



PASTORAL LETTER

THE YEAR OF PRAYER

POSTSCRIPT

Brother John Johnston, FSC
Superior General

1 January 1996

1 January 1996
Feast of Mary, Mother of God
World Day of Peace

THE YEAR OF PRAYER

POSTSCRIPT

“The obligation that you have to instruct children and bring them up in the spirit of Christianity should make you very assiduous in prayer, in order to obtain from God the graces you need to carry out your work well and to draw upon yourselves the light you must have to know how to form Jesus Christ in the hearts of the children who are entrusted to your guidance, and give them the spirit of God.

“Realize that to fill yourselves with God as much as you should in the state in which Providence has placed you, you are obliged to converse frequently with God.”

St. De La Salle, *Med.* 80.2
Feast of St. Nicholas

Dear Brothers,

“Christ himself has brought us peace by making the Jews and Gentiles one people . . . he broke down the wall that separated them and kept them enemies . . . by means of the cross he united both races into one body . . . he preached the good news of peace to all” (*Eph.2:14-17*).

With sincere gratitude for your greetings and blessings, I offer you my best wishes, together with my prayer that you enjoy throughout the year 1996 that peace and union which Christ, by means of the cross, has brought to the world.

But I am praying, Brothers, not only that you receive personally the precious gift of peace, but also that, as individuals and as communities, you **BE** veritable apostles of peace and union, that is to say, men who, actively and efficaciously, tear down walls of separation and promote genuine communion.

As I wrote to the Visitors last month, unity can be a challenge whenever two or more persons assemble—whether or not they are members of the same family, race, caste, clan, tribe, ethnic group, national heritage, religion, political persuasion, economic situation, or

speak the same language. It is not surprising, therefore, that living together as Brothers of different ethnic, racial, national, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds can be, and often is, a challenge. But it is a challenge which, with the help of the Lord who has brought peace and union to the world, we can confront effectively.

Diversity of culture

Today the charism which the Holy Spirit gave to a young French priest in the 17th century is lived by men of some eighty different nationalities. As an international community of consecrated men, we manifest an extraordinary complexity of cultural heritages. In many of our districts, sub-districts, delegations, and communities, diversity of culture is the lived reality.

Brothers, we are called not only to live together in mutual respect and harmony as Brothers, but also to be a communion of persons actively and efficaciously committed to generating communion.

We have, for example, a "working relationship" with some 55,000 lay teachers and countless other parents, former students, benefactors, and young people. We have the marvelous possibility—and the responsibility—to transform this "working relationship" into an authentic international communion of persons committed to building a world in which all can

live together in justice and peace, regardless of ethnic, racial, cultural, national, religious, linguistic, political, and economic backgrounds. We have the potential to foster the growth of an international communion of persons dedicated to education, the size of which few educational bodies can match. That is a potential that we need to recognize, acknowledge, and embrace with humility, thanksgiving, enthusiasm, creativity, and dedication.

Universal love

Our responsibilities as Christians—and even more as Christians who make public profession of their faith and dedicate themselves totally to following Christ and his teaching—are clear. There is no ambiguity in the Gospel message which calls us to universal love. Nevertheless, experience has taught us that it's one thing to profess universal love in the abstract, that is to say, to accept in a theoretical manner that as Christians, we are called to love all persons—and not only those of our particular family, clan, tribe, culture, etc. But it's quite another thing to love those very real persons with whom we live, pray, work, and socialize. As the cartoon character "Charlie Brown" remarked: "I have no problem loving the human race; it's people I can't stand."

Furthermore, the message of Christ goes counter to "conventional wisdom", that is to

say, commonly held expectations and goals. Paul VI's description of the human condition may sound a bit pessimistic, but it is, it seems to me, all too often accurate:

"The human heart is small; it is egoistic; it has place only for oneself and for a few others of one's own family or one's own caste; and when it opens up a little, it succeeds in loving its own fatherland and its own social class, but it always seeks boundaries and limits. . . . A catholic heart means a heart with universal dimensions, a magnanimous heart, an ecumenical heart, a heart capable of embracing the whole world" (quoted in *A Biblical Spirituality of the Heart*, Jan Bovenmars, pp.186-187).

In his meditation for Christmas Eve, St. De La Salle writes eloquently of this facet of the human condition. While his focus is on Joseph and Mary's inability to find lodging because of their poverty and social status, one can give his words a more comprehensive interpretation:

"For how long has Jesus been presenting himself to you and knocking at the door of your heart in order to make his dwelling within you, and you have not wanted to receive him. Why? because he presents himself only under the form of a poor man, a slave, a man of sorrows" (*Med.* 85.1).

An essayist in the United States wrote recently that Martin Luther King was an effective leader of both black and white United States Americans, because he was able to assure "good people" on each side of the racial divide that their counterparts on the other side existed, and that they needed to embrace a strategy of reconciliation. Today, however, in so many areas of the world (including countries in which our Institute is located), it is the "bad people"—the extremists—on each side who are providing negative leadership and are provoking hatred and division.

The following remark of Afif Safieh, representative of the Palestinian people to the Holy See (and member of the Board of Trustees of Bethlehem University) is very pertinent:

"I believe that we should confront intolerance with tolerance and that our slogan should be: the only hatred we have is of hatred itself."

