

BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS



Pastoral Letter to the Brothers

THE BROTHER'S VOCATION TODAY

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC

Superior General

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Dear Brothers:

The pastoral ministry of vocations was the object of Proposition 26 of our last General Chapter. It stated that, during the course of 2003, *each Region of the Institute, singly or in cooperation with others, plan and hold a Lasallian workshop on the pastoral ministry of vocations for the purpose of giving fresh impetus to vocation ministry in Districts, Sub-Districts and Delegations* (Proposition 26). Consequently, this year has special importance for the 11 Regions of the Institute in relaunching a vibrant and active program for the pastoral ministry of vocations.

As I have shared with you on other occasions, this proposition owed much to the tenacity and interest of the young Brothers who were present at the Chapter. Like many of the other Brother capitulants, I was very impressed by the faith witness and love for our vocation exemplified by these young Brothers. I am convinced that what is most important for vocation ministry is that we believe in our own vocation and in the validity of that vocation today. In so doing we make article 141 of the Rule our own: *The words of St. John Baptist de La Salle are still true: "The need for this Institute is very great." The young, the poor, the world and the Church still need the ministry of the Brothers.* Obviously, there are many different experiences of vocation ministry throughout the Institute. The long-

established Districts are seeing the number of vocations decline while the Institute is increasing in many young Districts. Consequently, it is important to consider the Institute as a whole rather than focus on one of its parts. What is actually emerging is a more multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Institute and this is both an extraordinary richness and a great challenge.

Most of the reflections that follow were shared last year at a vocation workshop organized by ARLEP (Lasallian Region of Spain and Portugal). Throughout this letter I will make reference to the Brother's vocation but I am aware that the pastoral ministry of vocations ought to identify and promote a charism that is expressed through different vocations. Obviously, the topic of vocations inevitably opens up related areas of shared mission and Association. We should not forget that we work for the Church and therefore we can be justifiably proud that so many bishops, priests, religious and committed lay persons have been educated in our schools. In this connection, during my recent visit to Asia I had the opportunity to meet a good number of bishops, almost all of them former students from our schools in Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia.

FOR A CHANGING WORLD - A NEW PASTORAL MINISTRY FOR VOCATIONS

History teaches that the charism of consecrated life is always evolving. While always remaining faithful to the charism of the founders, it is capable of finding or “inventing” new forms which respond more directly to the needs and the aspirations of the time (John Paul II, Audience of

28 September 1994).

Today we hear much talk about the aim of history being an invitation to renounce ideals and commitment. What counts, it is said, is intimacy and personal fulfillment, a type of thinking that excludes history and relationships with others. This leads to the danger of excessive individualism that is expressed through private worship, and in the yearning for success, image and power. This kind of thinking, in which everything is provisional and nothing seems definite, obviously has consequences for the pastoral ministry of vocations. It is also expressed in the breakdown of many stable relationships both in the family as well as in religious life itself. Another factor today is that the process of identity development is more extended with the result that vocational decisions tend to be taken later.

At the invitation of the Church, the Institute undertook a journey towards adapted renewal beginning with the General Chapter of 1966 - 1967. This renewal was necessary and produced excellent results. However, it no longer seems adequate for today. We must take the next step. John Paul II invites us to “invent” new responses. Renewal is different from re-creating. Renewal is accomplished at the structural level whereas re-foundation goes beyond this. It must touch persons and transform the Gospel memory out of which emerge timely responses to the challenges of today. Renewal is focused on the past while re-foundation looks towards the future. Sometimes foreseeing the future

consists in thinking about the present and maintaining it. This would be a linear movement. But today this is not enough. We are in a period of radical paradigm changes in which linear forecasting will not work because the paradigm change presumes a break and not continuity. As Denis Gabor puts it: *“We cannot predict the future. We have to invent it”*. Young people, with their new language, can help us to describe the new directions to be taken both within and outside of religious life. As the Latin-American Conference for Religious (CLAR) tells us: *“they (young people) have a new voice which must be listened to. They have a story that they want to share and they need space in this ongoing task of renewing and re-founding religious life.”*

However, on the other hand, the problem of identity, about which so much is spoken today, cannot be separated from the mission. The issue of identity will not be resolved by simply re-establishing external signs such as lifestyle, habit, distinctive symbols, institutions etc. Our identity, both personal and collective, can better be rediscovered through our mission which is our *raison d'être*. When a group clearly identifies its mission it is able to “invent”. It is able to take the risk of creating new and significant initiatives that respond to current needs. As Victor Frankl puts it: *“Those who have a **reason to live** can put up with almost any kind **of how to live** (Nietzsche). I see in these words a driving force which is valid for any kind of psychotherapy. The concentration camps showed that those most apt to survive were those who knew that a task that needed to be done was waiting for them.”*

