



PASTORAL LETTER

**OUR CHARISM
IN THE LIGHT
OF THE SYNOD**

SOME REFLECTIONS

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Superior General

1 January 1995

OUR CHARISM

IN THE LIGHT OF THE SYNOD

“The Holy Spirit knows the time and moments when people suited to the tasks required by historical circumstances must be called upon.

“In his time, he called Benedict and his sister Scholastica. . . ; he called Bernard, Francis and Clare of Assisi, Bonaventure, Dominic, Thomas Aquinas and Catherine of Siena. . . ; he called Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francis Xavier, Peter Claver. . . .

“In the centuries closest to us, the Spirit who renews the face of the earth called others such as **John Baptist de La Salle**, Paul of the Cross, Alphonsus Mary de Liguori, John Bosco. . . .

“What would the world be without these figures?”

John Paul II
Homily, Closing Mass of the Synod

1 January 1995, *Year of Prayer*
Feast of Mary, Mother of God

World Day of Peace

Dear Brothers,

Last night the members of the various communities of the Generalate inaugurated the **YEAR OF PRAYER**. I know that many Districts and communities have also begun the year with appropriate celebrations.

It is my hope that, during the next twelve months, we shall all, in the spirit of the decision of the 42nd General Chapter, 1) deepen our understanding of prayer and of its place and importance in our life; 2) grow in our relationship with the Lord through a more determined and more enlightened practice of personal and community prayer; 3) commit ourselves resolutely to a regular program of daily prayer—now and in the future.

But, Brothers, I want to recommend a fourth objective, one not specified explicitly in the General Chapter proposition, but certainly compatible with it. I suggest that the year 1995 be a year of intense prayer **FOR** the Institute, a year in which we express to God our desire to live that gift of the Spirit—namely, our charism—more “faithfully, zealously, and creatively;” a year in which we ask the Lord fervently to enliven us through his Spirit “with holiness, awareness, sensitivity, creativity, and courage,”

and “to shape and renew our Institute that it bear the image of Christ and show his likeness to the world” (*Pastoral Letter*, 1994).

How Providential it is, Brothers, that the Year of Prayer follows the synod, which has so clearly and emphatically affirmed the value and importance of our vocation, an affirmation which endorses our conviction in faith that “the young, the poor, the world, and the Church still need the ministry of the Brothers” (*Rule*, 141).

You have already received the first of three dossiers that we hope will help you to live this special year efficaciously. It had been my intention earlier to write to you today on the subject of prayer. Given my desire, however, to communicate with you concerning the synod, I decided to share some thoughts on prayer at the end, rather than at the beginning, of the Year of Prayer.

Joy, peace, and hope

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope” (*Rom* 15:13).

Paul’s beautiful prayer expresses very well what I find in my mind and in my heart as I begin this pastoral letter. The passage is as dense as it is profound. My reflection on it in no way exhausts its meaning. Paul describes God as the God of hope. Through the power of his Spirit,

he fills us with the gifts of joy, peace, and hope, those gifts for which each of us longs. But because they are gifts, they can be accepted or not accepted. Paul seems to me to say that if we believe—believe in humanity, in one another, in ourselves, in God—these gifts shall be ours.

If we are not experiencing the joy, peace, and hope which we desire, Paul’s line of reasoning suggests that we need to read the signals. The signals are telling us that our faith is not what it should be: it is too weak. To believe as we should believe, however, and to persevere in that faith “in spite of everything” is not easy.

In his message for this World Day of Peace—*Women: Teachers of Peace*—Pope John Paul II says that “the violence which so many individuals and peoples continue to experience, the wars which still cause bloodshed in many areas of the world, and the injustice which burdens the life of whole continents can no longer be tolerated” (paragraph 1).

In the address which I delivered last March to some nine hundred European Lasallians, I spoke of the disappointment we are all experiencing at the current explosion of ethnic, national, and religious violence. I said that never in my wildest imagination had it ever occurred to me that people such as those in ex-Yugoslavia—people who had lived as neighbors for years—could suddenly turn on one

another out of fear and hostility rooted in historical events.

Rwanda: a nightmare

That was in the month of March. One month later the nightmare of Rwanda began. We thank God that no Brother of the Christian Schools is among the fatalities of that unspeakable tragedy, fatalities that include numerous women and men religious, priests, and bishops. But our Brothers have lost mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, friends. . . . Sadly, however, they have no precise information concerning their loved ones and are forced to live with an uncertainty that is for them a veritable hell.

Our hearts go out to you, dear Brothers of Rwanda. You continue to have a special place in our thoughts and in our prayers.

No, confronted with such evil and incalculable suffering, it is not easy to believe in humanity, in one another, in ourselves, in God. Nevertheless, as human persons, as Christians, as religious, we must maintain and strengthen that faith. As I write this paragraph, I recall those poignant words of fifteen-year-old Anne Frank, recorded in her diary just three weeks before she and her family were discovered, arrested, and eventually massacred: "In spite of everything I still believe that people

are really good at heart." That kind of faith leads to joy, peace, and hope. It is a gift of the Spirit and a striking illustration of the truth of Paul's further statement:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . Neither death nor life . . . nor anything else will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (*Rom 8:35-39*).

Believing involves far more than giving intellectual assent. Believing demands commitment. If we really believe in humanity, in others, in ourselves, in God, we are inspired to act. "The time has come to move from words to deeds: may individual citizens and families, believers and Churches, States and International Organizations all recognize that they are called to renew their commitment to work for peace" (*Women: Teachers of Peace*, par. 1).

The three missionary Brothers who have returned to Rwanda are giving witness to all of us of this living faith. The same is true for those Rwandan Brothers who will soon inaugurate a community among the refugees in Eastern Zaire. It is this kind of belief in humanity, in others, in ourselves, and in God that will enable all the Brothers of the Delegation of Rwanda to begin again, in the not-too-distant future, we pray, their presence and service among the people of Rwanda.

Crossing the threshold

Yes, to become persons of joy, peace, and hope, we have to demonstrate by our deeds that we really believe. I think that this is what John Paul II means when he says in his recent book-length interview that we have to “cross the threshold of hope.” To get beyond that threshold, we must, he says, take up our cross and follow Jesus (*Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 224).

In a very real sense, this pastoral letter is about crossing that threshold to peace, joy, and hope as Brothers of the Christian Schools. To navigate that crossing successfully, we have to be men of faith. “In spite of everything” we have to believe—sincerely and earnestly—in the Church, in the Institute, in our Districts, in ourselves, in the Lord, who is calling us to be Brothers.

We have to believe in the Second Vatican Council, which the Pope calls

“ . . . a great gift and experience for the Church . . . a unique occasion for creative thinking . . . characterized by great openness to dialogue among Christians, as well as with non-Christians and those who do not believe. . . . (The Council fostered) a sense of communal responsibility which will shape the image of the Church for generations to come. . . . Although priests are still too few, we

have been witnessing a primarily qualitative renewal . . . (we) must be thankful and feel constantly indebted to the Holy Spirit for the gift of the Council” (*Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, pp. 157-167).

Brothers, this very positive assessment of Vatican II parallels my personal assessment of our 39th General Chapter. It was truly a gift of the Holy Spirit. We are still in the process of purification and renovation launched by the momentous decisions of 1966-67. Despite disappointments and setbacks, we are making progress. We must believe, commit, and recommit ourselves with determined steadfastness to that ongoing process of “qualitative renewal” of which the Pope writes, inviting young people to join us in order to assure the presence and service of Brothers of the Christian Schools for generations to come. What the Lord asks of us today is courageous, creative, and persevering fidelity in every aspect of our life of consecration, mission, and community.

I have entitled this pastoral letter *Our Charism in the Light of the Synod: Some Reflections*. My intention is to offer comments, necessarily limited in scope, on the recent synod and then to “meditate,” from the perspective of the synod, on one of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*.

