



PASTORAL LETTER

TRANSFORMATION

REFLECTIONS ON OUR FUTURE

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Superior General

1 January 1993

TRANSFORMATION

Reflections on our Future

"I urge you, Brothers, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. This is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may be able to discern what it is that God wants."

Rom. 12:1-2

"The change which must be wrought in our case is an internal one. We must be completely transformed by the light and fullness of grace, and by the possession of God's Holy Spirit."

St. John Baptist de La Salle
Meditation No. 152.2

1 January 1993
Feast of Mary, Mother of God

World Day of Peace

Dear Brothers,

"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).

That blessing which Paul addressed to the Christians of Rome expresses well the blessing I wish to address to all of you on this feast of Mary, Mother of God, and the World Day of Peace. Brothers, as we begin the year 1993, year of the 42nd General Chapter and, consequently, year of evaluation and renewed commitment, I pray through Mary, Mother of God and Mother of our Institute, that the God of hope fill each of you with joy and peace.

I pray that you experience joy and peace as you reflect upon the blessings God has bestowed upon our Institute throughout our more than three centuries of consecrated life and service. Brothers, let us be grateful for what our religious congregation has contributed to the mission of the Church since 1680. At the same

time, let us appreciate the tremendous good that the Institute and entire Lasallian Family is realizing today. And let us **HOPE** that for generations to come the Lasallian Family of Brothers and committed lay men and women will continue to exercise its mission of human and Christian education. I pray today that our gratitude for the past, appreciation of the present, and hope for the future will inspire us all to participate actively and creatively in the ongoing process of the **TRANSFORMATION** of the Institute.

Paul probably never suspected that this particular prayer of blessing, which he undoubtedly expressed spontaneously, would be the object of analysis for centuries afterwards. Regardless, his words do in fact help us to penetrate his understanding of God's action in the life of the Christian. It is clear that for Paul, joy and peace are gifts from God. They are essentially the result of the power of the Holy Spirit. They must, however, be received and accepted. It is certain also that for Paul the experience of joy and peace is related to faith, to believing: believing in God, in one another, in ourselves.

Joy and peace are not only compatible with human suffering; they make suffering tolerable. They enable us to experience in faith that God loves us, that he never abandons us: "If God is

for us, who is against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

"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)

This awareness in faith that nothing can separate us from the love of God is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Through the power of that gift, we abound in hope. Faith and hope then are intrinsically related: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).

Hope lived "together and by association"

But this hope is not something we experience and live only as individuals. We live it in communion with our fellow Christians. We Brothers of the Christian Schools live our hope "together and by association:"

"Let us hold on firmly to the hope we profess, because we can trust God to keep his promise. Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works. Do not stay

away from the meetings of the community, as some do, but encourage each other to go" (Heb. 10:23-25).

How appropriate are those words as we approach the General Chapter. Paul speaks of hope in the context of action: hold fast, don't waver, stir up one another, love, do good works, meet and act together, encourage one another.

Many times over the years, I have expressed my opinion that hope should never be confused with optimism. Optimism and pessimism are feelings. Some of us are optimistic by temperament or upbringing, some of us pessimistic. But we don't have to live as victims of our feelings. We can be "proactive" persons, persons who take responsibility for their lives. We can be men of hope, whatever our feelings. Men of hope have a vision of what they think can and should be, together with a firm, persevering, and effective commitment to make that vision a reality. I am stressing the first person plural. We must be men of hope as "brothers." In interdependence and solidarity, we have to commit ourselves to be "shapers of what might be" rather than "servants of what is."

Brothers, as we begin this important year for the future of the Institute, I pray that God, source of our hope, help each of us to believe in him,

in one another, and in ourselves, and in believing find peace and joy. I pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we may abound in hope, a hope that will inspire us to pray earnestly and to work creatively and energetically for the ongoing TRANSFORMATION of our Institute.

I. 1993: YEAR OF EVALUATION AND RENEWED COMMITMENT

The "Health" of the Institute

During the meetings which the General Councillors, Vicar General, and I are privileged to have with Brothers throughout the Institute, one question is almost inevitable: what is the "health" of the Institute? A comprehensive response to that question is an essential dimension of the official report to the General Chapter, now in preparation. But here is a brief account of some of my personal impressions:

1. In general we are proud to be Brothers. We love the Institute. We experience a strong sense of association, interdependence, and solidarity. We are interested in the life and mission of the Institute throughout the world.
2. Perhaps never before in our history have

Brothers manifested towards St. John Baptist de La Salle the degree of interest, respect, and love that we manifest today.

3. Most of us are interested in and committed to the ongoing revitalization of our life of faith, prayer, and community.

4. We find personal satisfaction in our apostolic activities. Increasingly we accept that our mission today is a "shared mission". We are collaborating more effectively with our lay colleagues. We are proud of the excellent work done in the institutions which we animate, together with our devoted lay men and women.

5. And yet, many of us, while appreciating our individual contributions, are confused about the specific role we should exercise today as religious men and as communities and as Institute. We recognize that lay men and women can very effectively manage schools, teach, catechize, and serve as pastoral ministers to the young. Some of us wonder if there is still need for our particular form of religious life.

6. We find ourselves—at least in many areas of the Institute—caught up in a vicious circle: the fewness of vocations is a source of dis-

couragement and confusion; discouraged and confused Brothers do not attract vocations.