The European Congress on Vocations held in 1997 took up the Pope's invitation to make a qualitative leap with regard to the pastoral ministry of vocations. He told us that *“it is time to make a decisive move away from the 'pathology of tiredness' and resignation. This justifies itself by attributing the only cause of the vocation crisis to the current generation of young people. We must have the courage to ask the appropriate questions and to recognize possible mistakes and errors in order to give a new, enthusiastic and creative witness”* (*New Vocations for a new Europe*, 13).

SOME ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PASTORAL VOCATION MINISTRY

The first condition for an authentic pastoral vocation ministry is to have faith in our own vocation. We must believe in the value that religious life and the vocation of the De La Salle Brother continue to have today. *Vita Consecrata* speaks of this value as follows: *“What would become of the world if there were no religious? Beyond all superficial assessments of its usefulness, the consecrated life is important precisely in its being unbounded generosity and love, and this all the more so in a world which risks being suffocated in the whirlpool of the ephemeral”* (V.C 105). This is absolutely fundamental. Without a deep faith in who we are, it is impossible to attract others to follow us. This is particularly so in a world where, as the same post-synodal document tells us, many doubt the very meaning of religious life: *“Many people today are puzzled and ask: What is the point of consecrated life? Why embrace this kind of life, when there are so many urgent needs in the areas of charity and of evangelization itself, to which one can*

respond even without assuming the particular commitments of the consecrated life?" (V. C. 104)

The response to such questions cannot be made on the functional level. What gives meaning to our lives is that we have been seized by God and we want to respond to his love with the total gift of ourselves. We cannot do anything else. On the other hand, and possibly this is one of the ambiguous signs of the times, young people today feel more attracted by the mystical rather than by the functional aspect of religious life. When I was Visitor of Central America, one mandatory question in my first interview with postulants was "What was their motivation for wanting to be Brothers?" During those years, marked by liberation theology and by revolutions, by wars and by a very great sensitivity to justice, their motivation was frequently of an apostolic or social nature. It seems to me that young people today have other motivations that are more centered in the search for meaning and spirituality. While both positions are ambiguous they are surely signs of the times. If in the past it was necessary for young people to integrate the spiritual dimension, perhaps today it is necessary for them to integrate the social and apostolic dimension.

I believe that we are all aware that the topic of **VOCA-TIONS** is a vital one for us. But I believe that what is most important is not a preoccupation about survival or about not dying. What is fundamental is to respond to the growing needs of the poor and the young and to respond with fidelity to their calls. They are our *raison d'être*. What should inspire us is the building up of the Kingdom. It is love for needy men and women that should inspire us to be **active witnesses**.

According to Amadeo Cencini in his wonderful book *Vocations: From nostalgia to prophecy*, the pastoral ministry of vocations should keep three major strategic dimensions in mind. First of all, there is the area of **charism**. This should lead us to present the order's foundational story to the candidate, along with the inspiration we take from that story and the new ways of expressing it. Secondly, there is the **anthropological** dimension. This should help the candidate to see that the journey to which he is invited will promote full human and evangelical fulfillment. Thirdly, there is the **spiritual** dimension. This offers a spirituality that gives meaning to mission and that can fulfill the candidate's aspirations for the transcendent.

Finally, we can ask ourselves why certain groups in the Church today do have vocations. In 1993, Albert Dilanni, then Vicar General of the Marist Fathers, published an article in the American magazine *Review for Religious* in which he tried to respond to the question of why there are groups that are able to awaken vocational interest in the so-called first world. Personally, I am not totally in agreement with what he says because it seems to me that these groups have yet to withstand the test of time and because some of their methods are not the most appropriate. Nonetheless, it is interesting to focus on the reasons why these groups are attractive to young people and to ask ourselves to what extent we can use them to our advantage. There appear to be three reasons that explain this attractiveness: (1) They have explicitly religious objectives (2) They offer an intense community experience (3) They have a passion for evangelizing the world.

- With regard to explicitly religious objectives, the article

showed that the objectives that attract young people to these groups today are not to be found in the psychological realm or in the realm of social action. Neither are they concerned with the search for justice and peace. What does attract them is the message that Jesus is alive and present. Young people are not attracted by a political interpretation of faith or by its intellectual presentation. Without falling into the reductionism or into the spirituality that characterizes several of these groups, should we not ask ourselves: To what extent do we offer young people a witness of God as absolute in our lives? To what extent do we offer them a witness of the centrality of Jesus in our lives? To what extent do we offer them a spirituality and an experience of mysticism that is attractive?