My prayer, Brothers, as I begin this letter, is that the God of hope help us to live our lives

with an intense faith and ardent zeal and that through the power of his Spirit he fill us with the gifts of joy, peace, and hope.

I. THE SYNOD

Participation in the synod on *The Consecrated Life and its Role in the Church and in the World* was an extraordinary privilege and blessing. The opportunity to collaborate as Assistant Special Secretary with Cardinal Basil Hume, General Reporter, and with Father Marcello Zago, Special Secretary, was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for which I am grateful to God and to the Holy Father. I am thankful also that Brothers Gerard Rummery, Pablo Basterrechea, and Telmo Meirone were also named to the synod.

Brother Gerard Rummery, General Councillor, was appointed to Cardinal Hume's "working team" as a well-qualified consultant. Gerard contributed significantly a year ago as a member of the group which synthesized and analyzed responses to the questionnaire that had been sent to bishops and religious throughout the world and which helped prepare the text of the much-appreciated working document, called the *Instrumentum Laboris*.

Brother Pablo, our former Superior General and currently Secretary General of the *Union of Superiors General*, was named as auditor,

an expression of the esteem in which he is held by the Holy See. Brother Telmo, Visitor of the District of Argentina-Paraguay, was appointed in recognition of his role as President of the Conference of Major Superiors in Argentina and Vice-President of the Confederation of Latin American Religious (CLAR).

Four other Brothers were appointed: the Superiors General of the Marist Brothers and of the Brothers of St. Gabriel, together with the Provincials of the Sacred Heart Brothers in Lesotho and of the Capuchins in Central Canada. This Capuchin Brother brought an important dimension to the synod: he is the Provincial of the Capuchin Province made up of priests and brothers.

But before saying more about the synod itself—its nature, methodology, accomplishments, and shortcomings—I want to provide you with some information and commentary that I hope will help you to see the synod in a context.

Need for clarification

In the late '80s and early '90s, I noticed that Superiors General were expressing, with increasing frequency and urgency, the need to clarify the identity, role, and mission of religious life in the Church and in the world today, a Church and a world which had changed dramatically in the previous three decades.

Among the most striking developments has been that of the participation of the laity in evangelization, a phenomenon which John Paul II says in *Redemptoris Missio* is in the process of changing ecclesial life. In his interview the Pope states that although vocations to religious institutes are

“. . . still too few, religious movements are being born and are flourishing. They are made up for the most part of lay people who are married and have professions. They are oriented toward the renewal of the individual. At one time the renewal of the Church took place mainly through the religious orders” (*Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, pp. 167-168).

That this development is having an impact on religious life is clear. Four out of five members of religious institutes are lay. The work of these religious—all of it—can be done and is, in fact, being done by men and women who are not members of religious institutes. These men and women, many of whom are very committed Catholics, are well aware that there is no need today to enter religious life to perform works or ministries that only yesterday were done predominantly by women and men religious.

Crisis of vocations

During this period of reflection several years ago, I was among those who were convinced of the need to confront directly and honestly the gravity of the crisis of vocations to religious life, a crisis provoking us to ask whether religious life, as we have known it, has a future. The crisis is most evident in economically developed areas of the world and is more apparent in some institutes than in others.

You are well aware, Brothers, that our vocation is the one most adversely affected by the current crisis. You know that we have today considerably less than half the number of Brothers we had thirty years ago. We have excellent statements about the value, relevance, and even need for our vocation. Nevertheless, every year the total number diminishes and the average age increases. As I have said before, however, I think that Father Kolvenbach is correct when he says that the crisis in the vocation of Brothers is a reflection of the crisis religious life as such is experiencing: “This crisis,” he wrote, “is possibly less manifest among religious who are also priests, since these manage to conceal it within their priestly commitments” (*Men of God: Men for Others*, p. 38).

But, of course, we were aware that the crisis was also seriously affecting institutes of Sisters, as well as clerical institutes. We knew also that some bishops, priests, and women

and men religious themselves were beginning to ask whether religious life should be considered a form of life which contributed very significantly in the past, but has "had its day."

It is true that at the present time there are reasonably good numbers of vocations to religious institutes, including our own, in various countries of the so-called "economically developing" world and in countries recently liberated from Marxism. I think that young people are entering religious life in these countries for reasons similar to those which formerly motivated young people in countries that are now called "developed." One of these reasons, among others, is that there is an acute need for certain services, services which women and men religious can provide. I am not saying that there is anything necessarily wrong with this motive. But it does suggest that when these geographical areas become more "developed," they could have—unless corrective steps are taken—the same problems we are having today in economically developed countries.

Mutual relations

But there was a third reason why the Superiors General were considering some kind of forum to study religious life in the Church today: the need to strengthen "mutual relations" between bishops and religious, as well as among all those who constitute the ecclesial

community at every level. Several concrete problems of those years had convinced us of the need to review the lived experience of "mutual relations" in the Church.

At an assembly in May 1991, therefore, the *Union of Superiors General* decided to organize an international forum on religious life. We knew that there was a possibility that religious life might be the topic of the next synod, but many of us preferred a forum which would permit full participation of large numbers of religious, as well as theologians.

Following that meeting the USG President, Vice-President, and Secretary discussed the idea with Cardinal Hamer, Prefect of the *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*. He responded very positively, but he also informed us that he expected the Holy Father to choose consecrated life as the topic of the next synod.

Decision: Synod on Consecrated Life

In late November of that same year, the newly elected USG President and Council participated in the early morning Mass of the Holy Father. After Mass the Pope informed us that he had decided that consecrated life would be the theme of the next synod and that he was counting on the very active collaboration of men and women religious throughout the world.

The official announcement was made in late December 1991. In February 1992 four Superiors General, two men and two women, were invited to share some preliminary thoughts with the international synod council of cardinals and bishops. I find it interesting to read now the text of my presentation: I spoke of the ambiguities in the expression “consecrated life;” the specific identity, role, and mission of institutes of consecrated life in the Church and in the world today; the relationship of priesthood to religious life; the role of Brothers—particularly in clerical institutes; mutual relations among all those constituting the ecclesial community, and the necessity of seminary education in the theology of consecrated life. All of these topics were treated abundantly and constructively during the synod.

Several months later the *Lineamenta* appeared. This document contained a preliminary presentation of the major themes and a questionnaire to which women and men religious throughout the world were invited to respond.

In November 1993 the USG held its Congress, by that time perceived by all as an important step in the preparation of the synod. Nine Brothers of the Christian Schools were among the five hundred participants from around the world. The conclusions of the Congress were transmitted to the synod secretariat and, together with the responses of con-

ferences of religious and individual institutes, contributed significantly to the composition of the *Instrumentum Laboris*.

Nature of the synod

It is impossible to understand the work of the synod without some knowledge of its nature. During the dinner which concluded the synod, the Holy Father, speaking spontaneously, reflected on the etymology of the word “synod.” He reminded us that the root meaning is not only “meeting” or “assembly,” but also “way” or “journey.” He described the synod as a long process of “walking with” and—to our great satisfaction—commented on the significant contribution women and men religious had made to the synod “journey.” He stated emphatically that he wanted women and men religious to continue “walking with” him as he prepared the post-synodal document.

The image of a “journey” is interesting and helpful. The synod is indeed a long process, beginning with the announcement and concluding only with the publication of the apostolic exhortation, a process of at least four or five years. The synod, therefore, is not over.

It is important to bear in mind that a synod is an assembly of bishops. Unless the Holy Father decides otherwise, it is advisory in nature. One can certainly argue in favor of an advisory body that is more representative of

the entire ecclesial community, but that is not immediately pertinent. The recent synod was a synod of bishops. But the synod was extraordinary in that a major effort was made to involve women and men religious. In addition to the 245 members of the synod, there were 103 auditrices, auditors, and consultants—by far the highest number ever—sixty of whom were women. Furthermore, for the first time, they were permitted to speak, not only in the small groups but also in the general assembly.