Task of the 42nd General Chapter

To attempt to describe the "health" of the Institute in a few words, as I have just done, is not easy. On the one hand, there is much that is very positive and encouraging. There are numerous signs of life and vitality. This General Chapter must vigorously affirm and foster all that is positive and life-giving. On the other hand, it is a fact that the total number of Brothers is less than half of what it was twenty-five years ago, and that numerous sectors of the Institute have few, if any, novices on an annual basis. The delegates to the General Chapter, taking as their point of departure the lived experience of the Institute, must confront honestly and objectively the reasons for that numerical decline and propose creative and dynamic responses.

On the occasion of the celebration of the Heroic Vow at the Generalate in 1991, I chose as the theme of my conference the words pronounced on 21 November 1691 by De La Salle, Nicholas Vuyart, and Gabriel Drolin:

"We promise **TO DO** by unanimous agree-

ment and common consent everything we shall believe in conscience, apart from any human consideration, to be for the greater good of the said society.”

The Founder and his two companions promised **TO DO**, that is to say, **TO ACT**. They manifested very clearly their conviction that God wanted them to take responsibility for the future of the society. They revealed themselves to be proactive people. They were determined that outside forces not shape the future of the new society. They themselves accepted responsibility for shaping that future. They did not limit themselves to a prayerful act of consecration or to general declarations. They decided to take concrete steps in response to specific needs: 1) to procure a house near Paris that would “be suitable for bringing the wearied and sick Brothers back to health;” 2) to gather the Brothers there for retreats; 3) to establish there a novitiate.

Brothers, I don’t want to sound “dramatic,” nor do I want to raise unrealistic expectations of the General Chapter. The Chapter cannot work miracles. Furthermore our *Rule* states that the future of the Institute is in our own hands:

“The life and development of the Institute depend primarily on the mystery of and the

power of grace. By the gift of freedom, however, the Lord has willed to place the destiny of the Institute in the hands of the Brothers who are committed to work together so that it will prosper and remain faithful to its mission.” (R.142)

But the General Chapter, which is “the ultimate expression of the communion that exists among all the Brothers,” (R.103) can indeed contribute very significantly, particularly when all of us participate in one way or another in its preparation and later in its implementation. Many of you have already taken part in the Chapter by praying, as individuals and as communities, for God’s blessings, by completing the questionnaire, by writing personal notes, or by preparing recommendations in assemblies or district chapters.

Five possible objectives

What actions should the 42nd General Chapter take? Obviously that is a question the capitulants themselves must answer. They have to be guided by the *Rule* which assigns them the responsibility of evaluating the life of the Institute, of providing for its ongoing adaptation and renewal, and of determining the main lines of action for the next seven years (R. 103).

Nevertheless, I am convinced that the General Chapter can and must contribute to the ongoing **TRANSFORMATION** of the Institute in the following ways:

1. By responding clearly to our need and desire for a more precise articulation of the specific role of the Institute, District, community, and individual Brother in the exercise of our "shared mission;"
2. By evaluating forthrightly, in the light of the *Rule*, our lived experience of consecration, mission, and community;
3. By calling us once again—as individuals, communities, districts, and Institute—to spiritual conversion and transformation, without which revitalization of the Institute is not possible;
4. By determining and articulating clearly major priorities and objectives for the next seven years;
5. By determining effective strategies for realizing those objectives; strategies at every level: Institute, regional, district, and community.

My purpose in writing to you today on the topic of the General Chapter is not to make concrete proposals, but rather to offer some personal reflections on a certain number of aspects of our life of consecration, mission, and community. It is my hope that these thoughts will contribute to the corporate reflection that must precede specific responses to the five objectives I have just suggested.

II. TRANSFORMATION

Study on the Future of Religious Orders in the U.S.

The title I have given to this letter—**TRANSFORMATION**—occurred to me after reading the recently published and still preliminary report of the *Study of the Future of Religious Orders in the United States*. This important study was conducted over a three-year period by Father David Nygren, CM, and Sister Miriam Ukeritis, CSJ. It is not my purpose to comment on the study in a systematic manner, but I shall make several references to it.

Nygren and Ukeritis say that religious institutes are in the midst of a process of "transformation:" major shifts have occurred and are still occurring in the way members understand their

life and mission, and in the way they structure their lives. It won't surprise you to learn that the two researchers found consistent evidence of a marked diversity of understandings, some of which are clearly contradictory. After analyzing their data, they conclude that without significant change in the currently evolving process of transformation, religious life in the United States will continue to decline and, more importantly, will not be able respond significantly to the people who have the greatest need of their help and services. In the final section of their report, entitled "Shaping the Future," they assert:

"If religious life is to continue to be a vital force . . . dramatic changes must occur in most religious congregations in the United States. Fidelity to the spirit of the founder and responsiveness to critical and unmet human needs are basic to the ongoing mission of religious communities."

Most of you will find nothing surprising in those words. Our Institute has consistently and forcefully called us to creative fidelity to the spirit of our Founder, which fidelity in itself impels us to respond to "critical and unmet needs." It is hardly necessary to cite passages from the *Declaration* or articles from the *Rule*. But it is pertinent I think to cite the following quotation from the *Message* of the 41st General Chapter,

a message which called all of us to personal spiritual renovation and to radical renewal of our mission:

"The difficulties which our Institute is experiencing at the present time will only be resolved by a genuine return to our origins. We were founded in response to precise needs, and we shall continue to exist and develop only if we respond to the present-day forms of educational deficiencies. This calls for an evolution and conversion of our works."