"Let us give children a future of peace"

Yes, Brothers, you and I are called to be *Apostles of Peace and union*. As such, Pope John Paul II's message for the *World Day of Peace* has particular relevance: *Let us give children a future of peace!* The Pope calls attention to the children who are victims of armed conflicts and other kinds of physical and sexual violence, of those who live in the

streets, are illiterate, become addicted to drugs, become involved in criminal activity, are obliged to serve as soldiers and are taught to kill, of those who suffer the consequences of unhappy, unhealthy, and "broken" homes. . . .

At the meeting of heads of Lasallian institutions of higher education last July, I reminded the participants that the 42nd General Chapter urged initiatives in defense of the rights of children. I recommended that our institutions of higher education consider what initiatives might be feasible. But creative action can be taken by Lasallian institutions at every level. I am thinking, for example, of publications, forums, and seminars to sensitize the parents of our pupils and the public in general to the horrendous situations that we so often tolerate with passive complacency. It is true that we often feel helpless in the face of such social ills, but it seems to me that in many countries, if not all, a united and organized Lasallian Family could contribute constructively through the political process.

I. 1995: THE YEAR OF PRAYER

These reflections on peace and union, as well as on the defense of the rights of children, are very pertinent to the principal topic of this letter. It was concern for neglected children that led to the founding of the Institute. And in the quotation on the inside of the cover page,

St. De La Salle declares that concern for the salvation of children should make us "assiduous in prayer" and prompt us "to converse frequently with God."

To help us grow in our capacity and commitment "to converse frequently with God" was the intent of the General Chapter delegates when they designated 1995 "as a year devoted specifically to the prayer life of the Brother." You are in a better position than I to gauge the impact of the "Year of Prayer" in your personal life and in the life of your sector in general.

But I have the impression that the Brothers of the Institute appreciated the initiative of the General Chapter and did in fact focus on prayer in a particular way during the past twelve months. Many sectors prepared special material and organized retreats and other sessions on the topic of prayer. Some Brothers rediscovered the richness of the chapter of our *Rule* devoted to prayer. Others were helped by the sections on prayer in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Judging from comments received, I can say that the materials prepared here in Rome have been generally well received and employed creatively. Furthermore, the members of the General Council have been kept very busy responding to requests for animation of retreats on prayer.

. . . And now?

But it is appropriate at the end of the special year to ask ourselves that pertinent question: "and now?" What is our understanding of prayer at this moment? What is our attitude towards it? Are we making a personal and community effort to be more faithful to prayer? Has the "Year of Prayer" helped us to improve the quality of our personal and community prayer?

If so, we thank God. If not, it is perhaps not likely that one more "document" devoted to the topic of prayer is going to make a difference! Nevertheless, it is my desire to add a **post-script** to what has already been said. I mentioned in my letter of a year ago that it had been my intention to write a letter on prayer at the beginning of the designated year. Nevertheless, because it seemed very appropriate to share something in 1995 of my experience of the synod, I decided to postpone my letter on prayer until 1 January 1996.

It is not easy for me to write on prayer. I have no particular theological expertise in prayer, and I am certainly not the man of prayer that I should be or that I want to be. Moreover, prayer is intensely personal. Frankly, I find truly helpful only a small percentage of what I read on prayer. I suspect that your experience is similar. Regardless, I am going to share with you some of my own thoughts and convictions

in the hope that you will find them useful as a point of departure for your own personal reflection.

Cultural context

Given the cultural diversity of the Lasallian world, it is not possible to provide a description of cultural trends that is valid everywhere. Nevertheless, I think it useful to call attention to certain trends that are affecting many parts of the Institute directly or indirectly. Commentators of the cultural scene speak of dechristianization (obviously in sectors historically Christian), secularism, anti-clericalism, loss of a sense of mystery, religious indifference, trivialization of religion, consumerism, individualism, narcissism, moral relativism. . . .

We need to recognize that these trends can have and probably do have a profound influence on our understanding of prayer, our attitudes towards it, and the place we give it in our life. I have no intention of attempting a discussion of all of these trends. Nevertheless, I would like to share with you some of the observations which Stephen Carter, an expert on constitutional law in the United States, makes in a stimulating book entitled *The Culture of Disbelief*.

Trivialization of religion

Carter, a convinced Christian, thinks that United States law and politics, while not directly hostile to religion, tend to trivialize it. Religion is treated as an unimportant facet of the human personality, one that should be kept "private," one that can be easily discarded. Religious convictions are presumed to be irrational, arbitrary, unimportant, and, therefore, irrelevant. Religious people are expected to "bracket" their religious convictions from the rest of their personality.

The consistent message of society is that whenever the demands of one's religion conflict with what one has to do to get ahead, one is expected to ignore the religious demands and act "rationally." Carter, however, insists that faith and reason are not inconsistent:

"I am a Christian who relies on discernment of the will of God as the path to moral knowledge and I consider this process no less rational than any of the more secularized forms of moral reasoning that dominate our media and the academy" (pp. xv-xvi).

What many critics of religion resent is that religious people frequently take positions that differ from approved government policy. The implication is that the secular moral judgments of the state should guide the practices of the various religions. The attempt to marginalize and even exclude religion from public debate

on major philosophical and moral issues has been vigorously opposed by the Pope as well as by a number of conferences of bishops and individual religious leaders. Some of the interventions of these religious leaders have been controversial. But, as Stephen Carter argues, the power to take an independent path and even resist state policies is one of the major contributions that religion can make. Religions, he holds, should be autonomous communities of resistance and independent sources of meaning.

