



PASTORAL LETTER

# OUR COMMUNITY LIFE

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SOME REFLECTIONS

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### Some Reflections

Since you are privileged to be called by God to live a community life, there is nothing you should pray for with greater insistence than union of heart and mind with your Brothers. Only by means of such harmony will you be able to maintain that peace which constitutes the whole happiness of your life. Ask therefore the Lord of all hearts to make yours one with those of your Brothers, in that of Jesus.

St. John Baptist de La Salle  
*Meditation No. 39*  
Eve of the Ascension

1 January 1992  
Feast of Mary, Mother of God

*World Day of Peace*

Dear Brothers,

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14).

Once again, Brothers, on this feast of Mary, Mother of God, and the World Day of Peace, following what I consider to be an inspired and beautiful tradition in our Institute, I make my own Paul's greetings to the Christians of Corinth, praying that God, through his grace, love, and fellowship, help you to grow in "union of heart and mind with your Brothers." May he grant you throughout the new year the peace for which you seek, together with the selfless love which you require in order to be instruments of peace for those associated with you and for those confided to your care.

I thank you, Brothers, for your Christmas greetings, as well as for your remembrances of my birthday. I wish it were feasible for me to answer each of you personally.

## 1991: A Complex Year

My pastoral letter of 1991 was written during the “countdown” to the war we were praying earnestly would be averted. Unfortunately, that war did become a reality, “revealing how real is the danger that human reason can allow itself to be dominated by destructive self-interest or inveterate hatred” (John Paul II).

Perhaps we shall never know the number of victims or the extent of the damage and destruction inflicted during the Gulf War. Perhaps we prefer not to know. Does fear of knowing and being confronted by the truth explain the rapidity with which that tragic war seems to have been forgotten? Have the moral issues associated with it been given the consideration they merit?

The “news” throughout 1991 was not, however, all bad. On the contrary. We can rejoice at the end of the cold war, the end of some dictatorships, the positive movement in disarmament, the progress in the formation of the European Community, hopeful developments in the Middle East and in South Africa, the cessation of hostilities in Eritrea, the release of many hostages. . . . But these achievements are small consolation to the thousands who are still suffering from various forms of injustice or from the political and ethnic conflicts raging in many parts of the world; or to those unable to find adequate food or shelter; or to those anguishing from chronic unemployment or from the loss of their jobs during the current recession.

But if the past year is difficult to assess, so also is the last quarter century. In recalling the twenty-five year history of the celebration of the World Day of Peace, John Paul II offers this reflection in his *Message* for this new year:

“It is natural, a quarter of a century later, to look back at this period as a whole, in order to determine if the cause of peace in the world has actually made progress or not, and if the tragic events of recent months — some of which are regrettably still going on — have marked a substantial setback.” (No. 1)

Brothers, it is in this tumultuous world — the world that actually exists — that we live our consecrated life in community and in the exercise of our mission. As I mentioned last year, no year seems to pass that our life and mission are not affected in one way or another by political instability, violence, and war. In recent months, for example, we have remembered and prayed for the members of our Lasallian Family in such areas as Haiti, Zaire, Djibouti, and Sri Lanka. During the month of May we experienced both grief and pride at the martyrdom of Brother Jaime Gutierrez of the District of Medellin. And we have anguished at the dangerous situation in which our Brothers find themselves in Peru.

Brothers, I cannot let this occasion pass without recalling the recent deaths of Brother Noé Zevallos, Visitor of Peru, and of Brother Celestin Rasoloarison, Visitor of Antananarivo, Madagascar. Brother Noé died of cancer, and Brother Celestin from injuries sustained in an automobile accident.

We grieve the loss of two highly respected and well-loved Brothers. May they rest in peace. The members of the Lasallian Family in each of these two districts have lost not only a friend and brother, but their leader. As their brothers, we offer them solidarity, sympathy, and prayers.

### **1991: A Year of Vitality in the Institute**

But having called to mind some of the hardships and disappointments experienced in 1991, I want to insist that the year was a positive one in the life of the Institute. There have been many encouraging developments: the relaunching of the Institute in Czechoslovakia and Rumania, with the help of Polish, Spanish, and missionary Slovak Brothers; the decision of our Brazilian Brothers to begin a community on 9 January 1992 in Mozambique and that of our Polish Brothers to begin a community in the Ukraine next July; the first professions and expansion of our novitiate in Nairobi; the opening of our new international scholasticate in Abidjan; the opening of an aspirancy in Cuba; the bold and creative decision of our French Brothers to become one district; the initial work of the General Chapter Preparatory Commission. . . .

To this incomplete list I want to add an event that was common to every sector of the Institute during 1991: the celebration of the Heroic Vow of St. John Baptist de La Salle, Nicolas Vuyart, and Gabriel Drolin. Brothers everywhere have found inspiration in that truly remarkable story. We seem to find no difficulty in identifying with the crisis and

consequent "great perplexity" De La Salle and his first followers experienced. In the pride we have felt in their "irrevocable commitment" and in the decisive actions which preceded and followed it, we have found inspiration and strength to respond with vision and resolution to the challenges we face today.

One of the areas of our life that calls for clarification of vision and renewed commitment is that of our community life. In the title of this pastoral letter, I have included the words "some reflections" to communicate clearly that this document is not intended to be a comprehensive study of community life. Its objective is modest: it is to share some thoughts on some aspects of our community life in order to encourage your own personal and communal reflection.