The meaning of "transformation"

But while conversion of our works or apostolic activities is surely contained in the meaning I am giving to the word "transformation," the word has a broader significance. Authentic **TRANSFORMATION** must be understood comprehensively. It touches **every** aspect of our life of consecration, mission, and community.

Authentic transformation must also be distinguished from that transformation which is an historical fact. Our Institute, together with all other religious institutes, has been in the midst of a process of transformation during the past twenty-five years, a process which will continue for some years to come. But this process of

transformation urgently needs direction. There can be no question of our waiting passively for the final outcome of the process. Such passivity would be fatal. With the help of God we have to participate constructively in the creation of our future. In pursuit of that end we need clear vision, sound priorities, precise objectives, and effective strategies.

Authentic Transformation

What precisely is authentic **TRANSFORMATION**? I think that an insightful and inspiring answer can be found in these words of exhortation which Paul addressed to the Romans:

"I urge you, brothers, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. This is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may be able to discern what it is that God wants."
(Rom.12:1-2)

Exegetes tell us that Paul's appeal is directed to the "brothers" (which expression surely included the "sisters"!), that is to say, to the members of the Christian community of Rome. Paul reminds the community of Christians that common pursuit of what is right is expected of

those who are members of the Body of Christ. He urges them to offer their bodies, that is, themselves, as a living sacrifice. He compares them to sacrificial animals, but adds an essential distinguishing note: he wants them to offer themselves as "living" persons, to offer themselves knowingly and willingly. Their sacrifice should be "spiritual" worship: it should be guided by reason and thus be worthy of the human person (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 862).

Paul urges the Romans to avoid conformity with the world. He exhorts them to undergo an interior transformation, a transformation that results from a change in their manner of thinking: "be transformed by the renewal of your mind." The context of these passages and of numerous other passages leaves no doubt that Paul was convinced that renewal of the mind and subsequent interior transformation are effected by the Holy Spirit, who helps Christians discern what it is that God wants.

The transformation to which the Christian is called is nothing less than transformation in Christ. Paul was able to describe his sense of "being transformed" in words which, were they not so familiar, would surprise and perhaps shock us: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). "For me to live is Christ"

(Phil. 1:21). The Christian who lives united to Christ is led by the Spirit and in his daily life manifests love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:25).

In these passages, Brothers, I think we find the key to authentic **TRANSFORMATION** and, consequently, to the future of the Institute. On the eve of the 42nd General Chapter, the following words of St. De La Salle are very pertinent. We need to take them seriously:

“The change which must be wrought in our case is an internal one. We must be completely **TRANSFORMED** by the light and fullness of grace, and by the possession of God’s Holy Spirit.” (*Med.* 152.2)

Keeping in mind these thoughts on our need for progressive and authentic transformation, let us reflect on some aspects of our life of consecration, mission, and community as Brothers of the Christian Schools.

III. BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWAL OF YOUR MIND

“Look upon yourselves as God’s ministers”

On the basis of their study of religious institutes in the United States, Nygren and Ukeritis assert that many religious are disoriented and confused concerning their role and function in the Church. Furthermore, “diverse, sometimes contradictory understandings of religious life” have emerged. There is evidence of a lack of common understanding, common vision, and common goals. In my reflections last year on “intentional communities” and “association,” I remarked:

“It seems to me that some of us are unconsciously trying to live with a certain number of the elements of an ‘intentional community,’ but with a *de facto* commitment to a style of life which could more accurately be described sociologically as an ‘association.’ Attempts to build a model of Institute and community life which incorporates characteristics of two fundamentally different models result in a common life which is incoherent, unsatisfying, and unhealthy for all concerned.” (PL 1992, p. 20)

We must have a common understanding of what it means to be Brothers of the Christian Schools. There is certainly nothing original in that assertion. The capitulants to the 39th General Chapter were convinced that they could not complete their work on the experimental *Rule* until they had responded with clarity to a number of burning questions concerning identity and mission. As a consequence they produced that document of which we are justly proud: *A Declaration: The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today*. But despite that excellent theoretical statement on our identity, and despite the *Rule* which evolved from it, we have to acknowledge that while there has been progress, there is still a significant gap between the written statements and the lived reality.

Given this situation, Paul's exhortation is pertinent: "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind." That exhortation invites us to ask ourselves, "How do we perceive ourselves as Brothers of the Christian Schools?"

It is obvious that our Founder was very concerned that the Brothers have a clear and common understanding of their identity, role, and function. He tells them in unambiguous language to look upon themselves as "ministers of God" and to live their vocation with a love and zeal so intense that they should be ready to give their

life, "so dear to you are the children confided to you" (MTR 1.1, 9.1, 6.2).