But, of course, religion is not always excluded from public debate. It is sometimes explicitly included, but for political purposes. Religion is exploited, that is to say, utilized. Politicians search the scriptures for quotations that convey the sense that God is on their "side." How often it appears that far from trying to discern God's will and then follow it, the political "preacher" first decides what path he wishes to take, then looks for evidence that God is in agreement. To exploit religion in this way is to trivialize it.

Carter argues that while believers must avoid an attitude of "infallibilism" and must respect those who have different positions, they should be faithful to their convictions.

Brothers at prayer

It is within the cultural context that prevails in our particular country that we Brothers of

the Christian Schools are called to be consecrated religious, that is to say, men who really believe in Jesus Christ, and express that belief in the way we live. Jesus Christ is for us the **Way**, the **Truth**, and the **Life**. We believe so intensely that we have freely consecrated ourselves totally to God by religious vows. We live this consecration in communion with persons who have received a similar call. "Together and by association" we serve the Lord by dedicating ourselves with ardent zeal to the human and Christian education of youth, poor youth especially.

But our faith is far more than an ideology: it is a relationship with God, a relationship that is expressed and nourished by personal and community prayer. As we pray, we send messages to all with whom we are in contact that we **BELIEVE**. In cultures that manifest a certain number of the trends mentioned above, particularly those which trivialize religious belief, our prayer is counter-cultural. To be faithful to prayer requires profound faith, hope, love, and courage.

II. UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES TODAY

Our identity as Brothers is what results from living in an integrated manner religious consecration, mission, and community. In the process of interiorizing the values that character-

ize our vocation, we **become** Brothers of the Christian Schools, men who manifest in a striking way the spirit of faith, community, and zeal. We have to consider our life of prayer in the light of that fundamental vision of the vocation of the Brothers.

But this understanding of ourselves as Brothers, so well expressed by the 39th General Chapter, has to be interpreted and lived in a Church and Institute that has changed remarkably in the past thirty years. Of the 60,000 persons living the Lasallian mission today, only 7% are Brothers of the Christian Schools. As the 42nd General Chapter stated very accurately:

"Guided by the Spirit, the Church has entered 'the age of the laity.' . . . we see our shared mission as a sign of the times. Far from being a regrettable situation, it constitutes an integral part of our vocation. . . . The Spirit invites us to a deeper and richer understanding of who we are and what we are called to do" (*Circular 435*, p. 43). . . . A way of looking upon ourselves as the only authorized agents of the mission of the Institute is obsolete" (p. 8-9).

John Paul II has remarked that the participation of the laity is in the process of changing ecclesial life (*Redemptoris Missio*, 2). It has certainly changed our Institute. The most striking difference between the experimental *Rule* of 1967 and its final version in 1986 is the introduction of a section entitled "shared mission." We

are reminded in articles 17 through 17d that to create schools that are truly Christian and Lasallian, we have to foster a spirit of collaboration among all the members of the educative community. We are told clearly that we exercise our apostolate within an educational community, in which the functions, including positions of responsibility, are shared.

The focus of these articles is primarily on the relationship between a community of Brothers and the institution which it serves. It is interesting to note, however, that our lived experience is leading us to a broader understanding of “shared mission.” We are recognizing more and more the need to think not only of a particular school and educational community, but also of the *network* of educational institutions and educational communities, with or without Brothers, that constitute the mission of the district.

These new realities oblige us to consider seriously our particular identity and mission as individuals and as communities within Lasallian educational communities. I think that the Brothers—as individuals and as communities—contribute to the Lasallian mission today in three ways:

1. Service: what we do.

In fulfilling our ministries, whatever our individual assignment may be, we contribute to the mission of the Institute. We participate, therefore, by teaching, by exercising various roles of school governance, by working with pupils in school activities, or by fulfilling other functions associated with the mission (*Rule*, 16).

There are, however, no functions **reserved** to us. Lay men and women can do everything that we can do. Our effectiveness in a particular ministry depends on general competence and not on membership in the Institute.

To what positions in the school should we give priority? Because the position offers the possibility of exercising strong, influential leadership, I personally favor assigning a Brother as headmaster—but only **IF** a well-qualified Brother is available. I would prefer, however, that other Brothers be assigned to teaching, catechetical, and pastoral activities that assure them direct contact with young people, rather than to secondary positions of governance, in which they are often “buried in offices.” Young people frequently complain to us during visits that they seldom have the opportunity to communicate in a personal manner with the Brothers.

2. *Witness: what we “signify”*

We are called to be messengers of the truth that liberates young people. We proclaim the truth not only by what we say and do, but also by who we are. As the *Declaration* says very powerfully:

“By his life, his conduct, his professional competence, his human qualities and the way he relates to people, the Brother witnesses to the reality of the transformation proclaimed in the Gospel (38.4). . . . The Word of God does not fall out of the sky in an abstract way. . . . It is not in words or in books that young people meet most forcibly the God who calls them by name, but rather in the person of the Brother who catechizes them” (40.5).

As individuals and as communities, we send **messages** “non-stop.” All those with whom we are in contact, our pupils particularly, are attentive to these “messages.” They “read” and evaluate them in the light of the expectations they have of us as Brothers of the Christian Schools.