### **I. BELIEVERS UNITED IN BUILDING PEACE**

To situate these reflections on our community life in the broad context of our life and mission as believers, as Christians, as religious, and as Brothers of the Christian Schools, I offer these introductory comments inspired by the Holy Father's Message for the 25th World Day of Peace, entitled *Believers United in Building Peace*.

The Pope insists that all believers, that is to say men and women committed to an "ethical and religious vision," are called "as individuals and as a body to be messengers and artisans of peace." This commitment to peace "is a duty incumbent

upon all who profess faith in God and even more so upon Christians" (No. 1).

"Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Catholic Church, we must respond to the great challenges of the contemporary world by joining forces with all those who share with us certain basic values, beginning with religious and moral ones. And among these challenges still to be faced is that of peace. To build peace together with other believers is already to live in the spirit of the Gospel Beatitude: Blessed are the peacemakers." (No. 9)

This exhortation recalls a fundamental message in *Christifideles Laici* (No. 32): communion generates communion. All Christians are called to communion, but a communion which is essentially directed to mission: the mission of generating communion.

As Vicar and as Superior General, I have had the great privilege of meeting Brothers, lay associates, and young people in nearly every country in which we have a Lasallian presence. The diversity of race, culture, language, religion, and political and economic situations is fascinating and inspiring. In meetings with teachers, parents, and young people, I frequently mention that one very important aspect of our Lasallian mission, and one that is common to every Lasallian activity wherever it is located, is that of promoting brotherhood and sisterhood.

We Brothers have to provide the leadership. What John Paul II said about missionaries in *Redemptoris Missio* is applicable to each of us:

"The missionary is the 'universal brother'. . . . As such, he overcomes barriers and divisions of race, caste, or ideology. He is a sign of God's love in the world — a love without exclusion or partiality." (No. 89)

Pedro Arrupe, S.J., once said that the great revolution of love proclaimed by Christ is that of breaking down the fences of a restricted brotherhood and calling all to universal brotherhood and sisterhood. Paul VI lamented that the human heart often appears small and egoistic, having place only for oneself and for a few others of one's own family and of one's own caste. What is needed, he said, is a heart with universal dimensions.

It is in this context, Brothers, that I want to place that communion which should characterize us as Lasallians. I am thinking first of all of that international Lasallian communion of Brothers, lay associates, clerical and religious associates, parents, former students, benefactors, and young people. Our vocation is to generate communion. It is to work for a world where all can live in peace and justice as sons and daughters of God and as brothers and sisters. The Lasallian Family is a tremendous force for good in the world and in the Church. But what a tremendous challenge we have to live our mission authentically!

Brothers, I must confess that the current plethora of ethnic and tribal conflicts, together with a resurgence of racism, in nearly every corner of the globe has tempted me to set aside this vision as hopelessly idealistic. But, no. As idealistic as it may sound, that vision is the goal God wants us to

pursue. The disappointments of the past year, rather than discourage us, should challenge us to renew our commitment to working for universal brotherhood and sisterhood.

In the remaining pages of this letter, we shall center our attention on communion in a more restricted sense: that of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. We shall consider our call from God to live in "union of mind and heart" with one another, that is to say, to live in a spirit of interdependence and solidarity at every level: institute, district, and community. In short, we shall examine our vocation to COMMUNITY LIFE — and our call to generate communion.

## II. THE NATURE OF OUR LIFE TOGETHER

A proper understanding of our life together on the level of local community presupposes a proper understanding of our life together as members of the Institute, that is to say, as Brothers of the Christian Schools. As obvious as it may seem to some of you, it is necessary to say clearly that the Institute is not a federation of relatively autonomous districts (or sub-districts or delegations) and communities. In other words, we are not members first of all of our districts and communities: we are members first of all of the Institute, which in turn is divided into districts and communities.

For this reason I believe the decision to begin the chapter of the *Rule* on **Community Life** with the following article was an inspired decision:

"John Baptist de La Salle was led to found a community of men who were enlightened by God to have a share in his plan of salvation. They associated together to respond to the needs of young people who were poor and far from salvation. Even today, each of the Brothers' communities finds in this historical event a fundamental source of inspiration."  
(*Rule*, 47)

### Our Story

This article reminds us that we can find in the story of the foundation of the Institute a fundamental source of direction and inspiration. Every society, every community needs to celebrate regularly in one way or another the story of its origin. The Jews celebrate throughout the year the great events of God's action in their history. We Christians celebrate through the liturgy and all the sacraments the passage of Jesus from death to life. In similar fashion we Brothers of the Christian Schools must tell and re-tell ourselves the story of our foundation, and find there a source of inspiration and commitment.

The principal "character" of our story is not, as we might expect, John Baptist de La Salle. The principal character is God himself. As our Founder reminded the Brothers in the meditation he prepared for the first day of their annual retreats, it is God who established this Institute, God in his Providence, that is to say, in his loving concern for the young, particularly the young who are poor. God

wants these young people to come to knowledge of the truth and be saved. But for this purpose they need teachers, since God operates ordinarily through human ministers. To provide such ministers, God kindles a light in the hearts of certain persons, calling them to respond to the need young people have for teachers and guides. The Founder told his Brothers that they were such persons. God had kindled a light in their hearts, calling them to respond to the needs of the young for human and Christian education.

St. De La Salle and the early Brothers were convinced that it was God who had taken the initiative in their regard. God in his Providence had destined and called them. To express this call and their response to it, the Brothers consecrated themselves entirely to the Trinity, to procure the glory of God as far as they would be able and as far as God would require of them.