Methodology

The synod methodology is unique—it has advantages and disadvantages. At the center of activity is the General Reporter, who is assisted by the Special Secretary. At this synod the General Reporter was Cardinal Basil Hume, Archbishop of Westminster, England, and former Benedictine Abbot. The Special Secretary was Father Marcello Zago, Superior General of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. An Ursuline Sister and I served as Assistant Special Secretaries. It is, I think, important to note that normally all four of these positions are occupied by bishops. Working closely with this group was the team of twenty consultants, among whom was Brother Gerard.

The General Reporter gives an opening address, designed to set the tone and to indicate major concerns. That presentation is followed by nearly two weeks of “interventions”

of eight minutes each. One intervention follows another. When a participant wishes to speak, he submits his request, text, and summary to the technical secretariat. Speakers are listed in the order of their requests. Each intervention is, therefore, independent of the others. In the General Assembly there is no “debate” in the usual sense of that word.

The Special Secretaries and consultants must follow the interventions very closely and prepare summaries according to themes for the use of the General Reporter. He is required to make a second presentation synthesizing the interventions, indicating major concerns, pointing out significant omissions, and proposing some important questions to be pursued.

Following that address, participants work in language groups—in which there is lively discussion and debate. After several days each group presents a report. Then the most challenging and important work is begun: the formulating of “propositions” to be presented to the Holy Father. These are not necessarily “propositions” in the usual sense. They are, rather, position statements, ranging from eight or ten lines to a full page in length.

The General Reporter and his associates must make a unified list of the propositions prepared by the groups. This list is then presented in General Assembly, and the synod members are invited to prepare amendments.

These amendments are studied and voted in each group. Once again the General Reporter has to make a unified list and present it to the General Assembly. This time, following a period of reflection, the synod members vote on each proposition.

At this synod there were fifty-five propositions. Out of respect for the Holy Father, the synod secretariat requests that the propositions not be published. A document is issued, however, called the *Message of the Synod*. But the *Message* does not go through the same rigorous procedure and, therefore, does not express with the same precision the position of the synod participants. The propositions of this synod are of excellent quality. They have been “leaked” to the press in Italy and published in their entirety. I am sure that they will soon be published in other languages.

All of the synod materials—questionnaire results, working document, synod addresses and interventions, as well as the propositions—are presented to the Pope for his use in preparing the post-synodal document, a project which can take a year or even two.

But none of the content of the synod proceedings will come as a surprise to the Pope. He attended every General Assembly session. Furthermore, throughout the month he invited every synod participant, without exception, to dinner or supper in groups of eight to ten.

These informal contacts between the Pope and the participants were deeply appreciated.

Finally, it is necessary to remember that this synod was concerned with “consecrated life” in general and not exclusively with “religious life.” In the remarks which follow, however, I have in mind, at least primarily, “apostolic religious institutes,” such as our own.

My hopes for the synod

I personally brought to the synod four major hopes:

- 1) that it recognize and affirm the contribution to evangelization that religious life has made in the past, is making today, and can make tomorrow;
- 2) that it clarify the specific place, identity, and role of women and men religious within the ecclesial community;
- 3) that it provide clear directives for the creation and/or strengthening of structures to promote mutual relations and coherent pastoral planning among all those who constitute the ecclesial community;
- 4) that it call women and men religious to live their religious vocation—in all its dimensions—with greater authenticity.

Without hesitation I am able to say that my hopes and expectations were realized to an appreciable extent. I want to comment on some aspects of the synod that I consider particularly pertinent to our vocation as Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Recognition and affirmation

Several years ago, the Conference of Bishops of a country that has witnessed very few vocations to religious life in the recent past published a pastoral letter praising women and men religious, most of them elderly, and thanked them sincerely for their presence and services. But one searches in vain in that statement for any indication that its authors were really convinced that religious life is important, if not essential, for the future of the Church in that country and that God continues to call young men and women to be religious.

In an interview published here in Rome a couple of years ago, a Superior General remarked that during the synod on Europe he was struck by the paucity of references to religious life. "Today," he said, "the most eloquent model is that of the laity. It is experienced with such urgency as to put other models in the shade. . . . the impression is that religious belong to the past, the future belongs to the laity."

On the one hand, it is clear that within the next twenty-five years, barring a remarkable and rapid shift in current trends, numerous institutes will either go out of existence or be forced to merge with other institutes. Certain institutes, it seems, will continue to grow in some areas of the world but will disappear in other areas. The synod recognized and acknowledged these two realities.

On the other hand, we are witnessing a blossoming of new forms of "consecrated life," as well as movements, groups, and associations of Christians who know very well that they do not have to enter religious life in order to live their baptismal consecration wholeheartedly and to exercise apostolic ministries and services within the Church.

The current situation has, of course, caused disappointment and anguish among many of us. We seem to be caught in a vicious circle, breaking out of which is very difficult: on the one hand, the fewness of vocations is a source of discouragement; on the other hand, religious who are discouraged, confused, and lack confidence do not attract vocations.

A Powerful Message

It seems to me, therefore, that in the very act of convoking this synod, John Paul II sent a powerful message to the Church and to the world. That message is still being communicated

through every step of the long process that is the synod.

The message is that the presence and service of women and men religious in the Church and in the world is still very important.

In intervention after intervention bishops referred to consecrated life as **GIFT**—gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church for the world. They acknowledged with admiration and gratitude the extraordinary contribution to evangelization religious institutes and societies of apostolic life have made over the centuries and continue to make today. Particular mention was made of the striking number of women and men religious who have lost their lives in the service of the Church, not only in years past but in our own day.

The dominant and prevailing tone of the synod was positive; some think too positive. These participants believe that in the effort to concentrate more on the “lights” than on the “shadows,” problems were not faced squarely enough. I agree that there was a concerted effort on the part of most participants to maintain a positive tone, an effort that led them to speak of difficulties in a balanced manner and without exaggeration (as did the *Instrumentum Laboris*).

On the other hand, there were a dozen or so aggressive interventions, some of which

were, in my opinion, excessive. Those moments notwithstanding, an impressive spirit of communion prevailed. In the General Assembly and in the groups, as well as in the informal (and very important) conversations in the corridors and coffee room, mutual respect, friendliness, and genuine dialogue were always in evidence. It is my impression that most of the bishops decided that it was preferable to approach indirectly the “shadows” that certainly do exist in religious institutes, rather than to transform the synod into a problem-solving session.

Nevertheless, I want to say clearly that various bishops provided very valid analyses of the situation of religious life today, while others forthrightly and constructively challenged religious institutes to ask themselves honestly whether or not they were facing authentically and creatively the real issues and concerns of people. They asserted that religious life will have meaning and a future only insofar as it responds to the critical needs of our day.

Our own attitudes and feelings

Brothers, I think that we all have to be honest with ourselves about our attitudes and feelings, including those that are negative. We should neither fear pessimistic feelings nor allow them to dominate us. It is probable that some of us have been accepting the decline of

vocations as a “sign” that religious life—our own specifically—is “finished.” Others of us, perhaps, are hopeful, but we find ourselves in a kind of ongoing depression with which we have learned to live. Still others of us, when we think of what has happened in our institutes during the past three decades, are inclined to be judgmental, cynical, angry, or bitter. Some of us, perhaps, “survive” psychologically by adopting an attitude of stoical resignation.

To all of us—whatever our attitudes and feelings about the current crisis—this synod—which is still in process—can be an experience of affirmation and encouragement. It can challenge us to refuse to play “victim” or to “curse the darkness,” but rather to take responsibility for our lives and help our institutes to begin anew.

“Consecrated Life”

When the topic of the Synod was announced as *The Consecrated Life and its Role in the Church and in the World*, the organizers stated that the expression *Consecrated Life* was to be given a broad interpretation, including not only religious institutes and secular institutes but also societies of apostolic life and, in an “analogical sense,” many other forms, some old, some new, of living baptismal consecration “differently.”