It is of course true that our lay partners send “messages” also. Those that live their faith authentically have a very positive influence on the young. Our witness, however, is different. We have made public profession of our faith and have devoted ourselves totally to the service of God. When the young esteem

us as loving, dedicated “brothers,” when they appreciate our professional competence, and when they discover that we really believe in Jesus Christ—so much so that we strive to live wholeheartedly as his disciples—we send them the **messages** that God wants us to send.

3. *Mediation: what the Holy Spirit does through us.*

Our Founder tells us that it is our vocation to **represent** Jesus Christ as his ambassadors and ministers. Our pupils should recognize Jesus in us and receive our instructions as if he were giving them.

For this purpose, we have to give ourselves frequently to the Lord, trusting that he will use us as instruments of his divine action in the lives of those he confides to our care (*Med.* 195, 196).

This “mystical” interpretation of our vocation, Brothers, is profound. The role of “mediation” is, needless to say, not something that we can “see” or “demonstrate.” But we believe that the Lord is really using us as channels of grace for our young people.

As mediators, we need to ask Jesus Christ insistently to make his Spirit come alive in us, since he has chosen us to do his work. We need to ask him for the grace to help young people find meaning and happiness in living their faith authentically.

"You must constantly represent the needs of your disciples to Jesus Christ, explaining to him the difficulties you experience in guiding them. Jesus Christ, seeing that you regard him as the one who can do everything in your work, and yourself as an instrument that ought to be moved only by him, will not fail to grant you what you ask of him" (*Med.* 196.1).

While we can distinguish these three dimensions of our contribution to the Lasallian mission today, they cannot be separated in time and space: we live them simultaneously. As we exercise our particular ministry, we send messages as witnesses and we serve as mediators of the Holy Spirit.

Brothers, it is in the light of what the 42nd General Chapter called "this deeper and richer understanding of who we are and what we are called to do" that we have to reflect on our life of prayer. But before we focus directly on prayer, let us reflect on what I have called the "mystical" dimension of our vocation: "representing" Jesus Christ, serving as his "instrument," exercising a role of "mediation."

III. CHRIST LIVES IN ME

De La Salle tells us that it is our vocation to "represent" Jesus Christ as his ambassadors and ministers. According to my dictionary, the verb to "represent" means to *stand for, to act for, to speak for, to serve as an example of*. Since the Founder says that our pupils should recognize Jesus in us and receive our instructions as if he were giving them, I think that we can say that our vocation is to "re-present" Jesus Christ, that is to say, to make Christ present again, today, in the lives of the young people confided to our care. This mystical dimension of the Brother's vocation is evident in this striking passage of the Founder in the meditation for Palm Sunday:

"Dispose yourself today, then, to receive Jesus Christ fully, by abandoning yourself entirely to his guidance, and by letting him reign over your whole interior life so absolutely on his part and so dependently on yours, that you may in truth say that it is no longer you who live, but Jesus Christ who lives in you" (*Med.* 22.2).

De La Salle refers to *Gal.* 2:20 some six times in the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* and at least twice in his meditations: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." I think that an understanding and appreciation of this quotation is indispensable to understanding and appreciating the identity and mission of the Brothers of the Christian

Schools. But the word “understanding” is not the correct word. Paul’s message cannot really be understood. It must be accepted in faith. The following commentary on *Gal. 2:20* of Joseph Fitzmyer, SJ, is not easy to grasp, but I think it merits serious consideration:

“The perfection of Christian life is expressed here; it is not merely an existence dominated by a new psychological motivation (“living for God”). . . . Rather, it reshapes human beings anew, supplying them with a new principle of activity on the ontological level of their very beings. A symbiosis results of the Christian with the Christ, the glorified Kyrios, who has become as of the resurrection a “vivifying Spirit” (*1 Cor 15:45*), the vital principle of Christian activity. **I live by faith in the Son of God.** Paul’s profound insight into the Christian experience: the reshaping of even physical human life by the transcendent influence of Christ’s indwelling. It must penetrate to one’s psychological awareness so that one realizes in faith that true life comes only from the redemptive and vicarious surrender of the Son of God” (*The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 785).

To let Christ reign over our whole life, as the Founder says, in order that we may say in truth that it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us, requires us to “live crucified,” that is to say, to “live with our arms outstretched” in an attitude of **YES** to all God asks

of us. When we live crucified with Jesus Christ, the Father raises us as he did his Son and fills us with the Spirit. We in turn, then, as F. X. Durrwell says, become fountains of living water for those confided to our care. We are able, therefore, to live our vocation as “mediators” of the Holy Spirit.

To let Christ reign over our whole life is to accept him without reserve. It is to enter into a personal relationship with the Christ who is for us the **WAY**, revealing by his life and teaching what being human is all about; the Christ who is for us the **TRUTH**, revealing by his life and teaching who God is and what he is like; the Christ who is for us the **LIFE**, filling us with his Spirit, enabling us to live as sons of his Father, as his brother, and as channels of that Spirit for those he entrusts to our care.

Our life of faith, then, Brothers, is a life of loving relationship with the Father, with Christ, with the Holy Spirit. The Trinity to whom we have consecrated ourselves entirely is the loving Father who loves us and has called us to live the gift of faith as Brothers of the Christian Schools; it is the Son who asks us to make his loving and saving presence a vivid and effective reality in the world of the young; it is the Spirit who enlightens, guides, and empowers us.