During the lifetime of the Founder, the Brothers vowed to associate themselves for the purpose of conducting schools for the education of children, particularly poor children. One could say that that vow was a vow of identity: it expressed and nourished their understanding of the Society and its purpose. Clearly this society was not just an ordinary organization of school teachers. It was a society of men who committed their lives totally and unreservedly to God in response to what they perceived as a call to dedicate themselves to the human and Christian education of the children of the artisans and the poor. This new society was very demanding of its members. They vowed obedi-

ence, promising to go wherever they would be sent and to do whatever they would be assigned. They made a vow of stability, by which they committed themselves to fidelity to God and to persevere, no matter what, in their freely accepted manner of living.

Although the Brothers did not during the lifetime of the Founder profess a vow of poverty or of celibate chastity, these elements of traditional religious life were integral characteristics of the new society from the beginning. As consecrated members they lived in communities of faith and intense prayer, in obedience to a local superior who governed according to regulations and eventually according to a Rule, which expressed the nature and purpose of the Society as well as the requirements of the members.

The purpose of this new society was the Christian education of children, especially poor children. It was for this purpose that the Brothers maintained, together and by association, gratuitous schools. Their vocation was essentially apostolic. The Brothers were totally consecrated to God as educators and apostles of youth.

## **“Intentional Communities” and “Associations”**

The story of our foundation, Brothers, is as fascinating as it is well documented. Its inner meaning is quite clear. The formula of consecration used by the early Brothers leaves no doubt that the Founder and early Brothers considered their new society to be what sociologists today would call an “intentional community:” that is to say, the type of group which makes the most extensive demands on its individual members. In an intentional community, members live, work, and recreate together. They voluntarily surrender control over choices which are normally considered private, for the sake of establishing a whole new way of life. The group’s transcendent mission or goal takes precedence over the needs of the individual members (*Creating a Future for Religious Life*, Patricia Wittberg, pp. 3-4).

The uncompromising language in which the ideals of the Institute are expressed in the writings of the Founder attest beyond all doubt that the Brothers committed themselves to follow Jesus Christ unreservedly and to make the living of the Gospel the primary objective of their life.

While the Founder and early Brothers spoke of “associating themselves” and of keeping schools “together and by association,” it is extremely important to observe that the meaning they intended to express by the word “association” was fundamentally different from the meaning sociology gives to that term today. De La Salle and the early Brothers used the word “association” to communi-

cate to themselves and to others that they were living what sociology calls today intentional or total community. Sociology, on the other hand, uses the word “association” to describe groups which make comparatively few demands on their members. Members of associations invest a certain amount of their resources in the attainment of some common goal or objective, but they retain their personal autonomy (Wittberg).

## **Our Self-Understanding Today**

The original understanding of the nature and purpose of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is, therefore, clear. But how do we understand ourselves today? Do we understand the Institute today to be an “intentional community,” a community which makes extensive demands on its members; a community of persons who live, work, and recreate together; a community of persons who voluntarily surrender control over choices which are normally considered private, for the sake of establishing a whole new way of life; a community committed to a mission which takes precedence over the personal preferences of the individual members?

Or do we understand ourselves to be an “association” in the sociological sense of that word? That is to say, a group of persons who invest a certain amount of their resources in the pursuit of some common goal but who retain their personal autonomy.

On the level of theory, the question is easy to answer. Even a cursory reading of the new *Rule* re-



veals that the Institute understands itself officially as an "intentional community." Every article of the *Rule* in one way or another develops the meaning expressed in Article 22:

"In response to the call of the Holy Spirit, each Brother, freely, and without any thought of turning back, bases his whole existence on the gospel in order to follow Jesus Christ. Accordingly he consecrates himself entirely to the Holy Trinity to procure the glory of God in the ministry of Christian education." (*Rule*, 22)

As if to reinforce this position, the Institute has not only reaffirmed its use of the traditional formula of consecration; it has now incorporated this formula in the *Rule* as Article 25. It is according to this formula that new members profess their annual, then perpetual, commitment and that professed members renew their consecration. Employing essentially the same words as the Founder and early Brothers, we consecrate ourselves entirely to God to procure his glory in the ministry of Christian education. We vow celibate chastity, poverty, obedience, association for the service of the poor through education, and stability. We dedicate ourselves to work "together and by association" in the ministry of Christian education. We express our willingness to go wherever we are sent and to do whatever we are assigned.

We, therefore, "voluntarily surrender control over choices which are normally considered private, for the sake of establishing a whole new way of life." But it is important to state clearly and unambiguously that we do not, by this commitment,

abdicate moral responsibility for our lives. We do not subordinate our autonomy without clear limits. Superiors in the Institute have only that authority which the *Rule* accords them. And the *Rule* must be and is in fact in conformity with Church law. We enter into a contractual agreement with the Institute. There are reciprocal rights and obligations, all of which are codified in laws which are designed to protect the rights of the members and the rights of the Institute.

Before assignments are made, for example, there must be a process of discernment which includes consultation and dialogue. There must be, in other words, a mutual search for the will of God. But the "bottom line" is availability and obedience. The superior has the final word: he makes the final decision — which is not at all the same as saying that he simply "rubber-stamps" or confirms what the member decides to do. By our availability and by our obedience, we manifest that for us the mission of the Institute takes precedence over our personal needs and desires.

Brothers, it is our vocation to follow Christ "together and by association." We are called to live in "interdependence," which is neither independence nor dependence. Interdependence is an invitation to live, not as children on the one hand or as individualists on the other, but as mature men willing to love, trust, take risks, share, make demanding commitments, and be faithful to them.