Questions were raised immediately about the precise meaning of the expression and even the appropriateness of employing it. Some considered the term inappropriate, because all Christians are consecrated by baptism; there were those who argued that the word does not play a central role in their particular tradition; others, that if members of new forms of Christian commitment, including married members, are classified as “consecrated persons,” what precisely is the specificity of “consecrated life?” Still others observed that diocesan priests are obviously also “consecrated;” finally, some asked if everybody is consecrated, what is the significance of the expression “consecrated life?”

It seems that the problem of how to call or categorize those who live their baptismal consecration “differently” has existed throughout history. It has never been easy and is not easy today to find an “umbrella” expression that captures with theological and canonical precision traditional and newly evolving groups.

I mention this problem because frustration with the lack of consistency in the understanding and use of the term “consecrated life” was voiced by numerous members of the synod. Frankly, I would have been happier to have had “religious life” as the focus of the synod, because it was not easy to remain attentive to the multiple forms that we were obliged to consider. The temptation to speak of the synod

as a synod on “religious life” was always there. Attempts to resist that temptation by simply substituting “consecrated life” for “religious life” were at times awkward, at times inaccurate.

Because a synod is not a theological congress and cannot be expected to resolve theological issues, various members requested a serious study of the difference, as well as the relationship, between baptismal consecration and the special consecration about which we have been speaking.

Identity of Religious Life

It has not been unusual to hear comments in recent years that the emphasis of Vatican II on the universal call to holiness, as well as its position that religious life belongs not to the hierarchical but to the charismatic structure of the Church, has contributed unwittingly to the confusion concerning the meaning and importance of religious life. Some think that the division of the faithful into clergy and laity leaves religious life without a real identity of its own and that the crisis in religious life will not be resolved until there is a recognition of the distinctive identity of religious life.

But not everyone accepts that interpretation of what Vatican II did, or at least intended to do. Some say that the Council presented two possible ways to classify members of the Church: from the hierarchical standpoint,

everyone is either cleric or lay; religious are not “in-between”—they are either cleric or lay. From the charismatic standpoint, however, some Christians, both clerical and lay, are called to live their baptismal consecration as members of religious institutes. It is possible, therefore, to recognize and identify three “categories” in the Church: laity, ordained ministers, consecrated persons.

Those who hold this position say that consecrated life is more than a structure *in* the Church; it is a structure *of* the Church. The Church without consecrated life would not be the Church willed by Christ. *Lumen Gentium* affirmed this, they say, when it declared that religious life, “while not entering into the hierarchical structure of the Church, belongs *undeniably* to her life and holiness.”

An impressive number of synod participants expressed the need for further clarity regarding the precise identity and place of consecrated life in general and of religious life in particular. For that reason the bishops asked that the study mentioned above include this topic. Needless to say, I hope that women and men religious will be asked to contribute to this study.

Sisters and Brothers

It would be interesting to know how many references have been made, before and during

the synod, to the statistics which were first presented at the USG Congress, then incorporated in the *Instrumentum Laboris*. The realization that religious constitute only 0.12% of the members of the Catholic Church and that of this percentage 82.2% are lay—72.5% are sisters and 9.7% are brothers—and that 17.8% are priests obliges us to view the Church and religious life in a manner that is, at least for many of us, different and certainly more enlightened.

The synod was strongly affirming of the vocation of sisters and brothers, reiterating the teaching of Vatican II that their vocation is complete in itself and that their ministries (that word is used explicitly in the propositions) are in their very nature ecclesial.

Sisters

The interventions of the women participants, both in the general assembly and in the groups, were of very high quality and recognized as such. But significant also was their contribution to the impressive spirit of community and dialogue that developed during the month together. That constructive and cordial atmosphere was conducive to the development of a genuine consensus that women religious be given greater responsibility in the Church at every level—local, national, international—and that they participate in the preparation of legislation, especially when it concerns them.

I am well aware that the forward movement represented in the synod was not sufficient to satisfy everyone. Nevertheless, I think the experience of the synod will have a positive and long-term impact on the participation of women—consecrated women particularly—in the life of the Church.

Brothers

In my opinion the most extraordinary sentence in the *Instrumentum Laboris* is that which asks the synod

“. . . to resolve the question of the brothers' participation in the governance of clerical institutes and those with priests and brothers, in such a manner that this might be regulated by the particular legislation of individual institutes, with due respect for their nature and tradition" (32).

The synod secretariat itself requested Brother Pablo to make a fifteen-minute presentation on the vocation of brothers. His remarks were much appreciated and frequently cited. Numerous participants intervened on the subject, all of them advocating a change in the current situation. A consensus was quickly reached that the existence of "mixed" institutes (priests and brothers) be recognized canonically—at the present time there are only two categories mentioned in the Code of Canon Law: clerical

and lay. There was wide agreement also that brothers be allowed to assume all posts of authority, if that is the desire of the members of these “mixed” institutes. In a number of institutes, however, the clerical dimension is integral to their charism. They intend to remain “clerical” institutes. The position of brothers in these institutes received less attention. Nevertheless, I think that the orientations that were adopted will be of benefit to them.

Some personal observations

Before leaving this topic, I want to make some personal comments about our vocation in the Church. These thoughts were stimulated by the extraordinary attention given to “brothers” throughout the synod.

The *Lineamenta* devoted a page and a half (19b, 21) to the topic of brothers, declaring that

“the consecrated life of brothers is today the most visible form of consecration in the variety of its charisms. . . . Oftentimes the character of the lay consecrated life for men is not clearly perceived, given that many of the faithful think that it should be joined to the priesthood, while in fact it represents consecration in its utter simplicity.”

I think it safe to say that many religious brothers appreciated this surprising coverage

and welcomed the affirmation and encouragement. To some other brothers, however, it seemed that the passages imply that the brother’s vocation appears so strange that it requires special treatment to explain and justify it.

These particular brothers know that their vocation is not well understood in the Church, but they do not experience any personal need to explain or justify it to anyone. They understand their vocation and are proud to be brothers. They know that their vocation is “complete.” I count myself in this second group of brothers.

But I have other concerns also. How does one justify the statement: “The consecrated life of brothers is today the most visible form of consecrated life. . . . it represents consecration in its utter simplicity?”

Of the 82.2% of consecrated persons who are not priests, only 9.7% are brothers. In what way do brothers—more than sisters—manifest consecration in its “most visible form?” In what way do brothers—any more than sisters—represent “consecration in its utter simplicity?”

The answer, I suppose, is the following: the brothers are not priests. Men CAN be priests. Therefore, in not choosing priesthood, they manifest consecration in its utter simplicity and give it its most visible form. That implied choice—a choice sisters cannot make—seems to me to be the only thing that distinguishes the vocation of brothers from that of sisters.

An “uncomfortable” assumption

But this line of reasoning is “curious” at best, “clerical” at worst. Underlying it, it seems to me, is an “uncomfortable” assumption that priesthood does somehow “complete” or perhaps “perfect” a priestless consecrated life and that the authors are struggling with the inconsistency of their position.

Several years ago I was at first amused, then irritated, during the homily of a well-meaning Church official who praised the brothers for having “sacrificed” the priesthood in order to give themselves “full-time” to the service of youth. I have never “sacrificed” the priesthood! I chose to become a brother because I felt a much stronger attraction to becoming a brother than to becoming a priest—an attraction that was central to my discernment that God was calling me to be a brother.

Sometimes the impression is given that God has called brothers (some of them at least) to be priests, but that they have chosen to be brothers instead—and that they deserve to be praised for having made that choice! Such a position is absurd theologically and in no way corresponds to my lived experience—and I think that your experience is similar to mine.

We are brothers because we want to be brothers. We know, of course, that some people think that we have become brothers because we are not capable of becoming priests. I do

not doubt that there are some brothers, particularly in clerical institutes, that are not capable of being priests. But it does not follow that they became brothers because they were not capable of being priests. They had no significant attraction to the priesthood. They chose to be brothers not because the life was somehow “second best” for them, but because the life of the brothers was right for them.