In short, to live our faith is to “walk with the Lord,” that is to say to “live in fellowship with him:”

“Enoch lived for three hundred sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God. Then he vanished because God took him” (*Gen.* 5:23-24).

The Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25

I think it helpful to reflect on these notions of “indwelling” and “mediation” in the light of *Matthew* 25. In this story of the day of judgment, the Lord divides the people of the earth in two groups. One group he welcomes because these persons responded to his needs when he was hungry, thirsty, alone, naked, sick, and in prison. Their response is one of surprise: Lord, when did we render you this assistance? He answers, whenever you responded to the needs of one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me. The other group the Lord rejects because those persons failed to respond to his needs. But when . . . ? they asked. “When you did it not to the least of my brothers, you did it not to me.”

Those called to enjoy the kingdom—rather than endure eternal fire—are those who compassionately and effectively attend to the needs of the hungry and thirsty, the immigrants and homeless, the sick, the imprisoned. . . . They are those who react lovingly to people they meet along their way—as did the Good Samaritan. They are not aware that they are serving Christ. Nevertheless, Christ tells them

that those suffering people are his brothers and sisters. The services rendered to them he considers as services rendered to him. In like manner, he interprets the failure to respond as sins against his own person.

In this story Christ reveals something of great importance: he is mystically united with everyone. When we attend to the needs of our neighbor, we attend to Christ himself. In no way, however, is that neighbor simply a “shell,” within which the Lord dwells. To “do it to me” is not a matter of penetrating that “shell” in order to love Jesus who is within. No, it is a matter of loving people as they are. When we love people **themselves**—personally, compassionately, effectively—the Lord accepts that as being done to himself: I was hungry, I was homeless, I was dying of AIDS . . . and you did or did not respond.

In meditating on this intriguing story, we grow in awareness of the mystical manner in which Christ is united to the human person. But I think there is something more to be learned from this story: if Christ is present in others—without their losing in any way their specific individuality and personality—then he is present in us in the same way.

Yes, Christ is so intimately present to us that Paul can make the claim: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” But just as Christ is present mystically in the hungry and homeless without their losing in any way

their uniqueness as human persons, so also he is present in Paul. Paul gropes for language to explain the inexplicable. He says he no longer lives, but he does in fact live. Christ is indeed united to Paul. But in no way does he lose his uniqueness as a human person. Commenting on *Gal. 2:20* William Johnston, SJ, says,

“Paul remained Paul and yet it was not his life but the life of Jesus that was vibrating within . . . while becoming Jesus we remain ourselves. Indeed, we become our true selves. We are faced with a great paradox of Christian mysticism: I become the other while remaining myself. Teilhard expresses it well when he says that union differentiates. 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” (*Letters to Contemporaries*, pp. 71, 91).

Paul, therefore, is still Paul. As he lives as authentically as he can, Christ lives in him. He is not some kind of “shell” within which Christ is living. On the contrary: he lives fully, and in the very act of living, serves as Christ’s minister, ambassador, co-worker, instrument.

De La Salle says that, like Paul, we are called to be instruments of Christ. God wants us to “represent” Christ: to render the Good Shepherd present today among young people. It is in our striving to be the people God wants us to be that we live this privileged vocation.

Faithful servants

Let us reflect now on the story in chapter 25 which immediately precedes that of the last judgment. It is the story of the master who before leaving on a trip confides to each of three servants the care of a sum of money which corresponds to their ability. The first two successfully double their investment. But the third, fearful of losing what has been confided to him, hides it rather than invest it. Although he returns to the master the sum that has been given him, the master is not pleased. He has the “useless servant” thrown into the darkness.

It is interesting to meditate on these two stories in juxtaposition. Christ has left this world “on a trip:” his passage from death to life. We are his servants. Specifically, we are Brothers of the Christian Schools, charged with the mission of human and Christian education. As the master expected his servants to devote themselves to their duties with competence, creativity, and effectiveness, so Christ expects us to give ourselves wholeheartedly to all aspects of our vocation. As the servants “took the place” of the master, so we “take the place” of Christ. We “re-present” him. We serve as his instruments, not by passively waiting for the Lord to work through us, but by devoting ourselves without reserve to what we believe to be his will.

I find this manner of understanding the “indwelling” of the Trinity to be helpful. We have

to strive to be “good and faithful servants,” that is to say, the persons God wants us to be. As we try to do our best, each of us can with confidence employ the language of Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” We can be certain that the Lord is mystically united to us and that as we live our vocation conscientiously, we are sources of grace, through the power of the Spirit which has been given us, for those God confides to our care.

At the same time, we have to be convinced that in order to **BE** the people God wants us to be, we must be men of prayer.

IV. PRAYER

1. *In our Life as Brothers*

De La Salle’s profound conviction that we Brothers must be men of prayer motivated his insistence on the centrality of prayer in our daily life. In his meditation for Christmas Eve he urges us to

“dispose our hearts to receive Jesus Christ in such a way that he may be pleased to make his home there. . . . It is for this purpose that the Son of God has come to earth and wishes to come into our hearts in order to make us sharers in his nature and help us become altogether heavenly persons” (*Med.* 85.3).

This statement is very consistent with our meditation on *Gal.* 2:20. Moreover, the Founder says, we have to “apply ourselves to detach our hearts” from all that is in any way incompatible with “partaking of the divine nature” (2 *Peter* 1:4). To achieve such liberation and to grow in union with Jesus Christ at the very center of our being, we turn in confidence to the Holy Spirit from whom

“you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness that we are children of God . . . the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us” (*Rom* 8:15-16, 26).