"From the beginning of the Institute, the Brothers have fulfilled their mission 'together and by association.' Each Brother exercises his apostolate as a member of a community

by whom he knows that he is accepted, supported, and entrusted with his mission. The Brothers are in solidarity with their community, with their district, and with the Institute.” (*Rule*, 16)

It is interesting to observe how often the *Rule* uses the word “solidarity.” In my pastoral letter of 1989, I reflected on Pope John Paul II’s definition of this word. He says that **solidarity** is a “**firm and persevering determination** to commit oneself to the **common good**, that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are **all** really responsible for all (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38). Solidarity, therefore, is an indispensable requirement for living authentically our religious consecration.

## Our Lived Experience

But all of this is, of course, theory. We have to ask ourselves to what extent the reality of our daily life in the Institute corresponds to what is described and legislated in the *Rule*.

In a recently published sociological study of religious life, Sister Patricia Wittberg, S.C., discusses the conscious or unconscious evolution of many religious institutes — particularly but not exclusively institutes in the United States — from “communitarian” to “associational” models of religious life. Religious in “associational” institutes, whether or not they live together physically under the same roof, exercise almost total autonomy and independence with regard to their choice of work and their life style.

Religious institutes which intend to remain “intentional communities” — and that is certainly our position — must develop what sociology calls “commitment mechanisms.” These “commitment mechanisms” must be both effective and psychologically healthy. Community structures are examples of “commitment mechanisms.” Such structures are indispensable. Sister Wittberg insists that:

“One of the reasons some religious communities are declining is that they have neglected some of the basic socially integrating mechanisms which are needed to keep their group together, and have concentrated instead on addressing the individual psychological needs of their members.” (Wittberg, p. 9)

Brothers, the task of purifying traditional structures and creating new and effective structures in an intentional community is one thing. Transformation, done consciously or unconsciously, of that intentional community into an association is quite another matter.

What is the situation in our Institute? In my opinion no authentic generalization is possible. Situations vary considerably. But there is no doubt that we are struggling with uneven results to build a new model of community life, an intentional community life of Brothers who are striving to BE the men described in the *Rule*: men totally consecrated to God to work together for the human and Christian education of youth, poor youth particularly; men committed to live together in interdependence and solidarity.

I said that "we are struggling with uneven results." There are sectors of the Institute where community goals are authentic and where sound structures are in place, structures that are respected and utilized faithfully, creatively, and effectively, with positive results. There are other sectors, however, where a number of Brothers have confused and conflicting understandings of the very nature and goals of their life together. When common vision and purpose are not clear, authentic community life is difficult if not impossible. Members are unable or unwilling to build a meaningful system of structures to which they commit themselves.

It seems to me that some of us are unconsciously trying to live with a certain number of the elements of an "intentional community," but with a de facto commitment to a style of life which could more accurately be described sociologically as an "association." Attempts to build a model of Institute and community life which incorporates characteristics of two fundamentally different models result in a common life which is incoherent, unsatisfying, and unhealthy for all concerned.

I thank God that the last paragraph is certainly not a description of the majority of the Brothers. But I think that we have to be clairvoyant enough to see where faulty thinking can lead. It is already evident to many Brothers that when there are strong currents of individualism in a district (or sub-district or delegation), the apostolic renewal and revitalization called for by the General Chapter become extremely difficult to effect. If a significant number of Brothers are not disposed, for example,

to accept transfers and new assignments, corporate apostolic planning involving the renewal of some present commitments, withdrawal from others, and the creation of new ventures at home and abroad is not feasible.

### **Our Shared Mission**

I have insisted that the Brothers of the Christian Schools are called by God to live a form of community life which sociologists call "intentional" or "total," as opposed to "associational." On this point there can be no compromise.

But the "associational model" is perfectly appropriate to express the variety of relationships and groupings our lay colleagues can have among themselves and with us. Our invitation to lay colleagues to share our spirituality and educational mission is not, at least ordinarily, an invitation to the kind of "total community" which is proper to the Brothers. It is rather an invitation to invest a certain amount of themselves and of their time and energy, but without prejudice to their personal autonomy and/or family obligations.

It is essential that this distinction be made. In promoting — as we should and must promote — collaboration with the laity, we must at all costs avoid a confusion of identity and roles. What we need today is the wisdom, creativity, and courage to revitalize our own life as Brothers and simultaneously to develop and foster a variety of structural forms whereby the laity can participate actively in our Lasallian educational mission.

## Living Together in Community

Having offered these thoughts on the nature of our life together as Brothers, I propose now a few reflections on some aspects of our life together in community, taking as point of departure three sections of Chapter 4 of the *Rule*. Nevertheless, as I try to organize my thoughts, I am keenly aware that the integration of the dimensions that constitute our life as Brothers is such that separating them, even for the purpose of discussion, is as artificial as it is possibly misleading.

### III. A COMMUNITY OF FAITH

Article 48 describes the Brothers' community in language which is dense, unambiguous, and demanding:

"The distinctive character of the Brothers' community is to be a community of faith where the experience of God is shared."

The importance of the first three words cannot be exaggerated: **the distinctive character**. Each of these three words merits reflection. We are about to be told what character distinguishes the Brothers' community, the character without which the community could not claim to be authentic. That distinctive and indispensable character is **to be a community of faith where the experience of God is shared**.

The Brothers' community is foremost a community of faith, or more precisely, a community of men

of faith, men who "walk with the Lord and live in fellowship with him." To live community life authentically, we have to be men who live — freely, faithfully, and enthusiastically — a relationship with the Father whose loving presence is real and is the dominant influence in our life; a relationship with Christ, who is for us the Way, the Truth, and the Life; a relationship with the Spirit, upon whom we depend for guidance and for the power we need to touch hearts.