I never hear people asking whether the consecrated life of sisters is “incomplete” because it lacks the priesthood. Why then do they ask the question about brothers? Women and men religious who are not ordained priests constitute 82.2% of consecrated persons. Our consecrated life is 100% complete. We don't need to justify ourselves to anyone. *Lumen Gentium* is clear: religious life is open to women and to men, whether or not they are or will become ordained.

One more thought: we Brothers of the Christian Schools say in our *Rule*, in accord with Canon Law, that we are “lay” and that we belong to an institute that is exclusively “lay.” But we *NEVER* refer to ourselves as “lay brothers.” We are brothers. That is sufficient. I am pleased that some clerical religious are beginning (or are returning to an earlier tradition) to call themselves “brothers.” But I have no intention of calling myself a “lay brother” in order to be distinguished from them. If distinguishing language is needed—I am not convinced it

is—then they will have to call themselves “clerical brothers”—because we shall continue to call ourselves “brothers.”

I am pleased that the Synod has stated clearly that the consecrated life of non-ordained religious—both women and men—is **valid, full, complete, needed, and wanted** in the Church of today and tomorrow.

II. OUR CHARISM

Having considered in a general way a few of the themes given substantial attention during the synod, I intend now to “meditate” more directly on our own charism in the light of opinions expressed and orientations adopted by the synod participants. I have decided to take as my point of departure a particularly precious and pertinent text of St. De La Salle: *Meditation 201*, the ninth of his *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*.

Reflect . . . you will be convinced

Our Founder begins this meditation with an important exhortation:

“Reflect . . . that it is God who has established in the Church apostles, prophets, and teachers, and you will be convinced that he has also established you in your work.”

“Reflect” and “you will be convinced. . . .” We need to be profoundly convinced that it is God who has called us to be Brothers of the Christian Schools and as such to exercise a specific service in the Church for the world today. To grow in that conviction, we have to reflect on our identity, role, and mission—the major themes of the synod. The importance De La Salle placed on such reflection is perfectly obvious to anyone who analyzes his meditations, particularly those he prepared for the Brothers to use during the quiet moments of their annual retreat. He knew that without a clear vision and a keen sense of who God wants us to be and what God wants us to do, we become disoriented, confused, ineffective, and unattractive.

“Charism”

In my pastoral letter entitled *Living Authentically in Christ Jesus*, 1 January 1994, I devoted eleven pages to the topic of “charism.” I shall, therefore, be brief today. The word has been widely used in reference to religious life only since Vatican II. It has profound meaning and significance as an expression of the marvelous diversity which characterizes the “ecclesial communion” which is the Church. The Church must strive to bring Christ’s loving and saving presence to all aspects of life and to all peoples. To enable the Church to fulfill that

mission, the Holy Spirit has given a multitude and variety of charisms. We can look upon the Church as a “communion of charisms and ministries” (*Christifideles Laici*, 20-21).

In the early days of the synod, several bishops expressed the hope that the assembly would help clarify the term “charism.” But my impression was that most of the members of the synod accepted the word as it is generally used today: 1) to express, in a generic sense, the “gift” of consecrated life to the Church and to the world, and 2) to express, in a specific sense, the particular gifts received by founders and transmitted to their disciples.

A charism is a specific manner of living baptismal consecration. It implies a particular mode of being, mission, fraternal life, and spirituality. It is a gift of the Spirit to the Church for the service of the world. It is dynamic, not static. It is confided to a particular institute “to be lived, safeguarded, deepened, and constantly developed” (*Mutual Relations*, 11).

It is not surprising that De La Salle never used the word. What is surprising—more than that—what is impressive and inspiring is that he wrote **AS IF** he knew the word and all it implies:

“There are diverse ministries, but there are different operations, and the Holy Spirit manifests himself in each of these gifts for the common good, that is to

say, for the good of the Church. One receives by the Spirit the gift to speak with wisdom, another the gift of faith by the same Spirit.

“You must not doubt that it is a great gift of God, this grace he has given you to be entrusted with the instruction of children, to announce the gospel to them, and to bring them up in the spirit of religion.”

These passages reveal clearly that our Founder was convinced that this new and original manner of living baptismal consecration—committing oneself totally to God in order to exercise, by association, the apostolic ministry of education (*Rule*, 2)—was “a great gift of God . . . who has established in the Church apostles, prophets, and teachers.”

God’s initiative

In his introduction to an English-language translation of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, Brother Miguel Campos states that “the main *character* of the meditations is God, the living God who calls, who chooses, who sends on mission.” The truth of these words is evident:

It is God who has established in the Church apostles, prophets, and teachers. . . . **It is he** who has also established you in your work;

“**It is God** who has called you, who has destined you for this work, and who has sent you to work in his vineyard.”

Yes, it is God who has taken the initiative, God in his Providence, that is to say, in his loving care and concern for children and young people—especially those who are poor—God in his desire that they come to knowledge of the truth and be saved. This loving God has kindled a light in the hearts of the persons he has **destined** to receive this charism. This light enables these **chosen** persons to become aware that they have been **called**, that they have been **sent** to evangelize the young through human and Christian education (*Med.* 193).

God has called the Brothers of the Christian Schools to a specific “ministry” in the Church. De La Salle’s use of this word to describe the apostolic service of the Brothers is bold. He situates the Brothers’ service squarely in the context of the “diverse ministries” to which Paul makes frequent reference.

Three times in this meditation alone, the Founder reminds the Brothers that God has called them to “**this holy ministry**,” that they have to be prepared to give their life if necessary in the exercise of “**your ministry**.” Furthermore, he insists

“. . . that you look upon yourselves as **ministers** of God. . . . you are not only

the **ministers** of God, but also of Jesus Christ and of the Church. This is what St. Paul says when he expresses the wish that everyone should regard those who announce the Gospel as **ministers** of Jesus Christ.”

De La Salle’s remark that Paul wishes that those who announce the Gospel be considered “ministers of Jesus Christ” is interesting. Not everyone agrees. There are those who would like to reserve the word “ministry” to “clerical services.” For this reason I am happy that in the proposition concerning religious institutes of sisters or brothers, explicit references are made to their participation in the ministry of the Church and to their specific **ministries**, which are, in their very nature, ecclesial.

In this meditation the Founder also uses other images for the Brothers: **ambassadors** of Jesus Christ and, at least indirectly, **good shepherds**. Although he does not seem to speak of the Brothers as “prophets,” he places the vocation of the Brothers unambiguously in the company of “apostles, prophets, and teachers.”

The prophetic dimension

In his meditation for the Third Sunday of Advent, De La Salle says that John the Baptist, when asked whether he was the Christ, or

Elijah, or a prophet, answered that he was none of these. He declared that he was only a voice that proclaimed the Word of God. De La Salle says that it is the same for those who instruct others. "They are only the voice of the One who really disposes hearts to accept Jesus Christ and his holy teaching." The Founder adds that the prophets spoke by the movement of the Holy Spirit and that "it is also by the movement of the Spirit of God that all those who today proclaim his kingdom continue to speak."

I have the impression—but I could be wrong—that the Founder wanted his Brothers to be aware of the "prophetic dimension" of their vocation but that he did not encourage them to call themselves "prophets." I think it accurate to say, however, that he wanted them to exercise a prophetic role as ministers and ambassadors of Jesus Christ.

I raise this topic because there were numerous references during the synod to the prophetic dimension of consecrated life, to prophecy, to living as "prophets." That religious life—including that of the Brothers of the Christian Schools—is intended to be "prophetic" is undeniable. The *Instrumentum Laboris* states that consecrated persons have "a special prophetic role in the midst of the People of God, which is prophetic in its very nature" (64). But because the word itself is used so frequently and not always with clarity, precision, and

consistency of meaning, I tend to use the expression with some caution.

