in the world who suffer because of disease, hunger, poverty, war." (*L'Osservatore Romano*, April 20, 2003).

To speak about justice should lead us to concrete experiences and not to stay in the realm of words and good intentions. We, too, are called to make dreams come true and to live in close proximity to the problems of people through our ministry of Christian education for the building up of the Kingdom, the dream of Jesus. It is a Kingdom in which all can live as sons and daughters of God and as brothers and sisters.

Such was also the Lasallian dream: to build a world in which education would be the birthright of everyone and where children and the young who are poor might find ways of participation and growth. The following text of the Founder has always touched me be-

cause it allows us to see what responsibility God has placed in our hands: “You should look upon the children you are charged to teach as poor, abandoned orphans... This is the reason God places them as if under your guardianship. He looks on them with compassion and takes care of them as being their protector, their support and their father, and it is to you that he entrusts this care. This God of goodness places them in your hands.” (*Med.37.3*)

Our 4th vow of association for the educational service of the poor is grounded in this perspective. If God our Father places the care of children and the young in our hands, this involves, as an anticipation of future life, building a world where God's love for all is made clear by the fraternal relationships which we establish. In the context of the globalized world in which we live today, this involves excluding no one and being concerned principally about those who are excluded.

An unknown land

In 1980, Brother José Pablo questioned whether, for us Brothers, the idea of the promotion of justice was not an “unknown land where only a few explorers have gone” (*Cir 412, p.63*). Nevertheless, there is a close connection between the educational service of the poor and the promotion of justice. “In fact, what does it mean to serve the poor if not to begin by es-

establishing a minimum of justice in their regard through facilitating their access to education? In this way they are helped to develop their skills through the use of a pedagogy adapted to their culture so as to make the Gospel available to them in their own language. Service of the poor and the promotion of justice, far from being incongruous, depend on one another and complete one another” (*ibid.*, p.64).

Yet in 1966-1967 the Declaration had already called us to commit ourselves in very concrete ways by indicating the close relationship between our educational service of the poor, the object of our 4th vow, and the promotion of justice. For example: “The service of the poor requires that the Brother, in conformity with his mission, stand in opposition to all forms of poverty as frustration and to have, above all, a special concern for the full human development of persons who are poor, sensitizing them to improve the milieu in which they live” (*Dec.30.3*). Therefore, Brother José Pablo states: “The obligation to work toward establishing a more just social order, not only is in keeping with service to the poor, which is an essential element of our consecrated life, but it proceeds from it” (*Cir 412*, p.64).

With regard to those who do not have the good fortune of working directly with the poor, the Declaration adds: “Whatever the commitment, however, the Brothers will want always to be in solidarity with the

poor and with the activity of the Institute that favors the poor. In every situation, they will do all they can to awaken social consciousness by teaching social doctrine, leading the students to participate effectively in the struggle for justice and peace to which the Church calls them in the world today.” (*Dec. 32.1*)

Our Rule also points very clearly to the relationship between the promotion of justice and our 4th vow in the pertinent section where it tells us: “The Brothers have always in view the promotion of justice in the light of the gospel and either the direct or indirect service of the poor as the preferred aspect of their ministry of education” (*R. 40*). For some, this means the victims of injustice, by means of education which will enable them to change their situation. For others, this involves the teaching of duties that derive from responsibility, social justice, and universal charity. In particular, they are invited to educate our students in the social doctrine of the Church, to prepare them so that they will be able to create relationships that are more just between nations, and to encourage them to commit themselves effectively in activities that favor justice and peace (*cf. R. 40c*).