I happen to be writing these words on 26 December, feast of St. Stephen, first martyr. De La Salle's meditation for today speaks eloquently of the manner in which we should perceive ourselves as Brothers:

"What should strengthen your zeal, as well as your faith, is that you are called to announce the Gospel as God's ministers You have been chosen by God to make Jesus Christ known Teach those whom you have to instruct the rules of the Christian life and the means by which they may secure their salvation. It is for this end that God has charged you with your ministry. Do not become unworthy of it by negligence." (*Med.* 87.1.2)

Our Founder's understanding of the Brother's vocation emerges with clarity from an objective reading of his meditations and other writings. But that "understanding" has had to be "translated into modern terms" (R. 147). During the past several decades, we Brothers have had to discern and express who we believe God wants us to be today, what we believe he wants us to do, and how we believe he wants us to do it. That in this corporate process of discernment

we have been creatively faithful to the Founder has been affirmed by the Church, which

“ . . . has recognized in these texts (the *Rule*) the faithful expression of the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and of the tradition of the Institute: consecrated to God as lay religious, the Brothers are called to provide a human and Christian education for young people, especially the poor, according to the ministry which the Church has entrusted to them. They endeavor to look upon everything with the eyes of faith, they share in community the experience of God, and they fulfill ‘together and by association’ their service of evangelization, principally in schools.” (*Decree*, 1987)

Paul urges us to be transformed in our way of thinking in order that we may be able to discern what is good for us, what God wants of us, what is the perfect thing for us. In like manner our Founder insists that we live by the spirit of faith, which enables us to “see” with the eyes of faith. Without the eyes of faith, our life as consecrated religious apostles makes no sense.

IV. FOLLOWING CHRIST AS CONSECRATED MEN

“I consecrate myself entirely to you . . .”

Our consecrated life is a response to a call from God through his Holy Spirit (R. 22). How do we know that we are called?

“Religious choose religious life because, in some deep way, they must. Like the artist who has to paint or the poet who has to write, religious have to do what they do, not because it makes sense but because life does not make sense for them on any other terms.” (Sandra Schneider)

Our response, the *Rule* insists, must be made “freely.” Nobody has forced us to become Brothers. Nobody is forcing us to persevere. We must live that free response every day of our life: “in good times and bad times” and “without any thought of turning back.” We consecrate ourselves “entirely to the Trinity to procure the glory of God in the ministry of Christian education” (R. 22). We live that consecration “together and by association” as members of the Institute and as members of a specific community.

Religious consecration “establishes an intimate communion between the person of each

Brother and that of Jesus Christ" (R.24). We commit ourselves to "stay with him" twenty-four hours a day. We make fidelity to him and to his Gospel the primary objective of our life. Fully aware of the consequences, we agree to follow him wherever he goes:

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mt. 16:24)

On several occasions I have heard theologians and Superiors General of other Institutes comment on the central place that religious consecration has in Lasallian spirituality, particularly as it is expressed in our formula of consecration. Consecration "gives meaning to the specific commitments which it inspires and brings into unity the successive moments in the life of the Brother" (R. 22). For this reason we need to offer ourselves to God every day "as a living sacrifice." I have never forgotten the recommendation of Brother Cornelius Luke, long-time Visitor General, to make an explicit act of total consecration to God every day without fail.

Our life of consecration is expressed by vows of chastity, poverty, obedience, association for the service of the poor through education, and stability in the Institute. I shall offer some thoughts on our vow of poverty and that of association for

the service of the poor under the heading "Solidarity with the Poor." In like manner I shall reflect on obedience and stability in the context of our life "together and by association". At this time, however, I want to comment briefly on some aspects of our vow of celibate chastity.

Chastity lived in celibacy

Our total consecration is expressed in a particularly striking way by the vow of celibate chastity. Consecrated chastity expresses and nourishes our commitment to follow Christ and to enter into intimate communion with him. It frees us "for the service of others" (R. 27). When lived authentically and wholeheartedly, consecrated celibate chastity helps us to grow in reverence for others and to love with a warm, compassionate, unconditional, gratuitous, and respectful love, a love that affirms and calls others to realization of their God-given potential.

But chastity must be lived authentically and wholeheartedly. If it is lived inauthentically, the "witness" we give is negative and perhaps even scandalous. If we live it half-heartedly, we become little more than self-centered bachelors.

The obligations we assume are clear: we commit ourselves publicly by vow "to live a celi-

bate life and to renounce, from a new motive, that of the vow, every act, interior or exterior, contrary to chastity" (R. 28). We are certainly well aware of the magnitude of the decision we have made:

"By promising to abstain from genital relationships and from the foundation of a human family, we are touching what is most human about us. We should certainly expect some intense feelings and challenges if we embrace this kind of chastity. We should also expect some painful times. There is no doubt that this kind of abstinence leaves a gaping hole or chasm in the heart of the human person. Such abstinence can only be a holy and healthy choice if we honestly face that 'hole' and seek to focus our energy and our longing on the enhancing and humanizing of life, on the Lord in the life of prayer, and on generous service to others." (David A. Fleming, SM, *Pilgrim's Notebook*, pp. 37-38)

To live consecrated celibate chastity authentically and wholeheartedly, we need that purity of heart of which Søren Kierkegaard wrote so convincingly. If we have purity of heart, we are single-minded, not double-minded. We "will one thing:" what God wants of us. David Fleming says something similar, but in different language:

"The religious who does not live an intense love for God will find the hole in the heart pretty meaningless and will probably start looking for other compensations—career, work, comforts, possessions, relationships that skate on the edge of the promise of chastity." (*Ibid*, p. 39)

V. SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR

During the lifetime of the Founder, the Brothers vowed to unite themselves and to live in society for the purpose of maintaining together and by association gratuitous schools. That the reason for the insistence on gratuity was to assure that poor children had access to the Christian schools hardly has to be mentioned.