As men of faith we are led, according to our Founder, "to look upon everything with the eyes of faith, to do everything in view of God, and to attribute all to God" (*Rule*, 5). Faith in the life of the Brother is so pervasive that I can say that everything I have said already, and everything I shall say, presupposes faith.

### Public Profession of Following Christ

The distinctive character of our communities is to be communities of men who have made the public profession of the will to live the Gospel fully, radically, and coherently the primary objective of their life (Marcello Azevedo, *Vocation for Mission*, pp. 8-9). Our communities are, therefore, or should be, communities of men who have made the following of Christ the goal of their life.

"... each Brother, freely, and without any thought of turning back, bases his whole existence on the gospel in order to follow Jesus Christ. (*Rule*, 22)

... by faith the Brothers, 'cooperators with Jesus Christ,' consecrate their whole existence to the building up of the kingdom of God through the service of education." (*Rule*, 5)

Article 48 is clear: the Brothers' community is a community of men who have made the commitment to live an "intentional" or "total" community model rather than an "associational" model. The Founder's message in meditation after meditation is unambiguous:

"Have you consecrated yourself so wholeheartedly to God as to renounce all else? (*Med.* 146, 3)

"Immediately St. Matthew left his office and all that he possessed to follow our Lord... . Have you really left all from your innermost heart... ? Attach yourselves to Jesus Christ alone ... since he has chosen you in preference to many others to announce these truths to your pupils." (*Med.* 167, 1-2)

But my reflection on Article 48 is not as yet complete. The article insists that the distinctive character of the Brothers' community is to be a community of faith **where the experience of God is shared.**

### **Sharing the Experience of God**

We share our experience of God in the very act of living together as consecrated Brothers of the Christian Schools. We share our experience of God in a particular way in our daily community prayer:

"The Brothers' community is a community of prayer. The Brothers pray together. Together they hear the word of God and meditate on it. Together they recognize that they are sinners before God and they participate in the same Eucharist. Together they seek God and it is together that they find him." (*Rule*, 50)

It is my impression that, in general, the quality of our prayer life and our commitment to the Eucharist and to daily morning and evening prayer has steadily improved in recent years.

I have spoken in the past of prayer as a period of "heightened awareness" in faith of the loving presence of the Lord and of our presence to him. Prayer, whether personal or communal, is essentially a matter of "being with" the Lord in loving attention. These "moments" in time and space of "being with" the Lord are precious: God uses them to nourish that relationship in faith which is at the heart of our life as Brothers.

Community prayer, therefore, is a specific period in time and space when the community is "with" the Lord. It is a "moment" in which God brings us into greater communion with himself and with one another. Our Founder says that the chief "occupation" in prayer "consists in cultivating a close relationship with God and uniting oneself interiorly to him." Whatever the content and style of our community prayer — the Liturgy of the Hours or other forms of prayer (*Rule*, 71) — it is essential that the prayer be a period of "being with" the Lord in faith, hope, and love.

But community prayer is not, of course, a matter of "praying alone together." It is rather an expression of the life of the community. The *Rule* gives precise guidelines. If we are to live as a "community of faith where the experience of God is shared," we have to provide opportunities for the Brothers to manifest their faith to one another. This sharing can take various forms, the most basic of which is the sharing of petitions.

When a Brother asks his Brothers to pray for a particular intention, he is truly sharing his faith. The invitation to offer petitions is an opportunity to link our prayer with everyday reality. I have long been impressed by the link between prayer and the events of the week which the Holy Father makes during the Angelus every Sunday. But that link between prayer and the events of daily life is not always evident in our community prayer. I have been surprised at times at the absence of any reference in community prayer to very significant events that are occurring or have just occurred in the school, the community, the Church, or the world generally.

A second level is the occasional sharing of short reflections, without discussion, following a reading. The phrase "without discussion" is important. Community prayer is not the time for intellectual debate. But it is the time when Brothers can share with their Brothers the meaning they find in a passage from scripture, from the writings of the Founder, or from some other author.

A third level is the sharing of faith that occurs when Brothers actually pray aloud. There is still another level mentioned in Article 71a: the sharing

of moments of silence. But for the sharing of moments of silence to be a communal experience, it is necessary that there be regular sharing on the other levels.

It is true that the introduction of moments of faith sharing in our community prayer is of relatively recent origin. But the practice of conversing about God and religious matters belongs to our Lacsallian heritage. In fact, De La Salle wanted such conversation to take place during recreation! Canon Blain tells us that some Brothers complained that a recreation spent in this manner was more of a prayer meeting than recreation. Most of us would probably agree with that judgment. Regardless, it seems to me that what De La Salle says about spiritual conversation in his beautiful meditation for Easter Monday can be said today about the sharing of our experience of God in prayer. He said that the result of the conversation held by the two disciples of Emmaus was that Jesus joined them:

"Thus the fruit of holy conversation is that Jesus comes to us... . The disciples found their hearts burning within them... . Jesus being in your midst will give himself to you, and will communicate to you his spirit. The more you speak of him and of what relates to him, the more you will come to know and relish what is good, and the holy truths he has taught us." (*Med.* 30)

## Fidelity in our Community Life

To assert that the distinctive character of the Brothers' community is to be a community of faith where the experience of God is shared is to assert a lofty and admirable goal. But goals, however praiseworthy, are, obviously, not enough. I am in agreement with a contemporary spiritual writer, Father David Knight, when he says that a community should be judged not by the goals it proposes, but by the means to which it is willing to commit itself in order to achieve these goals.