- Secondly, these new groups attract young people because they offer a powerful community experience and effective mutual support. As a consequence of the weakening of family relationships, young people are searching for a new reference group that responds to their fragility and need for support. They give more importance to affective ties and to a life-style that is simple and not highly structured in preference to a life-style that is authoritarian and formal. They value spontaneous sharing and the sharing of different aspects of their lives. In this regard it would be worth asking ourselves: To what extent do our communities offer a welcoming space to young people? To what extent are our communities places of sharing, celebration and pardon? In this connection I would like to refer you to my December 2002 Pastoral Letter: *Being Brothers in Community: Our Primary Association*.
- Another reason for the attractiveness of these groups is

their passionate desire to evangelize the world. These groups make the Gospel the foundation of their lives and they want to proclaim it everywhere. It is possible that, at times, they fall into a kind of fundamentalism and that they are insensitive to the realities of the postmodern world or to inter-religious dialogue. But is it not still true that our vocation consists in *consecrating our lives to God in order to bring the Gospel to the educational world?* (Rule, 12) and that we understand our **principal function** *to be the work of evangelization and catechesis whereby we contribute to growth in faith of those who have been baptized and to the building up of the ecclesial community?* (Rule, 15)

GOSPEL INSPIRATION

In the Gospel, (Mark 3: 13-15) to follow Jesus implies two basic postures:

- To live with Jesus: ***“So they came to him”***
- Being involved in a mission for the Kingdom: ***“They were sent out to proclaim the message.”***

In other words, following Jesus means being called into intimacy with him. Through a deep faith and contemplative relationship we allow ourselves to be captivated by his person. We become deeply influenced by his actions and by the fulfillment of the Kingdom mission as entrusted to him by the Father. But following Jesus does not end there. To follow means to continue, to pursue. In other words, it means to carry his mission forward with him and like him: *“As the Father sent me, so am I sending you”* (John 20: 21), *“I am with you always”* (Matthew 28: 20).

We need to grow in order to give life, to respond to the mission to which the Lord has called us. The pastoral ministry of vocations also needs to be situated in the perspective of this mission, in our following of Jesus: *“The invitation of Jesus, ‘Come and see,’ (John 1: 39) is the golden rule of pastoral work for promoting vocations, even today. Following the example of founders and foundresses, this work aims at presenting the attraction of the person of the Lord and the beauty of the total gift of self for the sake of the Gospel. A primary responsibility of all consecrated men and women is therefore to propose with courage, by word and example, the ideal of the following of Christ...”* (V. C. 64).

These two basic postures translate into a number of radical demands that shed light on the following of Jesus:

“He summoned those he wanted” (Mark 3: 13). **A Sense Of Gratuity** because the initiative comes from God and is not a result of our personal merit.

“They left their nets and followed him” (Matthew 4: 20). **It is Unconditional:** The treasure has been found. It is the precious pearl that makes us relativize everything else.

“Do not look back” (Luke 9:62). **The Ultimate Purpose:** Here we are talking about following Jesus as one's ultimate purpose to the very end. This is not simply in the chronological sense but also refers to giving maximum effort without setting limits.

“You cannot be the slave both of God and of money” (Matthew 6: 24). It is **Exclusive:** Absolute dedication to

the Lord relativizes everything else. It is necessary to accept God and renounce idols. God is a jealous God who wants us completely for himself. In my *Letter to the Young Brothers* I cited some examples of how some of them are living this dimension and how they experience it profoundly as a *foundational* experience of their lives and actions rather than as something theoretical.

“No one who does not carry his cross and come after me can be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). It is **Conflictual**: This involves rejecting all things that keep us from God: for example, power, money, prestige, and ideologies. This is the counter-cultural dimension of religious vocation that continues to be attractive to young people. This is evidenced in their welcome of the Pope's message during the World Youth Days.

“Proclaim the good news to the poor” (Matthew 11: 5). It involves a **Preferential Option**: This implies opting for the poor and the marginalized. In the words of Ellacuría: *“Clearly, the poor and the oppressed are in themselves the privileged places of the presence of God. That said, this does not mean that this is automatically true for me. It is precisely in the exercise of faith that they become so for me.”*

To speak about the pastoral ministry of vocations involves, first of all, reflecting on our own vocation and that of our Brothers in order to help us live authentically. We know that our vocation cannot be reduced to one initial call but is, rather, a series of options throughout life. It is a journey by means of which a person is made aware of God's call.