The Brothers made no explicit vow of poverty prior to the Bull of Approbation, but they lived poverty from the beginning. Together with his Brothers, the Founder himself lived in literal solidarity with the poor. Furthermore he considered poverty to be an essential dimension of the Brothers' life and mission. In his meditation for Christmas day he tells us that if we have a sincere love for poverty and for all that is humiliating,

“. . . you will touch the hearts of these poor boys and the majority of them will become good Christians. But if, on the contrary, you do not resemble Christ at his birth, . . . you will be neither loved nor appreciated by the poor, and you will never be for them a saviour, as your profession requires, for you can attract them to God only in so far as you resemble Jesus at his birth.” (*Med.* 86.3)

Historically, there is a clear link between the commitment of the Brothers to human and Christian education of poor children on the one hand and to their poverty as individuals and as communities on the other. This link is expressed explicitly in article 32: “the Brothers become poor in order to follow Christ who was poor and in order to serve better all persons as their brothers and sisters, especially those most in need.” Because of this fundamental relationship, I am treating our vow of poverty and our vow of association for the educational service of the poor under one heading: “solidarity with the poor.”

“If you want peace, reach out to the poor”

The *Message* of the Holy Father for the 1993 World Day of Peace is entitled *IF YOU WANT PEACE, REACH OUT TO THE POOR*. The

Pope’s intent is obviously to link national and international peace and stability with the problems of poverty, war, and injustice. But when I read the message, I found myself making another application: If we Brothers of the Christian Schools want “peace”—that is to say, if we want to find the tranquillity that will be the fruit of the revitalization of our Institute, we must “reach out to the poor.” Our authentic transformation, as both the *Message of the Chapter* and the *Rule* clearly state, is intimately linked to solidarity with the poor:

“The difficulties which our Institute is experiencing at the present time will only be resolved by a genuine return to our origins. We were founded in response to precise needs, and we will continue to exist and develop only if we respond to present-day forms of educational deficiencies. This calls for an evolution and conversion of our works.” (*Message to the Brothers*)

“The Brothers, as persons and in community, look upon their intellectual and spiritual development in terms of a progressive conversion to the poor.” (R. 40b)

Living as persons of “modest condition”

The first reason proposed by the *Rule* for the life of poverty is that of following Christ who was poor. It is essential, therefore, that we understand and experience the vow of poverty as a way of living that expresses and nourishes intimate communion with Christ.

Our *Rule* declares that we Brothers “live simply as persons of *ordinary means* (literally **condition modeste**), having everything in common” (R. 32). Some of us might find that statement either insufficiently demanding or too vague. Regardless, I think that it can serve as a very helpful instrument for examination of our life as individuals and as communities.

In his *Message* on peace John Paul II says that too many of us are “dominated by the frenzied race for possessing material goods.” Writing not to members of religious institutes but to all Christians, he calls for moderation and simplicity. He urges all Christians to choose freely evangelical poverty:

“Evangelical poverty is something that **TRANSFORMS** those who accept it. They cannot remain indifferent when faced with the suffering of the poor; indeed, they feel impelled to share actively with God his pref-

erential love for them.” (*Message*: Para. 5)

As consecrated religious we have to take very seriously those words which the Holy Father has addressed to Christians generally. We need to examine ourselves as individuals, as communities, as districts, as Institute. Are we living as persons of “modest condition?” We have to be attentive to the impact the “frenzied race for material goods” has on our life as Brothers. We have to be sensitive to the human tendency to adopt progressively higher standards of living: in choice of food, drink, furnishings, clothing. . . . David Fleming describes the atmosphere in a number of religious houses today as that of a “comfortable second-class hotel for religiously minded persons” (*Ibid.*, p. 32). He makes another statement that my own experience certainly corroborates:

“Simplicity, even a touch of austerity, is among the expectations which today’s people, especially the youth, place upon those who claim to be religious. People who make no pretense at simplicity themselves want to see it in us. . . ; it is quite clear that nothing speaks more compellingly of holiness than a simple, austere life-style: conversely, nothing arouses more disbelief and alienation than the aroma of luxury among the professionally religious.” (*Ibid.*, p. 32)

But as important as it is to speak of moderation and simplicity, it is not enough. We religious are called to pursue evangelical poverty in a particular way, that is, by means of the vow of poverty and all that that vow entails. If the ideal of living poorly seems a little vague, there is nothing vague about the strict obligations that result from our vow of poverty:

1. We forego the independent use and disposal of goods or objects having monetary value. (R. 33)
2. We retain only the bare ownership of our patrimony and of the right to inherit. Any action whatever concerning these temporal goods requires the permission of the Brother Visitor. (R. 33-34)
3. Whatever we produce by our work, and whatever we receive as a salary, pension, or donation, belongs to the Institute. (R. 33)

Association for the service of the poor through education

Article 39 states unambiguously that in virtue of our fourth vow, we commit ourselves, "as the Founder did, to conduct schools or other centers of Christian education that are acces-

sible to the poor."