How essential it is, therefore, that communities, following the directives and orientations of the *Rule*, create structures which help them to grow in communion with God and with one another. But, of course, creating the structures is not enough. Each Brother must then give high priority to creative presence at every community activity. "High" priority is not "absolute" priority. There will be times when we have to be absent from community prayer or other activities. But we should regret being absent, because we really want to be present. Being creatively present in the community is a duty which we owe to our Brothers. But where a true spirit of community prevails, Brothers are present to one another and to God not only because they have a duty to be present, but also and primarily because they want to be present.

## IV. AN APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY

Article 51 speaks of the community as being **dedicated to the apostolic ministry**. The Brothers' community is essentially apostolic. The apostolate is of its very nature. But, the article adds, the apostolic mission of the community needs constantly to be discovered.

Yes, we all realize that the manner in which our communities exercise their mission has changed significantly in the last twenty years. Perhaps a quick way to express this change is to refer to two passages from our normative documents. In the *Declaration*, published in 1967, we read:

"The community of Brothers is **THE** (emphasis added) animating force of the school to which it gives life and direction according to its mission."

Few of us would claim that, excluding cases which have become the exception rather than the rule, the community of Brothers today can or even should be **THE** animating influence. A similar expression in the *Rule* of 1987 reflects the striking change that has taken place in the last two decades:

"The Brothers' community **SHARES IN** (emphasis added) the animation of the institutions in which it is involved." (*Rule*, 51a)

In our day communities are related to schools and other educational institutions in a variety of ways. Nearly everywhere the number of Brothers actively involved in the institutions is greatly re-

duced, while the number of lay teachers has significantly increased. Most of the institutions which are under the direct responsibility of the Institute continue to have Brothers as Headmasters or Principals. But a significant minority of schools now have lay heads who are responsible to boards or councils in which the District exercises its influence. Both of these new situations are obliging us to "rediscover" our mission, that is to say, to determine both the relationship of the community to the institution and its specific role, as well as to create appropriate structures.

But in addition to communities of Brothers actively involved in institutions which are the responsibility of the district, we have today a number of communities of Brothers who are effectively engaged in institutions or centers which are not the responsibility of the district. We have other communities which are made up of Brothers legally retired but actively and generously engaged in a variety of apostolic services. Then we have communities of Brothers retired for reasons of age and health, who, with faith and zeal, exercise their apostolic mission primarily through prayer and suffering.

Another development in recent years is the decision, motivated by reduced numbers, to transfer the communities to smaller houses, often located on or near the school property. In general this initiative has proved to be very beneficial for community living.

This rapid summary is not intended to be comprehensive. It is designed only to illustrate the striking changes that have occurred in recent years.

## The Witness of the Community

In *Redemptoris Missio* John Paul II writes of Christ as the "Good News," insisting that there is an identity in Christ between the message and the messenger, between saying, doing, and being: "He proclaims the Good News not just by what he says or does, but by what he is" (*RM*, 13). *Lumen Gentium* beautifully challenges religious to render Christ present today to believers and non-believers alike:

"Christ in contemplation on the mountain, or proclaiming the kingdom of God to the multitudes, or healing the sick and maimed and converting sinners to a good life, or blessing children and doing good to all men." (*LG* 46)

Our *Rule* states clearly that as religious vowed to the ministry of Christian education, our first apostolate consists in the witness of our consecrated life. One way we exercise this "first" apostolate is through the visibility of our community life (*Rule*, 24, 51b).

We Brothers therefore — as communities as well as individuals — are called to be the loving and saving presence of Christ in the world of education. We witness to that presence by what we say, by what we do, and by who we are. The *Declaration* expresses this truth poignantly: "It is not in words or in books that young people meet most forcibly the God who calls them by name, but rather in the person of the Brother" (40).

Witness presupposes visibility. What is most im-



portant, however, is not that young people know that we have "Brother" before our name, or see that we wear a religious garb, or be aware that we live in a celibate community. What is most important is that we manifest visibly our personal faith in Jesus Christ as well as our effort to live the Gospel fully. Visibility implies, therefore, a sharing on a personal level. It presupposes that we are in contact with the young. Young people should be able to "sense" that we believe in Jesus Christ, whether or not we are actually teaching religion. They should be able to recognize us as people who are willing to put ourselves on the line for what we believe.

In other words, without putting on a spectacle, we have to let our "light shine." Those teaching religion have a privileged opportunity for communicating their faith and values. But all of us, regardless of our apostolic activity, can discover ways to communicate to the young that we are believers. For this purpose, however, we need knowledge of young people, creativity, initiative, and boldness.

I am speaking not only of personal witness, but of community witness. There must, therefore, be community visibility, as Article 51b declares. Our young people must "get the message" that we are communities of consecrated apostles. Unfortunately, however, our boys and girls too often have little if any idea of what goes on beyond the doors of our community residences. I am not suggesting that we go to the other extreme. We have both the need for and the right to privacy. But a solution can be found which protects the value of privacy as

well as that of openness. Not a few communities today invite groups of young people to join them from time to time for community prayer, liturgy, and social gatherings. The results have been very positive. They see and experience us as "ordinary human persons" who lead lives of faith, prayer, fraternal love, and zeal.

### **Builders of Communities of Faith**

A second way by which we can exercise an apostolate as community is that of building educational communities which are truly Christian and Lasallian. Our *Rule* directs us to make known to the rest of the educational community the essential elements of the Lasallian message and to offer to those who desire it a more intensified sharing of Lasallian spirituality (*Rule*, 17c). There is ample scope here for community initiative.