Convinced of the sublimity of our call, we have declared in our new *Rule* that prayer is a gift from God which we welcome in all the events of our daily life, responding to it in praise, thanksgiving, intercession, and repentance (*Rule*, 65):

“Ordinarily the Brothers give to God at least two hours of each day in mental prayer, the Eucharist, community prayer, spiritual reading, and personal prayer” (*Rule*, 73).

It is my purpose to offer a certain number of reflections on some aspects of “mental prayer, the Eucharist, community prayer, spiritual reading, and personal prayer”. But it is not my intention to attempt a systematic or comprehensive treatise on the prayer of the Brother.

The meaning of prayer

In my pastoral letter of 1990, I defined prayer as a period in time and space of “heightened awareness” in faith of the loving presence of the Lord and of our presence to him. That is a definition or description I read in a theological journal some twenty-five years ago. I still find it helpful—although it can be improved.

Prayer is a period or “moment” which can be situated both in time and in space. I am making a clear distinction between “prayer” and the “life of faith”—and even between “prayer” and Paul’s notion of “praying without ceasing.” The “life of faith,” on the one hand, is the relationship we enjoy with the Lord at all times. “Prayer,” on the other hand, refers to specific moments of “heightened awareness” of that relationship, during which we express praise, thanksgiving, repentance, and petition, moments which in turn nourish the relationship.

An analogy might be useful. Persons in love—a happily married couple, for example—are generally “aware” of one another even when they are separated. They are not, of course, literally conscious of one another, but their relationship is such that it shapes their vision, their judgments, their decisions, and their actions at all times. But periodic moments of “heightened awareness”—which can take many forms—are indispensable. These are experi-

ences which express and nourish the loving relationship.

Analogies are in their very nature more dissimilar than similar. Nevertheless, the example can help. Prayer is essentially a matter of being with the Lord in a loving relationship. But being with the Lord involves more than the word “awareness” conveys. Being with the Lord implies **attention** and **intention**.

2. Attention

“Let us remember. . . .”

Those of us who are former pupils of Lasallian schools learned at a young age the formula: “Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.” But all of us have known and appreciated from the earliest days of our initial formation the central and pivotal position that attention to the presence of God enjoys in Lasallian spirituality.

That traditional expression is an invitation to recall that we are literally, and at any given moment, in the presence of the Lord. God, of course, is always present. We sometimes hear well-intentioned prayer leaders invite us to “place ourselves” in the presence of God—as if we had a choice!

“To live in the presence of God should be as natural for a Christian as to breathe the air which surrounds him. . . . The life of

prayer is simply to be aware that God is present to us and we are present to him” (Abhishiktananda, *Prayer*, pp. 3, 5).

This awareness in faith of the presence of God is of fundamental importance. Prayer—mental prayer, community prayer, Eucharist, or any other form of prayer—has meaning only in so far as it is an expression of relationship with God. That is why in the remarks which follow we shall return many times to the importance of frequent and explicit **attention** to the presence of God.

3. *Intention*

Purity of Heart

A number of times over the years I have made reference to Søren Kierkegaard’s understanding of purity of heart: **to will one thing**. The following passage from *Deuteronomy* is a magnificent expression of exclusive devotion to Yahweh, of “willing one thing,” namely Yahweh and Yahweh’s will.

“Hear, O Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone; and you shall love Yahweh with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk

by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (*Dt.* 6:4ff)

Israel is called to love Yahweh totally. A commitment is demanded that pervades and shapes the entire life of the Israelite. There can be no question of double-mindedness, that is to say, of willing two things; of trying, for example, to love God and mammon. I am reminded of the wealthy, status-seeking, and complacent Christians of Laodicea who are told that despite appearances, they are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked:

“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot! Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth” (*Apoc.* 3:15-17).

We live with purity of heart when we live crucified, that is to say, with our arms outstretched in union with Christ, in an attitude of total and uncompromising commitment to God and to his will. Purity of heart is to manifest our determination to do what we believe to be God’s will, to avoid what we believe to be contrary to his will, and to accept life as it unfolds in our regard, including those unexpected and sometimes painful events which invade “the tidy little world we like to construct

for ourselves” (Robert Johann). As our *Rule* declares:

“By faith the Brother recognizes that his life consists in a succession of calls from God to which he continues to respond . . . he is invited to be open each day to the presence of the living God in such a way that he discovers it and lives it in his mission, his consecration, and his community life” (*Rule*, 100).

Sinners at prayer

I have always found consolation in Paul’s experience of his weakness and in his willingness to be honest about it:

“I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate” (*Rom.* 7:15).

Many of us, I think, find it difficult to be honest with ourselves. We are inclined to “rationalize” or “explain away” our faults. We live in an age of extraordinary moral relativity. When we don’t like certain prohibitions, we can, if we so choose, find a way to say that the prohibitions no longer “make sense” and are therefore no longer prohibitions. This phenomenon has perhaps some novel features today, but it seems the tendency is nothing new. It is recognized in the first letter of John: “If we say we

have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (*I John* 1:8).

Gilbert Keith Chesterton says somewhere that the Catholic Church is not a community of saints, but a community of sinners always needing and always receiving from God forgiveness. I think that as we grow older, we find it easier to admit the existence of evil in our life. Some years ago I heard spiritual writer David Knight remark, “When I was young I prayed for perfection; now that I am older I pray for mercy.”