Prophetic, prophecy, prophets. . . . Ask someone in the street what prophets do—and you will probably be told that they foretell the future. If that "someone in the street" knows the Bible, you might be told that prophets cry out to rulers and to all concerned: "Be converted . . . or face the consequences." Ask a religious, and you might be told that prophets denounce all forms of injustice and institutionalized violence. The concept of prophecy is complex. It is important that its comprehensiveness and richness be accepted in its entirety.

Our prophetic role

In her intervention, Sister Doris Gottemoeller, RSM, said that prophecy is not necessarily a matter of dramatic speeches and gestures, although some occasions call for them, but rather "a transparency to the divine which is the fruit of a life focused on Jesus and which is the real meaning of prophecy—speaking of God." To say that the Church is prophetic in its very nature is to say that we Christians must witness to the existence and presence of the loving God and to what we discern to be his will. This witnessing is expressed in proclamation, denunciation, liberation, solidarity, hope. . . . Living this special prophetic role can

be costly. It can bring upon us criticism, rejection, persecution, and even death.

To live this role authentically, we must be men of God. How easy it is to say those words. What a different matter it is to take them literally: to **BE** men of God; to **BE** “religious people,” to be “at home” in God’s presence; to live in loving relationship with God; to “walk” with him—as Christians: persons who really believe in Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life and are totally committed to him, having made public profession to follow him and to be faithful to his teachings.

When Christ is the focus of our life, we learn to think, judge, and act as he wants us to think, judge, and act. More than that, we begin to understand what Paul meant when he said, “I live now not I, but Christ lives in me. . . . For me to live is Christ.” We grow in our prophetic vocation to “represent” Christ and thus to reveal him to believers and unbelievers alike—Christ in contemplation on the mountain, Christ healing the sick, Christ blessing children (*Lumen Gentium*, 46).

In other words, we make the loving and saving presence of Christ a visible and effective reality in the Church and in the world. That is our prophetic role as Brothers of the Christian Schools, as ministers and ambassadors of Jesus Christ. Several bishops reminded consecrated women and men that their life makes

sense only if Christ is truly at the center. I think we need to hear that message frequently. We need to be reminded and encouraged to be men of prayer, persons in regular and frequent “contact” with the Lord, persons who devote time on a regular basis to reading and meditating the Scriptures, to spiritual reading, to theological study. Our daily Eucharist provides us the opportunity to renew, in union with Christ, our total consecration to the Trinity and our unconditional commitment to live wholeheartedly this specific way of living baptismal consecration.

What all this means, Brothers, is that each of us has to integrate in a personal synthesis all aspects of the three dimensions that constitute our particular vocation: consecration, mission, community. It is in the ongoing process of interiorization and integration—and of striving to live that synthesis with ever-increasing authenticity—that we establish our “identity” as Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Our specific role

But having said all this, we still have to reflect more deeply on our prophetic vocation within the context of other vocations in the Church. All Christians are called to holiness, to participation in the prophetic mission of the Church. What then is “special” about religious life?

While the fact that the synod recommended that a commission be established to study the identity, nature, and place of religious life within the ecclesial community is a clear indication that questions remain, there was a consensus that women and men religious are called to be **SIGNS** of the loving presence of Christ.

Religious make **PUBLIC** profession of the will to follow Jesus and to live the Gospel fully and radically for all their lifetime. Throughout the history of the Church, men and women have experienced a call to live their baptismal consecration in this extraordinary manner. It is extraordinary in that it is not the common, normal way. But to say that it is extraordinary is not to say that religious are therefore holier than those God calls to pursue holiness in very different manners.

Unfortunately, certain expressions used to compare diverse ways of living baptismal consecration can be interpreted as implying greater holiness on the part of religious. Despite that danger, however, the synod, both in its *Message* and in its recommendations to the Holy Father, followed the lead of Vatican II in stating that consecrated life is a particular way of living baptismal consecration in which those who have been called commit themselves to following Christ *more closely, more radically, more intimately*. Questioned several years ago concerning the appropriateness of such expressions, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, Superior

General of the Society of Jesus, responded:

“. . . when we use the expression to **follow the Lord more closely**, we are referring to the lives of the apostles, who likewise existentially followed the Lord. Among them, there were people whose holiness might have been in doubt, and one of them was actually a traitor; yet, for twenty-four hours in the day they stood with the Lord; and the Lord it was who determined their way of life.

“Today, in one way or another, religious do the same; they lay their lives out totally in the service of the Lord. . . . they renounce leading a life of their own, setting up their own home, having a profession of their own, and allow themselves to be guided by obedience into forming part of an apostolic body, giving primacy to the will of God and relocating the vital space of their personal freedom in God” (*Men of God: Men for Others*, pp. 147, 150).

I find helpful also the position of one of the working groups of the synod, which asserted that consecrated life is neither *outside*, nor *parallel* to, nor *above* Christian life, but rather is *inside* it. Its identity lies in the capacity to be a clear and visible **SIGN** of the radical choice of Christ which is innate in the vocation of all Christians.

When we live our baptismal consecration as Brothers of the Christian Schools, we **"SAY"** to all those with whom we are in daily contact: **"WE BELIEVE: WE BELIEVE IN GOD AND IN JESUS CHRIST."** That we have freely become Brothers and freely persevere is a declaration of our faith. When we communicate to others, directly and indirectly, that we are truly "at home" with God and "walk with" him every day, we become a source of surprise, perplexity, and questioning. Our life becomes a message, an invitation, and a challenge. And that is precisely what our prophetic role is all about.

Purity of heart

Several times over the years I have referred to Søren Kierkegaard's definition of "purity of heart:" "to will one thing." Following that lead, purity of heart means that we strive to "will one thing," namely God's glory. Consequently, we try to make our own those words the author of the letter to the Hebrews puts in the mouth of Christ: "*God, here I am! I am coming to obey your will*" (Heb 10:7). After reminding us of our obligation as ministers to announce the Gospel to the young, De La Salle says that

"You must have the love and the glory of God as your **single aim**. . . . Do this, then, with all the affection of your heart, working entirely for him."

The call to fidelity and to authenticity in all aspects of our life is demanding. The synod is challenging us—as our Founder did and as our last three General Chapters have done—to take literally and seriously the words of our formula of consecration. We are being challenged to increase our efforts to "close the gap" between the ideals we articulate and the lives we live.

We have to remind ourselves that De La Salle's extraordinary emphasis on "zeal"—46 times during the eight-day retreat!—is in no way an invitation to "activism." It is, on the contrary, an invitation to a profound apostolic spirituality. It is an invitation to be instruments of the "Spirit of the Living God" who enables us to touch the hearts of those he confides to our care.

"In calling you to this holy ministry, God **DEMANDS** that you fulfill it with an ardent zeal for their salvation, because this is the work of God, and he curses the one who does his work carelessly."

He exhorts us to fulfill our ministry

". . . with love and a sincere and true zeal, accepting with much patience the difficulties you have to suffer, willing to be despised by men and to be persecuted, even to give your life for Jesus in the fulfillment of your ministry."

Our mission

Given the magnitude of the impact recent changes in the world and in the Church have had on religious life, it is not surprising that the synod gave major attention to questions of fundamental importance: the very nature of religious life, its specific role, its relationship to other forms of consecrated life and new groups and movements, and its relationship to the entire ecclesial community.

Nevertheless, following the lead of the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which treated mission quite comprehensively, many participants spoke of the participation of religious institutes in the mission of the Church. I don't intend to report in a systematic manner on either the interventions or the propositions which they inspired. Instead, I shall continue to "meditate" on the ninth Meditation in the light of those interventions and propositions.

It is for the Church that we work

"You must not doubt that it is a great gift of God, this grace he has given you to be entrusted with the instruction of children, to announce the Gospel to them, and to bring them up in the spirit of religion."

Once again we are reminded that our vocation of instructing young people, of announcing

the Gospel to them, and of assisting them to grow in the spirit of their religion is a special grace, a "great gift of God." It is a specific charism among those charisms of the Spirit which enable the Church to "show forth Christ" in all aspects of life and among all people.