For those Brothers sent primarily to the poor, the Rule invites us to keep our eyes open to the inequalities created by society and to be creative in our response to new needs (*cf. R. 41*). This same invitation ought to lead us “to become increasingly conscious

of the reasons for the poverty that surrounds them and so become earnestly involved in the promotion of justice and human dignity through the educational service they provide.” (R. 14)

The following information, provided by Watch Report 2002, speaks for itself:

- World population: 6 billion persons.
- 3 billion persons have an income of less than two dollars per day.
- 1 billion, 200 million persons have an income of less than one dollar per day.
- There are 225 persons with incomes of 1.015 billion dollars each.
- The 3 wealthiest persons have assets which exceed the GDP of 48 of the least developed countries.
- The 15 wealthiest persons have assets which exceed the total GDP of sub-Saharan Africa.
- The assets of the 32 wealthiest persons exceed the GDP of all of South Asia.
- The assets of the 84 wealthiest persons exceed the GDP of China, the most populous country, with 1 billion, 200 million inhabitants.

Therefore, just providing welfare is not enough. It is important to get to the root causes of poverty and search for solutions of a structural nature. At the same time, we need to be aware that we cannot do

everything and that we ought to respond, first and foremost, by means of Christian education. But it is important to be familiar with reality. The Rule tells us that the Founder *was deeply moved and concerned*. If we are not so moved, we run the risk, pointed out by Brother José Pablo, that: “Some even seem to deny the very existence of such a world, believing it is merely an extreme fringe of society.” (*Cir. 412, p. 26*)

Education for justice

Education for justice should not be merely a specific subject area but a common thread that runs through the entire curriculum. This common thread should be reinforced by daily practice within the school. It is important to create a kind of micro-climate which offers an alternative, miniature model that does not support the anti-values which society often presents to us: market worship, corruption, fighting, competition, and consumerism. It is important that within the school there exists an experience of justice in which values, such as solidarity, communion, and participation are top priorities. Otherwise the school runs the risk of duplicating the system and preparing students for a society of privileges, training them in the competitive struggle where there is no solidarity. It is precisely this situation which we have to try to avoid if we want to be faithful to our 4th vow.

Father Kolvenbach, the Father General of the Jesuits, in a meeting with former students in Bolivia in 2001, spoke about the tremendous pressure which is placed on schools in the global jungle in which we operate where only the most prepared survive. He added: “Naturally we have to prepare our students so that they can compete in the market and ensure that they obtain one of the relatively few jobs that are available. But if that is the only criteria that we have to evaluate our institutions, we can consider them as having failed. If all they achieve is simply to turn men and women into being “for themselves and their friends,” and not “for others,” especially for the poor and excluded, our education will not have achieved its objective and we will not have educated for justice.”

Conclusion

As I conclude my reflection I would like to share the thoughts of Archbishop Romero whose commitment to the poor was sealed with his own blood during the Offertory of the Mass.

“From time to time it helps to go back and look at long-range effects.

The Kingdom does not exist only through our efforts.

It exists beyond our vision.

Our efforts are only a small fraction of the mag-

nificent venture of God's work.

Nothing of what we do is complete,
which is another way of saying that the
Kingdom of God always extends beyond us...

This is how it works:

We plant the seeds that will grow one day.
We water the seeds already planted
knowing that they contain a future promise.

We put down foundations that will need more
development.

We provide the ferment that produces effects
over and beyond our abilities.

We cannot do everything and to realize this pro-
vides a sense of freedom.

This enables us to do something and to do it
well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a
step along the road.

A time for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

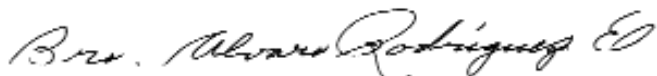
It may be that we never see the final results,
but there is a difference
between the master of works and the worker.

We are workers,
not masters of works,
ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future that is not ours.”

Brothers, I am convinced that our vow of association for the educational service of the poor is our particular way of building the Kingdom and of accomplishing the work that God has entrusted to us, based on our poverty, clearly aware of our limitations, like workers and prophets of a better world. According to Jon Sobrino, Christians today sense that the very future of faith depends on our closeness to, or our separation from, the poor. My question is: Might not the future of our Institute depend on that as well?

Fraternally in De La Salle,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Bro. Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, decorative flourish at the end.

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría
Superior General