During our visits, Brothers in school communities frequently ask what their apostolic priorities should be, given the reduced number of Brothers. The question deserves a careful answer. We are not exclusively catechists or youth ministers. I believe that we should continue to occupy positions of authority and to teach any subject in the curriculum. But at the same time we must never forget that our "principal function" consists in the work of evangelization and catechesis (*Rule*, 15). The invitation contained in that article is obvious. But if all of us cannot teach religion, even part-time, we can contribute in one way or another to the work of "campus ministry" or of "pastoral centers," a nec-

essary work that is developing everywhere today with good results. It is inspiring also to see an increasing number of Brothers accepting to work with Lasallian youth groups.

Much more could be said about community efforts to contribute significantly to the education of the poor — both in and outside of our schools. One initiative that I have found inspiring is that of communities who agree either to house or to arrange and finance housing for refugees and immigrants and to organize language courses for them.

Other communities organize for presentation in the pastoral centers short programs on topics of critical interest to the young, such as religious faith, world religions, racism, sexuality, AIDS, war, peace, care of the environment, etc.

### **A Mission to Be Discovered**

Brothers, the apostolic dimension of our community life must be an integral part of the community program. It is obvious that the primary beneficiaries of apostolic service are those we serve. But, as the *Declaration* says very well, community life itself is strengthened by a strong commitment to apostolic service:

“The communion of minds becomes more intimate, the spirit of prayer and life of faith is deepened, when the members are more aware of their apostolic mission... The reference of everything to the common mission makes it possible for a community to avoid

the risk of becoming enclosed within itself, of suffocating in the pettiness of small internal problems which threaten even the most regular communities if they are not constantly renewed in apostolic zeal.” (*Declaration*, 25.4)

Unfortunately, there are some communities that limit their focus to internal matters and leave the apostolic dimension to individual members of the community. That is a mistake. Although the role of the community has changed, the community has a mission to fulfill:

“Dedicated as it is to the apostolic ministry of education, the community realizes that its mission needs constantly to be discovered.” (*Rule*, 51)

### **V. A FRATERNAL COMMUNITY**

The sections of Chapter 4 which we have just considered — **A Community of Faith** and **An Apostolic Community** — are relatively short. The section, however, entitled **A Fraternal Community** covers three complete pages. The articles are truly rich in content and provide excellent material for meditation. It is not my purpose to offer a commentary on each article. My intention is to present a few reflections on this essential dimension of our life together, inspired particularly by the following passages:

“The Brothers are determined with one spirit to be brothers among themselves...” (*Rule*, 53)

“The community is for the Brothers their home. It is there that they live together. It is there that they experience each day anew the friendship, the esteem, the trust, and the mutual respect that they have for one another... By their active presence and by their sensitivity to one another, the Brothers assure the solidarity of the community.” (*Rule*, 54)

I shall center my reflections on three specific themes: 1) Our expectations must be authentic and realistic; 2) we must be PROACTIVE members of our communities; 3) we have to be COMMUNITY MEN.

### **1) Our expectations must be authentic and realistic**

Implied in that subheading are two dangers. First, it can and sometimes does happen that Brothers have expectations that are not in harmony with the essential directives and orientations which we have already discussed concerning the nature of our life together as Brothers, and, consequently, concerning the faith, apostolic, and fraternal dimensions of community life.

It is essential that we Brothers know and interiorize what we have decided about our life together. It is essential because both duties and rights are involved. On the one hand each of us is obliged to commit himself personally to living community life as described in our *Rule*. On the other hand each of us has the right to live with Brothers

who are committed to building authentic community life. In this regard the words of the *Declaration* are pertinent:

“When the Brother enters religion to seek God and serve his kingdom, he expects that the congregation will help him in this search and service... Thus rules and structures are not established simply that they be kept, but their purpose is the service of persons... The Brother in turn respects these rules and structures in his concern for the common good and recognizes that they are an integral part of the religious life.” (*Declaration*, 19)

But there is a second danger: that Brothers have expectations that are not realistic. I have always been impressed at the realism St. De La Salle expresses in his meditations and in his personal letters to the Brothers. With striking candor he remarks in Meditation 74:

“It is not possible for many persons to live together without being a source of mutual suffering. One will have a capricious temper, another will be combative; one will have disagreeable manners, another will be haughty; one will be too obliging, another will speak his mind too freely; others again will be too reserved, or dissimulating or critical. It is rare that such varied dispositions, such different mentalities, do not lead to difficulties among Brothers...”

“If you fancy you can live in a community without supporting the defects of your Broth-

ers, you are mistaken, and you have made a mistake in entering. Make up your mind on this matter for the future and for the rest of your life." (*Med.* 74)

De La Salle knew well, undoubtedly from experience, that unrealistic expectations cause frustration and discontent. There are some Brothers who expect community life to meet their needs just as satisfactorily as they might be met in intimate family life.

"But community is not a family, was never intended to be a family, and is incapable of meeting many needs often met fully in a family." (Hammet/Sofield, *Inside Christian Community*, p. 38)

If our programs of initial and continuing formation do not present community life authentically and realistically, they contribute to a problem that is already too common among us.

The happy communities among us are those in which the Brothers accept one another as they are. Someone has said that maturity is the ability to adjust graciously to the inevitable. We have to be realistic about the inevitability of our being imperfect members of imperfect communities.