"... the Holy Spirit manifests himself in each of these gifts for the common good, that is to say, for the good of the Church."

De La Salle insists that our mission is ecclesial in its very nature: "It is for the Church (which is the body of Jesus Christ) that you work." De La Salle's vision of our vocation converges in a striking manner with the orientation of the synod that religious sisters and brothers should be aware that the ministries to which they are committed are, in their very nature, ecclesial.

But it is interesting to reflect on what the Founder says in this meditation concerning the Church. I don't want to "read into" the meditations something that is not there or attribute to the Founder an "ecclesiology of communion" that has been developed only in our own century. Nevertheless, he states clearly that the Church **IS** the Body of Jesus Christ. He says that it is our duty to share in the great zeal of the Church for the sanctification of her children and that we should be able to say, with David,

“. . . the zeal of your house has consumed me. For this house is none other than the Church, since the faithful form this building which has been built on the foundation of the apostles and raised up by Jesus Christ, who is the main cornerstone.”

He declares that it is the faithful who constitute this Church built on the foundation of the apostles, the cornerstone of which is Jesus Christ himself. Moreover, he urges the Brothers to give “tangible proof that you love those whom God has entrusted to you, just as Jesus Christ has loved his Church.” That Church which Jesus Christ has loved is the communion of the faithful. With that same understanding of Church in mind, De La Salle exhorts the Brothers to show the Church “what love you have for her and give her proof of your zeal.”

It seems to me legitimate to conclude, therefore, that despite the Founder’s insistence on loyalty to the Pope and the Bishops, he did not “identify” Church with the hierarchy.

There is great food for thought here, Brothers. Our Founder wants us to be **MEN OF THE CHURCH**. It is clear to me that despite the conflicts De La Salle had with particular members of the hierarchy and with certain clerics, he was totally convinced that the vocation of the Brothers was ecclesial in its very nature: the Brothers should perceive themselves not only as “ministers of God, but also of Jesus Christ and of the Church.”

Brothers, we are ministers in a Church which is a communion not of “angels,” but of “human persons.” The implications of that statement don’t have to be rendered explicit. As loyal members of the Church at every level, we have to make a significant contribution to its life and mission—as individuals, as communities, as Districts, as Regions, as Institute.

Without in any way compromising our legitimate autonomy in internal affairs, we have to work in close harmony with bishops, priests, members of other religious institutes, members of new groups and movements, and the laity in general.

“Mutual relations”—between bishops and religious and among all who constitute the ecclesial community—was a prominent topic of the synod. Many participants stressed the importance of a common pastoral plan at all levels. Every apostolic work—traditional or innovative—must be well integrated in the plan of the particular Church. For this purpose dialogue among all those who constitute the local Church is essential. Several bishops spoke of the excellent contribution being made by commissions established to promote coordination and collaboration among bishops, parish priests, parishioners, religious, members of new movements, etc. Others, on the other hand, lamented the lack of effective structures to promote dialogue and mutual planning and the consequent lack of coordination of pastoral activities.

Some of the dioceses in which we serve have well-developed pastoral programs that reflect a coordinated approach to mission. Other dioceses do not. We have much to contribute, Brothers, to this coordination. We should not be passive spectators in the life of the local Church. Furthermore, we need to make sure that our apostolic activities and initiatives are not only not isolated from the rest of the ecclesial community, but also firmly integrated in a common pastoral plan.

But, needless to say, there will be occasional differences of opinion and even tensions. At such times, as several synod participants stated, dialogue is more important than ever. Father Timothy Radcliffe, Master General of the Dominicans, recalled that while the early Church is described as “one in heart and mind,” there were disagreements and quarrels. Debates and arguments, he said, can be signs of vitality—as long as there is mutual respect, acknowledgement of legitimate diversity, and a committed effort to learn from one another.

Our mission of human and Christian education

St. De La Salle told the first Brothers that God had charged them with responsibility for instructing young people, announcing the Gospel to them, and bringing them up in the spirit

of religion. Today we might describe these three dimensions as education, catechesis, and pastoral services. The privileged means for fulfilling this responsibility is the Christian school, a school which is a sign of the Kingdom, is a means of salvation, is always being renewed, and is accessible to the poor (*Rule 3*).

I was pleased that the synod characterized Catholic education as very important and urged religious who have this special charism to be faithful to Catholic schools, mentioning specifically that Catholic schools are among the principal means for helping the poor to liberate themselves from misery.

Salvation

After specifying that threefold apostolic responsibility of the Brothers, the Founder says that “in calling you to this holy ministry, God demands that you fulfill it with an ardent zeal for their **salvation**.”

When De La Salle speaks of salvation—which is very often—he undoubtedly refers to eternal salvation. But the last paragraph of this meditation seems to me to reveal that the salvation for which the Brothers should have “ardent zeal” is not limited to eternal life. He reminds us that our mission, like that of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is to enable children to find life in abundance. For this purpose we have to sacrifice ourselves and spend our

whole life “to give these children a Christian education and to procure for them the life of grace in this world and eternal life in the next.”

Whatever interpretation we decide to give these words, we should today understand the “salvation” of our young people not only as liberation from sin and death and the attainment of eternal happiness, but also as liberation from all that holds them back from developing their potential as the human persons God wants them to be.

God wants youth “to come to knowledge of the truth and be saved.” For this reason he confides them to our care and asks us to be their “brothers.” They differ in race, ethnic heritage, language, economic class, intellectual ability, talent, and religion. But they all have the *right* to become the persons God wants them to become—and we have the *duty* of assuring that their *right* is honored. As Brothers we accept our students and pupils “where they are”—not where we think they should be, not where we were when we were their age, not where our past pupils were in the '60s, '70s, and '80s. We welcome them with their questions, convictions, perplexities, concerns, hopes, fears, anger, frustrations. We respect them, accompany them, walk side by side with them. We share with them what we “see,” but in total respect for their liberty. We never try to impose our views upon them.

Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue

I included “religion” in that list of differences. We have youth in our schools today—often in the same school—who are “living” their Catholic faith and those who are not; youth who are Christians but not Catholic; youth who are non-Christian; youth who are indifferent or even hostile towards all “organized” religions.

In this context how do we understand “salvation?” How do we understand “Catholic school?” These are questions to which the Church has given considerable attention, particularly since Vatican II. The synod addressed the questions in a context, urging religious to maintain close relationships with Christians of other Churches and ecclesial communities and with non-Christians—relationships that focus on what unites rather than what divides us:

“The Synod fervently desires that interest in both ecumenical and interreligious dialogue grow. We ask consecrated persons in their different countries to develop this interest” (*Message*, VIII).

Moreover, the synod asked religious institutes to give priority to “dialogue of life” with non-Christians as a “fundamental mode of mission.” That is an important statement. The Church considers “dialogue” and “proclamation” to be two distinct expressions of evangelization. Both dialogue and proclamation should be very evident in our Lasallian schools today.

The Church gives “dialogue” a broad interpretation. We can identify at least six ways in which we can engage our young people in dialogue—whether they are Christians or non-Christians, believers or non-believers:

1. *fraternal relations*: when we promote fraternal relations among our young people, regardless of their religious beliefs, we are evangelizing;
2. *human promotion and education*: when we commit ourselves to the intellectual, moral, psychological, and physical development of those God confides to our care, we are evangelizing;
3. *promotion of justice*: when we strive to sensitize our students and pupils to questions of social justice and encourage them to commit themselves to the construction of a more just society, we are evangelizing;
4. *prayer*: when we make possible and promote various forms and celebrations of religious expression and of prayer among our young people, we are evangelizing;
5. *informal “dialogue:”* when we communicate with youth through the signs and symbols which identify the school as Catholic and when we share our faith with young people in informal conversa-

tion—while manifesting total respect for them in their belief or non-belief—we are evangelizing;

6. *formal “dialogue:”* when we organize lectures, seminars, discussion groups on topics relating to our faith as Christians, we are evangelizing.