Despite that clarity, however, and despite our lived experience, a number of Brothers continue to think that in calling for greater commitment to the poor, the Institute and its superiors are advocating non-school apostolates and are manifesting a lack of appreciation of the school apostolate. On the contrary. The position of the Institute is that it is our vocation "to conduct schools or other centers of Christian education that are accessible to the poor."

During the past fifteen years the Institute has witnessed a remarkable number of new initiatives in favor of the economically poor, the illiterate, victims of social injustice, nomadic peoples, youngsters with behavioral difficulties of all kinds, mentally and physically handicapped, and young people with learning difficulties. Written accounts of many of these programs, but by no means all of them, have been published in the *Institute Bulletin*, *Intercom*, or *Lasalliana*. Nearly all of these initiatives are allied to existing schools or are new schools or centers of Christian education. Our specific mission has been and continues to be to offer to the poor not any service whatsoever, but to offer them the service of education.

The orientations of the *Message* of the last

General Chapter challenge districts to take seriously the orientations of article 40a, as well as 19a, which propose transferring some of our activities or even entire works to our lay colleagues, in order to respond to those peoples whose needs are neglected, both at home and abroad. At the same time the *Message* encourages the Brothers to offer themselves for such service.

Brothers, I want to use this letter to express the appreciation and gratitude of the Institute to those regions, districts, and Brothers that have enabled the Institute in recent years to create new initiatives “at home and abroad,” as well as to strengthen districts, sub-districts, and delegations in developing sectors of the Institute. It is interesting to note that these Brothers are of all ages. The number of Brothers of “retirement age” who have offered themselves for the educational service of the poor has been remarkable. Remarkable also has been the quality of their presence and of their service.

But the *Rule* also insists (14 and 40) that when we work with young people “more or less well off,” we must help them to become more sensitive and more responsive to the poor, the aged, the sick, and to unjust situations. I think that one of the most encouraging developments in our schools in recent years has been the

creation of programs to help young people learn more about the “real world” and to spend some hours every week in direct service of the needy. Youth must go forth from our Lasallian schools convinced that to be a Christian is to be committed to “the total liberation of the human person. . . . The social dimension is an essential part of the Christian message” (John Paul II, *Address to the Latin American Conference of Bishops*, Santo Domingo, Par. 13).

We have made progress, Brothers. For that we thank God. But I think that we can and must do more. Furthermore, I am convinced that the revitalization of the Institute is intimately linked to progressive transformation towards a more effective educational service of the poor.

I close this reflection on solidarity with the poor with a remark the Holy Father made a few weeks ago to delegates to a General Chapter:

“Fidelity to your charism must not be static, anchored in the past. It must be dynamic and capable of adaptation to the diverse cultural and social situations to which the Lord calls you to work.”

VI. OUR “SHARED MISSION” OF HUMAN AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

The authentic transformation and subsequent revitalization we all desire for our Institute can occur only if we have a common understanding of and commitment to our mission.

That mission is clearly articulated in article 3: “The purpose of this Institute is to give a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor.” Our mission is “to bring the Gospel to the educational world. . . . The Brothers seek to integrate the effort for human advancement with the announcement of God’s word” (R. 12). It is for this purpose that we maintain Christian schools.

In speaking of the mission of the Brothers, it is imperative to maintain consistently this integration. To omit or minimize the religious dimension of our schools is a grave distortion of the purpose of the Institute. But it is also a distortion to detach our catechetical and pastoral activity from our work in the schools. The privileged instrument of our mission of human and Christian education is the Christian school, a school that is a sign of the Kingdom, a means of salvation, and is accessible to the poor (R. 3).

“The central place given to catechesis in the

apostolate of the Brother has never oriented the Institute towards a practical dissociation of catechesis from human education, or towards an exclusively catechetical ministry.” (*Declaration 40.2*)

There is considerable and encouraging evidence in the Institute today of efforts to make our schools truly Christian. In a number of areas religious instruction is enjoying renewed priority. Significant programs of pastoral activity in the schools are increasingly accepted as integral rather than marginal dimensions of Lasallian schools. The number of Brothers involved in catechetical and in pastoral activities of one kind or another has increased. Nevertheless, many of us have to admit that we do not readily recognize ourselves in the following description:

“The Brothers consider that their ‘principal function’ consists in the work of evangelization and catechesis. . . . They take advantage of the right moment and use the appropriate language to speak of Jesus Christ to those to whom they bring their message. . . . They provide opportunities for their students to encounter God; . . . they lead them along the way as they learn to pray.” (R. 15, 15a)

I think that authentic transformation demands

that we assume more conscientiously our role as “catechists by vocation” by teaching religion and by participating in pastoral activities as ministers to the young (*Declaration 38*).

Shared Mission

Our mission today of human and Christian education is in fact a shared mission. For this reason we have proposed inviting a certain number of lay men and women to assist the General Chapter as consultors during the deliberations on mission. Increasingly we realize that if we want our schools to be truly Christian and Lasallian, we must have the informed and enthusiastic participation of our lay colleagues. It is encouraging to note that everywhere today appropriate programs of formation in Lasallian spirituality and pedagogy are being organized for both Brothers and lay men and women.

At the same time, we are gradually becoming more aware of the possibilities inherent in “shared mission” for the education and evangelization of youth. In most Lasallian schools today, Brothers and lay men and women work in close collaboration. Some of these Lasallian schools have headmasters who are Brothers, while others have headmasters who are lay. But we also have an increasing number of Lasallian schools without any Brothers at all, a reality

most of us never thought possible even a few years ago.