On that journey the person becomes aware of the radical demands involved in the call and attempts to respond in fidelity and love. Today, more than ever before, it is clear that what young people need is the proclamation, transmission and witness of objective and transcendent values. They need **models of a way of life** much more than they need theoretical directions - no matter how wonderful and convincing these theories may seem to be.

VOCATION: A CALL WHICH MUST BE AWAKENED AND ACCOMPANIED

The call must be **awakened**. This involves awakening the ability to listen to God's call and to respond positively. This assumes the living out of a faith process in which the Lord is experienced as a living Person. He becomes involved in my life and invites me to work in his Kingdom. It reaches its culminating point when the young person “...becomes capable of seeing the events in his life as signs of God's action; when he becomes capable of feeling challenged by human problems, by situations of social rejection or absence of values...when he becomes capable of making choices inspired by Gospel values and which involve renunciation and risks; finally when his attitude is such that he is prepared to undertake commitments asked of him by God” (cf. *Guide for Formation*, 78 - 79).

In this context shared mission also has a specific obligation: “*The Brothers have the primary role to play in the awakening of these vocations. However, every member of the Lasallian Family is called to join in the pastoral ministry of vocations*” (Circular 435, page 57). During the

42nd General Chapter the consultants were the first to state the importance of the pastoral ministry of vocations. For them it was very clear that without Brothers there would be no Lasallian Family or shared mission. At the same time, as Brothers, we should be aware that this issue involves not only awakening the vocation to brotherhood but also to other ways of living out the Lasallian charism as well as other ecclesial vocations. In a special way we ought to assist the laity in having those roles which are uniquely theirs in the Church.

Another important call of the 42nd General Chapter was to the young Brothers: *“The young Brothers, being among those who have a closer affinity to youth, are favored agents in the evangelization of youth and in the pastoral ministry of vocations. Therefore, we urge them to remain involved as much as possible in youth and vocational ministry”* (Circular 435, page 58).

The call must also be **accompanied**. Vita Consecrata points to this need in the following way: *“After the enthusiasm of the first meeting with Christ, there comes the constant struggle of everyday life, a struggle which turns a vocation into a tale of friendship with the Lord”* (V. C. 64). We need to be very aware of the situation in which young people live today. They encounter a sense of drift and fragmentation along with the dangerous attraction for the immediate and the transitory. This often leads to an individualistic and relativistic code of conduct that limits their search for values. This can result in an unsatisfactory search where “being together” offers neither clear directions nor any defined program. Their environment leads

them to search for short-term values and transitory happiness. All of this is exactly the opposite of what we have to offer in religious life.

The key aspect of the accompaniment we offer is “**welcome.**” In this context, the pastoral ministry of vocations consists less in knowing what to say than in making time available for the young person who is searching for the right path. This attitude of welcoming consists, therefore, in a commitment to a search for the truth in freedom. It is a search in which neither of the two parties can predict the outcome.

The **community** plays a decisive role in this dual task of awakening and accompanying vocations. The capacity to invite a person to consider a vocation is not an individual quality belonging to one Brother alone but a quality of a community where Jesus is at the center. Young people today are more attuned to life experiences than to the world of ideas. In consequence, a community that questions, challenges and encourages a young person to follow Jesus is a community which is characterized by mutual love and has a special preference for those in need. It is a community where people live simply and happily, sharing their lives, work, and facilities. It is a welcoming community where people are available, pray together and celebrate God's mystery in their lives. This is affirmed in one of the most beautiful texts of the 42nd General Chapter: *“The community offers a challenge, in vocational terms, to the extent that it gives witness to the values of brotherhood, a deep spiritual life, dedication to evangelization and the educational service of the poor, gratuity, a welcoming and*

open spirit, incarnation within the local culture, the joy of living together as Brothers” (Circular 435, page 58).

OUR COMMITMENT TODAY

• **Prayer** continues to be the primary activity of the pastoral ministry of vocations. No matter to what extent vocations are conditioned by human mediation, they are a gift and a grace for which we should ask God. As the Founder told us: “*Ask him fervently...that he will be pleased to make your Institute grow and produce good day by day*” (Meditation 207.3). According to the *Guide for Formation*, in the pastoral ministry of vocation, prayer produces some immediate effects that are, at the same time, the guarantee of the reliability of that prayer. These effects are:

– Recognizing the initiative and primary role of God in the development of vocations.