“Have mercy on me, O God. . . . I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. . . . Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Fill me with joy and gladness. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (*Psalms* 50).

Like many of you, I learned as a novice to pray every morning these words from the *Imitation of Christ*: “Lord, what I have done in the past is nothing; give me the grace to begin anew.”

Inshallah

A year ago or so I read Oriana Fallaci’s fascinating and challenging novel, *Inshallah*, based on events in Lebanon in 1983. Throughout the book a young Italian soldier struggles

with the meaning of **Inshallah**. He is told that life is not a problem to solve, but a mystery to live. And to live this mystery there is a formula:

“It consists of one word. A simple word that here we pronounce at any pretext, a word that promises nothing, that explains everything, and that helps in all cases: **Inshallah**: as God wants! **Inshallah!** (p. 738)

The Italian youth is repulsed by this concept because it appears to him passive and demeaning. But familiarity with the Lebanese people and the experience of subsequent events soon teaches him that **Inshallah**, far from expressing resignation and impotence, means eagerness and determination to live (p. 774).

Brothers, these three dispositions—purity of heart, acceptance of our sinfulness and repentance, **Inshallah**—are nothing more than attempts at discovering a formula for living the mystery that life surely is. Separately and together, they invite us to rekindle every day our determination to follow Christ unreservedly and to heed the advice of Isaiah:

“Strengthen weak hands and make firm feeble knees. Those who are of a fearful heart, be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come and save you” (*Is.* 35:3-4).

It is in this disposition that we go to meet the Lord. Convinced that he comes to save us, we open ourselves unreservedly to his action in our lives.

“Intention”

But I want to propose another, more restricted, meaning for the word “intention.” Retired Cistercian Abbot Thomas Keating maintains that in the form of prayer he calls “centering prayer,” **attention**, understood as a general and loving awareness of the Presence of God, is of secondary importance. What is more important is **intention**, an exercise of the will by which we consent to God’s presence and to his action during the prayer. This consent implies that we are disposed to change whatever needs to be changed in our life. It implies not only a readiness but a desire to “be completely transformed by the light and fullness of grace, and by the possession of God’s Holy Spirit” (*Med.* 152.2).

“As long as our **intention** remains pure—to serve God, to listen to God, to wait upon God, to surrender to God—then thoughts of whatever kind do not make any difference. They do not affect the purity of our prayer” (*Intimacy with God*, pp. 57ff).

While Abbot Keating is writing with a specific form of prayer in mind, I believe that what he says is valid for all kinds of prayer. It is essential that we bring to mental prayer, community prayer, the Eucharist, and every other form of prayer these two fundamental dispositions: **attention** and **intention**.

Acts of faith and adoration

I think that John Baptist de La Salle would agree wholeheartedly with that assertion. The Founder maintained that “the first thing to be done in mental prayer is to become interiorly permeated with the presence of God” (*Collection*, p. 7). For this purpose he proposed that with the help of a passage from Scripture, the Brothers call to mind the presence of God, following which, making use of a schema of nine “acts,” they enter into conversation with the Lord. De La Salle acknowledges that making all the acts might not be feasible or desirable and suggests several ways of abridging them. One of these is to “make only the act of faith in God’s presence and that of adoration” (*Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, p. 150).

My suggestion, Brothers, is that we cultivate the habit of making these two acts before **every** form of prayer. In this manner we call to mind that we are in the presence of God and declare our faith in that presence. We adore God, which means we express our intention “to will one thing,” to live unreservedly for God. Acknowledging our sinfulness and readiness to change, together with gratitude for God’s loving mercy, we profess our desire for his transforming action upon us during that particular moment of prayer or Eucharist.

4. Holy Scripture

Tradition of the Institute

“The Brothers of this Society shall have a most profound respect for the Holy Scriptures; and, in proof thereof, shall always carry the New Testament about them, and pass no day without reading some of it, through a sentiment of faith, respect, and veneration for the divine words contained therein, looking upon it as their first and principal rule” (*Rule of 1718*).

Those of us from the pre-39th General Chapter “epoch” remember carrying the New Testament in the pockets of our religious habit and of reading from it on our knees in the common room, immediately before the accusation of faults and spiritual reading. We recall also memorizing the scriptural passages recommended in the *Collection*, as well as entire books of the Bible. Moreover, in accord with the Founder’s method, we were trained to make ample use of scripture in mental prayer.

All of these traditional practices of the Institute manifested St. De La Salle’s profound conviction that the scriptures must **be eaten** by all true servants of God, in order that “they may subsequently be able to communicate and explain their secrets to those whom they are called upon to instruct” (*Med.* 170).

The Institute Today

Our *Rule* today says that the Brothers have “a profound respect for Holy Scripture,” in which they find “endless sustenance” from studying, meditating, and sharing its richness. “They nourish and strengthen their faith by biblical and theological studies” (*Rule*, 6).

The traditional practices of carrying the New Testament at all times and reading it in community while kneeling are not generally in evidence today. Nevertheless, many Brothers give the Bible a place of honor in their bedrooms and devote time every night to reading its books consecutively or to reading the liturgical texts of the following day. In meditating on a specific scriptural text, they ask themselves 1) what it says literally; 2) what message the author intended to communicate to his readers; 3) what meaning the text has for us today. Some Brothers choose a particular text for use in their mental prayer of the following morning. All of these practices are ways of participating in the classic tradition of *lectio divina*: reading, meditating, praying, contemplating the Word of God.