## **2) We must be PROACTIVE members of our communities.**

A "proactive" person is one who takes responsibility for his life. He acts. He distinguishes be-

tween those areas over which he can exercise little control and those over which he can exercise significant control. It is to the latter that he devotes his energies.

A "reactive" person is one who does not take responsibility for his life. He is not in charge of his life or his destiny. He feels dominated and controlled by forces which are outside of him. He feels that he is a victim. He is prone to blame other people and circumstances.

I am indebted to Stephen Covey of the Covey Leadership Center for the following story which I think is quite pertinent to our reflections on community life:

At one seminar where I was speaking on the concept of proactivity, a man came up and said, "Stephen, I like what you're saying. But every situation is so different. Look at my marriage. I'm really worried. My wife and I just don't have the same feelings for each other we used to have. I guess I just don't love her anymore and she doesn't love me. What can I do?"

"The feeling isn't there anymore?" I asked.

"That's right," he affirmed. "And we have three children we're really concerned about. What do you suggest?"

"Love her," I replied.

"I told you, the feeling just isn't there anymore."

"Love her."

"You don't understand. The feeling of love just isn't there."

"Then love her. If the feeling isn't there, that's a good reason to love her."

"But how do you love when you don't love?"

"My friend, love is a verb. Love — the feeling — is a fruit of love, the verb. So love her. Serve her. Sacrifice. Listen to her. Empathize. Appreciate her. Affirm her. Are you willing to do that?"

Covey insists that love is a verb. Reactive people make it a feeling. They are driven by feelings. They believe that they are not responsible. They become a product of their feelings. If feelings control people, it is because they have abdicated responsibility and empowered their feelings to dominate them.

"Proactive people make love a verb. Love is something you do: the sacrifices you make, the giving of self... Love is a value that is actualized through loving actions. Proactive people subordinate feelings to values. Love, the feeling, can be recaptured." (Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, pp. 79-80)

Our Founder said something remarkably similar:

"A community in which charity and union are lacking is a kind of hell. Here one complains; there another raises his voice against

his Brothers on account of some grievance; a third is angry because someone has annoyed him; a fourth denounces his Brother to the Superior for what he has done to him. Nothing but complaints, murmuring and backbiting is to be heard, causing great trouble and disquietude. THE ONLY REMEDY TO SUCH DISORDERS IS UNION AND CHARITY." (*Med.* 65, emphasis added)

De La Salle urges the Brothers to be PROACTIVE, to DO something rather than simply REACT as a victim or martyr. To the problem of a community which is so lacking in charity and union as to be described as "a kind of hell," he proposes as the only remedy: UNIFY YOUR COMMUNITY AND LOVE ONE ANOTHER. That is a remedy as astounding as that of Stephen Covey: "Love her." The Founder would have agreed: love is a verb. If love is missing in community, PUT IT THERE.

Good families do not just "happen." Neither do good communities just "happen." Good communities are the result of wise, faith-filled, and loving ACTS.

### 3) We have to be **COMMUNITY MEN.**

If we think of the Brothers we have most admired as "community men," I think that we shall be able to recall them as men who really lived Article 54.

## CONCLUSION

We conclude, Brothers, as we began: with consideration of the "great perplexity" in which John Baptist de La Salle found himself in the year 1691.

After all the sacrifices, difficulties, and work of a decade, it seemed that he was back where he had started. The future looked grim. The Society he believed God in his Providence was calling him to establish was in crisis. He had reached a turning point. He had to decide: abandon the effort or move forward with determination.

We celebrate this year the 300th anniversary of his response. God inspired him to enter into association with the two Brothers he judged most capable of collaborating with him and to "bind himself, along with them, by an **irrevocable commitment** to persevere in the effort of establishing this Community".

But his response to the crisis was not limited to the "Heroic Vow". He ACTED with extraordinary creativity and courage, and those actions, blessed by God, bore fruit. Three years later he and twelve Brothers would profess perpetual vows. The Society would once again manifest vitality and growth.

Today, in the year 1991, we are suffering a severe crisis, one that has indeed shaken the confidence of not a few of us. The celebration of the "Heroic Vow" is a Providential occasion for renewing our own "irrevocable commitment" to follow Christ as Brothers of the Christian Schools and to work creatively for the revitalization of our Institute. The

actions that the Founder and early Brothers took in the early 1690's can inspire us to take the bold steps that are needed today.

Yes, Brothers, the words of our Founder are indeed still true:

**"The need for this Institute is very great."**

The young, the poor, the world, and the Church still need the presence and service of consecrated religious Brothers. Despite the difficulties which we meet, we know, in faith, that God does not abandon "his work", but that "it pleases him to make it bear fruit day by day. (*Rule*, 141, paraphrase)

Fraternally in St De La Salle,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Brother John Johnston". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

**Brother John Johnston, FSC**  
Superior general

## CONCLUSION

I think that everything I have attempted to say in these pages is captured in the beautiful word BROTHERS. For this reason I conclude with a passage, slightly adapted, from Canon Blain, a passage which I think deserves to be better known:

"If the name of SCHOOLMASTERS had been acceptable up to this time, ... it was no longer proper, now that they had joined together to form a single body. That of BROTHERS was the name that fit them best. For this reason, they chose it...

"This name reminds them that as Brothers they owe each other mutual proofs of tender but spiritual friendship; and that considering themselves as the elder brothers of the children who come to be taught by them, they should exercise this ministry of charity with truly loving hearts." (Blain, Chapter 3, Volume 1, Book 2)

Fraternally in St. De La Salle,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Brother John Johnston". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the text "Fraternally in St. De La Salle,".

**Brother John Johnston, FSC**  
*Superior General*