– Making the community aware of its irreplaceable function as a mediator between God and those discerning their vocation.

– Serving as a stimulus for community renewal and conversion.

– Promoting an attitude of listening and searching for God's will among faith groups and young people who meet in prayer (cf. *Guide for Formation*, 58).

– The 42nd General Chapter stated that “*the pastoral ministry of vocations is best situated in a good pastoral ministry of youth and in tune with the pastoral ministry of the local Church*” (Circular 435, page 60). In fact, the *Guide for Formation* tells us that an authentic pastoral ministry to youth must be vocational in principle. It should

propose the option for Christ within the Church in a progressive way and promote ministries, services and charisms for the development of the Christian community (*Guide for Formation*, 59). In a similar way, *Vita Consecrata* stresses this same relationship as follows: “*The most authentic way to support the Spirit's action is for institutes to invest their best resources generously in vocational work, especially by their serious involvement in working with youth*” (V. C. 64).

- I think it is important for our pastoral ministry of vocations that two signs of the times are kept in mind: **Inculturation** and the **New Evangelization**. We are preparing the Church for tomorrow and building the Institute for the future. It is that Institute and that Church which perhaps has been the subject of our dreams more than once. It is an Institute and a Church more incarnated in each particular situation, expressing the characteristics of each culture, and closer to the poor. In the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, it is an Institute and a Church which takes the Gospel more and more at face value without need for commentaries.

- *Vita Consecrata* sees catechesis as a very appropriate instrument for vocation work. “*Besides promoting prayer for vocations, it is essential to act, by means of explicit presentation and appropriate catechesis, with a view to encouraging in those called to the consecrated life that free, willing and generous response which carries into effect the grace of vocation*” (V. C. 64). With regard to this, the comments of Father Cencini seem very pertinent to me when he says that we should develop pastoral vocational

ministry, above all, in the area where we work. It is there that we have to make visible the richness of our charism and demonstrate the type of person we want to be. At the very least, this should be the rule and not the exception. For us, this area would normally be the school, the classroom, or the faith group. Although the Lord's ways are unpredictable, I have always considered it a little unusual when vocations come to us from those who do not know us well.

- Society today has discovered a form of solidarity and commitment to situations of real need in **Volunteer Programs**. This is occurring not only in the religious sphere but also in the secular sphere. As an expression of solidarity, can our communities foster the development of these programs? However, would it not be contradictory to offer to others, such as the Volunteers, the possibility of working in marginalized or innovative pedagogical experiences while contenting ourselves with offering to our own candidates the possibility simply of maintaining the works that we have already? Why do we not ask ourselves why our religious life does not attract those generous young people? Could it be because young people, even though they do admire us, do not perceive us as being in the front lines but rather see us as being preoccupied with the maintenance of some works and the administration of what has passed?
- In many places today young people tend to make commitments later and, before doing so, have a long period of experimentation with different experiences and life styles. This period of experimentation contributes to the progres-

sive stabilization of values. Bearing all this in mind, should we not think about a new model for pastoral vocational ministry that starts from this new perspective? This would involve inviting young people to have some experience in a missionary project team before making a life commitment? (Cf. Gelles Routhier, *Renewal of the mission: conditions for awakening vocations*, Montreal <http://www.vacations.2002.org>.) We do have some experiences along these lines in the Districts of Ecuador and North Mexico.

- I think the problem of the Brother's identity, which at times has been highlighted, is rather a problem of the role that the Brother should have today in the context of shared mission and association. This is a topic for reflection by all. I believe that this is very important for the pastoral vocational ministry because it refers to what we offer to those who wish to join us. This is my vision of the Brother today. He is
 - A visible sacrament of God's love.
 - A builder and a witness of fraternity in a divided world - an expression of Community as mission.
 - Available and mobile in function of the mission. He is a “Brother without borders.”
 - A spiritual companion (*1st Pastoral Letter*).
 - The memory of the charism for other members of the Lasallian Family.
 - Open to universal love, with a free and open heart.
 - Committed, creative and close to young people who are poor and at-risk.
 - A catechist and evangelist by vocation.

Brothers, I conclude with the following recommendation

from our Founder, hoping that each of us will make it our own through prayer and the quality of our life: *“Ask the Lord, that he will be pleased to make your Institute grow and produce fruit day by day, so that, as Saint Paul says, the hearts of the faithful may be strengthened in holiness and in justice”* (Meditation 207.3).

Fraternally in De La Salle,

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría
Superior General