But to affirm that to dialogue in these various ways is to evangelize is not to say that evangelization is limited to dialogue. The Church, missionary in its very nature, must evangelize by proclaiming Jesus Christ. More than once in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II insists that young people have the right to hear about Jesus Christ and that we Christians have the duty to respond to this right. But more than once also, he insists, and even employs italics for emphasis, that we must *propose, never impose*, Jesus Christ.

We propose Jesus Christ because we believe that he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We believe that he reveals what being human really means, as well as who God is and how he relates to us. It is our love for young people that makes us want to share our knowledge of Jesus Christ with them. Of course, we must, as the *Rule* suggests, find the “right moment” and “use appropriate language to speak of Jesus Christ” (15). But we should not be timid or fearful. The fact that impressive numbers of young people are actively engaged

in Christian movements, groups, and assemblies is a clear indication that many young people are open to receiving the message of the Gospel. We must take them "where they are!"

A Brother who works in a school in which most of the pupils are not Christian said recently that "*despite* the fact that we are a Catholic school, we accept all who come to us." I think it is more accurate to say, "*because* we are a Catholic school, we accept all who come to us." As John Paul II says:

"The Church, precisely because it is Catholic, is open to dialogue with all other Christians, with the followers of non-Christian religions, and also with all people of good will (p. 141). . . . Christ wants to awaken faith in human hearts . . . but he wants this in full respect for human dignity. In the very search for faith an implicit faith is already present, and therefore the necessary condition for salvation is already satisfied" (*Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, pp. 141, 193).

Other synod orientations

Brothers, there were numerous other interesting interventions and propositions which are pertinent to our specific mission: topics such as new apostolates in response to new needs,

preferential option for the poor, inculturation, mission *ad gentes*, social communication. . . .

Several participants reminded religious that they are expected to be on the *front lines*, in the *desert*, on the *margins of society*. They urged religious to respond to "new needs"—including those of the poor—with the kind of creativity manifested by their founders.

But religious were challenged not only to serve the poor, but also to live among them, inserted in their world—that is to say, to bring Christ's loving presence to the poor. Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, OMI, of the Philippines, while acknowledging the difficulties and tensions that have often accompanied such initiatives, urged religious "to live and work among the poor in the footsteps of Jesus, poor, chaste, and obedient."

One of the most challenging of all the interventions was that of Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, President of the *Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace*. In uncompromising language he reminded religious that poverty was central to their prophetic mission. He said that a valid résumé of Christian life is the radical choice that must be made between "two masters." He acknowledged the confusion that surrounds the meaning of religious poverty—many African bishops, for example, had expressed the difficulty that economically poor people have in understanding it. He insisted,

nevertheless, that evangelical poverty is the hardest but surest test of the authenticity of evangelization.

Living the Lasallian mission today

The conference I gave in Strasbourg last March to the nine hundred participants at the European Lasallian Congress was addressed to all persons participating in our Lasallian mission today. This pastoral letter, however, is addressed to the Brothers. Nevertheless, some of our partners might find parts of it useful.

I think that it is important that I say explicitly that in addressing the Brothers I am addressing 7% of those actively engaged today in the Lasallian mission. According to the statistics compiled by the office of our Secretary General, of the 55,747 persons engaged in Lasallian education today, 50,496 (91%) are lay men and women; 4,033 (7%) are Brothers; and 1,218 (2%) are priests or members of other religious institutes.

These statistics help us to understand and appreciate those General Chapter statements to which I called attention last year: that shared mission constitutes an integral part of our vocation, that looking upon ourselves as the *authorized agents* of our mission is obsolete, that our key role is to be the "primary witnesses" of the spirit and charism of the Founder, that we Brothers must "make visible the call to live the

Gospel in depth," and that we must be "readily available" for the educational service of the poor (*Living Authentically in Christ Jesus*, p. 44).

The orientations of the synod give strong support to each of those positions.

CONCLUSION

My point of departure has been a specific meditation of St. De La Salle. The presentation of the results of the synod has been, therefore, limited in scope and, consequently, incomplete. I have said little or nothing, at least directly, about community life, celibate chastity, poverty, obedience, or about the interventions and propositions concerning monastic congregations and other forms, both old and new, of consecrated life.

For me the synod was a rich, challenging, and encouraging experience. The concrete positions it adopted are, I think, a confirmation of the directions taken by our Institute in the four General Chapters which have followed the Second Vatican Council.

I am well aware, however, and you are also, that communicating to others significant personal experiences—such as those of chapters, retreats, renewal sessions, synods—is difficult, if not impossible. Moreover, some of you have written that very little information on the synod has been available in your local areas.

I think, however, that this situation is changing. Materials are now appearing in magazines and books that can be helpful to you personally and can serve as the basis of community discussions.

But as positive as I am about the synod, I am under no illusions about the seriousness of the crisis religious life is facing. Several times during the synod, as I listened to an intervention that I considered pertinent, insightful, and even inspiring, I found myself asking,

“But will it make any difference? We in this synod hall are a group of religious professionals talking among ourselves. The tone is positive, enthusiastic, hopeful. We are going to prepare recommendations to present to the Holy Father, who in turn will write a document. But will all that make a difference? Will what we are saying and doing here have a positive impact on those upon whom the future of religious life depends—namely, Catholic young people?”

I answered my own question in the affirmative. I said to myself, “Yes, this synod can help to assure that religious life has a dynamic future of service to the Church and to the world.” But how can it help? How can it assist the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools?

My response is that the synod has strongly affirmed the importance of religious life in the Church and in the world today and, at least to an appreciable extent, has contributed to a better understanding of the specific role of women and men religious within the ecclesial community. Furthermore, it has called religious to live their consecrated life, in all its dimensions, with greater authenticity. These accomplishments of the synod will certainly not “solve” our problems for us—but they can help.

They can stimulate us to **BELIEVE**—in the manner I described in the opening pages of this letter. That kind of faith in humanity, in one another, in ourselves, and in God will enable us to satisfy the following conditions, conditions that must be satisfied if our Institute is to “continue to respond with ardent zeal to the appeals of the Lord, the Church, and the world, in order to procure the glory of God” (*Rule*, 149):

- 1) We must be men of God, men totally committed to the following of Jesus Christ and of his Gospel—and for this purpose we must be men of prayer.
- 2) We must have—not just on paper but in our minds and hearts—a common understanding of our charism, that is to say, of who God wants us to be, what he wants us to do, how he wants us to do it.

- 3) This understanding of our calling must be translated into apostolic goals and objectives which we pursue with singleness of purpose and ardent zeal and which inspire us to “sacrifice ourselves and spend our whole life” on behalf of those God wishes to entrust to our care.
- 4) We need to be convinced that our vocation is truly a “great gift of God,” a charism that is recognized, appreciated, needed, and wanted.
- 5) We have to commit ourselves to living in a manner that can be described by the word **YES** rather than the words *perhaps, maybe, somewhat . . .* a life, therefore, of faith, hope, love, zeal, and courage.

Brothers, we must “pray as if everything depends on God and work as if everything depends on ourselves.” We must be “pro-active.” That is to say, rather than wait passively for the future to arrive, we have to take responsibility for creating that future, and thus **PRAY** and **ACT** decisively and constructively at the personal, community, District, Regional, and Institute levels.

Then, I am convinced, we shall recover our confidence, our pride, our enthusiasm. When that happens, we shall begin again to communicate, not in word, but in daily life, that we are

finding meaning, significance, and happiness in living our baptismal consecration in accord with this “great gift of God” which is our charism. We shall be the **SIGNS** we are called to be. Potential candidates will **SEE**—and not just read—what our life is all about. I think they will once again begin to say **YES** to God’s call to follow Christ as Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Fraternally in De La Salle,



Brother John Johnston, FSC
Superior General