But these new kinds of Lasallian schools will be authentically Lasallian only if effective structures are firmly in place to assure “animation” and accountability. Directors, whether Brother or lay, together with their educational communities, must be accountable to appropriate “boards of governors” and ultimately to the District. The District for its part must organize programs of supervision and animation of all the Lasallian schools in its network of schools.

What is of fundamental importance is that we accept our lay colleagues as full collaborators. Most of us have moved beyond the stage of considering lay men and women as “necessary evils.” But I am not sure that most of us have moved beyond the stage of considering them as “inferiors” who require our direction. I think that we must avoid at all costs the creation of dependency relationships which are nothing less than a new version of “clerical-lay” relationships.

An increasing number of our teachers, parents, former students, and friends are expressing their desire to live their faith in the spirit of John Baptist de La Salle and are participating in diverse forms of groupings. The General Chap-

ter will be the occasion for a pooling and evaluation of experiences and for providing orientations for the future.

I think that we are only beginning to realize the potential of "shared mission." For example, acceptance of the possibility of Lasallian schools with few or no Brothers enables us to understand and implement articles 40a and 19a in a new way. Both of these articles, inspired by Vatican II, invite us to consider transferring some of our apostolic activities or even entire works to the laity in order that we Brothers might respond to those whose needs are not being met, that is to say, those to whom we are called to serve by preference.

Missionary Activity

The major priority in our "missionary activity" is to foster growth of the local Institute. All other priorities and policies are subordinate to this one. Our eyes are on the future. We want to establish a strong local Institute that will be at the service of young people for generations to come. At the same time, of course, we are trying to do as much good as we can at the present moment. Furthermore, in fidelity to the orientations expressed in article 19b, we shall continue for as long as feasible to maintain our presence

and service "in areas where, humanly speaking, there is little or no possibility for the Institute to develop."

Brothers, I have already expressed appreciation of the generous response which regions, districts, and individual Brothers have made to our request for Brothers to serve as "missionaries." A number of areas of the Institute have been reinforced this year and two new foundations have been made: one by our Brazilian Brothers in Mozambique; the other by our Polish Brothers, with the help of a Brother from Canada, in the Ukraine. I am also heartened that on the personal questionnaires, 85% of the Brothers designated the missionary commitment of the Institute as an important topic for the General Chapter.

VII. TOGETHER AND BY ASSOCIATION

Living as Brothers: obedient and faithful

"From the beginning of the Institute, the Brothers have fulfilled their mission 'together and by association'. Each Brother exercises his apostolate as a member of a community by whom he knows that he is accepted, supported, and entrusted with his mission. The Brothers are in solidarity with their commu-

nity, with their district, and with the Institute.”
(R. 16)

That beautiful article expresses succinctly the heart of what I tried to express in my pastoral letter last year. The article reminds us that we are called to live in interdependence and in solidarity as members of the Institute, of our districts, sub-districts, or delegations, and as members of our community.

We are called to live what sociologists call “intentional community:” that is to say, the type of group which makes the most extensive demands on its individual members. In an intentional community members live, work, and recreate together. They voluntarily surrender control over choices which are normally considered private, for the sake of establishing a whole new way of life. The group’s transcendent mission or goal takes precedence over the needs of the individual members (*Creating a Future for Religious Life*, Patricia Wittberg, pp. 3-4).

That we are called to live intentional community life is clear: We consecrate ourselves entirely to God to procure his glory in the ministry of Christian education. We vow celibate chastity, poverty, obedience, association for the service of the poor through education, and stability. We dedicate ourselves to work “together and by

association” in the ministry of Christian education. We express our readiness and willingness to go wherever we are sent and to do whatever we are assigned.

We live our vows of obedience and of stability in an authentic manner by fidelity to the obligations we freely assumed when we consecrated ourselves to God as members of the Institute. By the vow of stability we render specific and explicit our resolve to persevere, loyally and devotedly, in the day to day life of religious and apostolic communion with our Brothers (R. 42). By our vows of obedience and stability we express publicly our commitment **TO BE COMMUNITY MEN**, that is to say, men who give themselves with creativity, generosity, and enthusiasm to the common task of building faith-filled and prayerful communities, apostolic communities, fraternal communities. John Gardner has a good description of such men:

“The longer I live, the more I respect enthusiasm. There is no substitute for the life of spirit that enthusiasm produces. Some people keep their zest until the day they die. They care. They reach out. They enjoy. They risk failure.” (*Morale*, p.62)

VIII. THE BROTHERS: MEN OF PRAYER

It is striking that 92.7% of the 3,534 Brothers who responded to the questionnaire indicated "personal and community prayer in the Institute" as an important topic for the General Chapter. Of that percentage 70.3% designated the topic as "very important." No other subject was judged as important for Chapter consideration as prayer. According to the Preparatory Commission, seventy "notes" on the topic of prayer have arrived, representing a variety of positions on such concerns as "the present crisis, difficulties encountered, time allotted, sharing, novelty or routine, and various devotions."

In the light of that evident priority, you might find surprising my decision to conclude this letter, rather than begin it, with reflections on prayer. My decision has been motivated by the following startling but unambiguous warning of Christ:

"It is not those who say to me: 'Lord, Lord', who will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Mt. 7:21)

Certainly this General Chapter must evaluate the life of prayer in the Institute and must make appropriate and effective responses. It is essential, however, that fidelity to the life of

prayer never be dissociated from fidelity to all aspects of our life as Brothers, a life which integrates religious consecration, mission, and community. We must consider prayer in the context of who God wants us to be, what he wants us to do, and how he wants us to do it. To live authentically as Brothers of the Christian Schools is, to use Kierkegaard's expression, to "will one thing," namely, God's glory.

Prayer, then, is indispensable but must be consistently related to that **YES** we say to God at every minute of our life. As Brother Charles Reutemann said very well in the article he prepared for the *Symposium on Prayer* thirteen years ago:

"Daily personal prayer is indispensable; but the primary business of life is achieved in the 'marketplace' where one stands shoulder to shoulder with the needful neighbor." (Reutemann, pp. 170-171)

Prayer is a period of "heightened awareness" in faith of the loving presence of God and of our presence to him. Specific and frequent "moments" of "being with" the Lord are precious: God uses them to nourish our relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a relationship grounded in faith, hope, and love.

It is in frequent and regular prayer, therefore, that we express, as individuals and as communities, praise, thanksgiving, contrition, and petition. Christ draws us into more intimate communion. The Founder insists that our union with Christ must be so personal and so intense that we are able to serve as his ambassadors, as his ministers, as his co-workers. Still more. Our union must be such that we can represent Jesus Christ, represent him so vividly that those confided to our care see him in us and receive our teaching as if he were teaching them (MTR 3.2).

Granted this is idealistic, even mystical, language. But the language accurately describes the Brother De La Salle wants his followers to become. He knows the magnitude of what he is asking both of himself and of his Brothers: "We must be completely **TRANSFORMED**," he says, "transformed by the light and fullness of grace, and by the possession of God's Holy Spirit" (*Meditation* 152.2). For this reason:

"Frequently give yourself to the Spirit of our Lord to act only under his influence and not through any self-seeking. This Holy Spirit, then, will fill your students with himself and they will be able to possess fully the Christian spirit." (MTR 3.2)

In these passages, Brothers, we find the

essence of the spirituality of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. That spirituality is truly profound, touching as it does the great mystery of the Christian's relationship with Christ: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). "For me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). In the incomprehensible ways of grace, we become Christ while remaining ourselves:

"When we are one with the other, we are most ourselves. In this respect union differs from absorption wherein one loses oneself in the other. . . . When my love becomes very deep, I am united with the other while remaining myself." (Wm. Johnston, SJ, *Letters to Contemplatives*)

Prayer is, therefore, indispensable in our life as Brothers. Indispensable also is the Eucharist. In our daily celebration of the Eucharist, Christ takes us into communion with himself and with one another. He communicates to us His Spirit and transforms us into his body. The following words from *Lumen Gentium* never cease to move me:

"Really sharing in the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with him and with one another. . . . By communicating his Spirit, Christ mystically constitutes as his body those

brothers of his who are called together from every nation." (L.G. 7)

AFTERWORD

"We'll see it when we believe it"

"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)

I conclude this letter as I began it: with a reflection on Paul's prayer that God, source of all hope, fill the Christians of Rome with joy and peace in **believing**, so that they may experience an abundance of hope. The key word in that very dense prayer is, it seems to me, "believing:" believing in God, believing in one another, believing in ourselves.

The theme of this pastoral letter has been **TRANSFORMATION**. I have offered a number of reflections on the future of the Institute. John Gardner has written:

"Even the most sensible proposal for a better future provokes the cynic to say, 'I'll believe it when I see it.' The tough-minded social activist Saul Alinsky turned the phrase

around and said: 'We'll see it when we believe it'." (John Gardner, *Morale*, p. 59)

We need to "believe" in the future of the Institute. As believers and as men of hope, we have to offer ourselves as a "living sacrifice" to God, "be transformed by the light and fullness of grace," and devote ourselves unreservedly to the authentic transformation of the Institute.

Article 76 encourages us to learn from Mary, Mother of Jesus and of the Church, how to be open to the Holy Spirit, who will transform us and transform our Institute. Let us, then, Brothers, ask Mary earnestly to intercede for us as we prepare for the General Chapter.

Let us turn also to our Founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle, who today, as in the past,

". . . challenges the Brothers, not only as the one who established the Institute but as the Founder who continues to inspire and to sustain it." (R. 149)

Those words came to life for me on Christmas morning as I read the Founder's meditation. In the first two points, contrary to his usual custom, he employs the first person plural:

"In choosing our present state, we should have prepared ourselves for abasement, like

the Son of God when he became man. . . .
We are poor Brothers, forgotten by the world
and esteemed of no consequence." (*Med.*
86.2)

The Founder refers to the situation of the Brothers of his day, a situation which differs from our own. What I find particularly moving, however, is that the Founder identifies himself totally with the Brothers and with their lived experience.

I am certain that, in like manner, he identifies himself with us today in our own reality. We turn to him, therefore, and ask him to pray that our Institute may "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" (R. 149).

Fraternally in De La Salle,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "B. Johnston". The signature is written in dark ink and is centered on the page.

Brother John Johnston, FSC
Superior General