I think we need to evaluate the place that the Scriptures have in our daily and weekly pattern of activities. Furthermore, we have to examine whether or not we are making an effort to grow in our understanding of the Bible by reading and participation in conferences, sessions, and courses.

Spiritual Reading

The *Rule* speaks of spiritual reading as a prolongation of the relationship established with the Lord as a result of meditation on the Bible. Accordingly, the Brothers

“arrange their work in such a way as to devote to spiritual reading all the time necessary to deepen their faith. The personal program takes this orientation into account” (*Rule*, 67a).

Some of us have to admit that we are rather careless with regard to spiritual reading. Our problem is not ill-will, but lack of personal organization and discipline. Our negligence is a clear example of how we frequently sacrifice the important for the urgent. Many of us organize our weeks with the help of desk or pocket time organizers. We need to situate spiritual reading squarely within our weekly cycle of activities—then be disciplined enough to be faithful to what we have decided. It is worth mentioning that some communities designate certain hours during the week as “quiet” times, during which the Brothers can make spiritual reading with the support of the community.

We also need to make sure that our community budget provides for the regular purchase of well-chosen books.

5. Personal Prayer

“The Brothers provide for moments of personal prayer during the course of the day, aware that this strengthens their willingness to be of service and enhances the quality of their apostolic action” (68b).

The expression “personal prayer” is used several times in the *Rule*, but its meaning is not always perfectly clear. In article 73, which lists the forms of prayer to which the Brothers should be faithful, the word “l’oraison”—which I am translating as “mental prayer”—is clearly distinguished from personal prayer and from “community prayer.” “Personal prayer” seems to be used in the same manner in article 68b, quoted above. But in article 72, “personal prayer” is given a broader interpretation and includes “mental prayer:”

“Each Brother has the primary responsibility for his personal prayer. Each one and all together are jointly responsible for community prayer.”

I have entitled this section of the pastoral letter **Personal Prayer**. I shall reflect on two forms of personal prayer: “moments of recollection” and “mental prayer.”

5.1 Moments of Recollection

“The Brothers remain in union with God by frequently remembering his presence, by looking upon events with faith, by concern to bring a great purity of intention into the different aspects of their work and relationships, and by assuring periods of time for silence and more profound recollection” (68).

It is essential that periodically during our busy days as apostolic religious, we make provision for “moments of recollection,” moments of **attention** and **intention**. During these moments we recall the presence of the Lord who loves us and calls us to serve him. We renew our intention to “will one thing,” namely, God’s will in our regard.

The “veterans” among us are reminded of the beautiful tradition of kneeling for a short “act of adoration” upon entering the common room, our classroom, and our bedroom. We have not forgotten either the hour and half-hour prayers in the classroom, during which we, together with our pupils, redirected our lives towards God. Moreover, we were encouraged to pray briefly in the chapel from time to time, particularly before leaving the house and upon returning.

Brothers, whether we draw upon the practices of the past or create new practices, we

need “moments of recollection.” Many Brothers today have simple but efficacious ways of recollecting themselves. Some carry the rosary or rosary ring and pray this Marian prayer while walking or at other opportune moments. Some carry a collection of scriptural quotations which they have personally selected and make use of periodically. Others have a “prayer word” which they express from time to time to help them renew their **attention** and **intention**—in chapel, in their bedroom, while walking. . . .

I think that we have to develop personal patterns or habits of “moments of recollection.” The *Rule* is very wise in reminding us that

“Throughout the tasks which fill their day, the Brothers make an effort to remain united with God, whose messengers they are” (68).

5.2 Mental Prayer

“The Brothers of this Institute ought to have a great love for mental prayer; they should look on it as the first and principal of their daily exercises and the one which is best calculated to draw down the blessing of God on all the others” (*Rule of 1718*).

“Mental prayer” differs from “moments of recollection” primarily in terms of duration. It is a period of at least twenty to thirty minutes of “heightened awareness” of the loving presence of the Lord and of our presence to him, during

which we freely open ourselves to the transforming action of the Lord.

In the English-speaking world we have been blessed in recent months by the publication of a new translation of the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*, as well as with a translation of the extraordinary and very helpful commentary of Brothers Miguel Campos and Michel Sauvage.

In his treatise on mental prayer, the Founder says that prayer should take place in the “depths of the soul” (*fond de l’ame*), that is to say, in its innermost part. Other writers, both in the past and in the present, speak of the “depths” as the “heart” or the “center.” We are, of course, groping for words to express what is inexpressible: the profound mystery communicated in *Galatians* 2:20, with which we have already wrestled: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

In mental prayer we strive, in faith, to be in touch with Christ at the center of our being. The “principal activity of the soul,” says our Founder, is “to fill itself and to unite itself interiorly with God” (*Explanation*, pp. 21-22). A more personal way of expressing that thought is to say that the principal activity in prayer is to express and nourish our relationship with the Lord at the center of our being.

The heart of the Founder’s method is “conversation” with God. He frequently cautions

against turning prayer into an intellectual exercise. For this reason he proposes numerous "acts." His conviction is clear: to make mental prayer is primarily to communicate with, not think about, God.

We can converse with the Lord, according to De La Salle's method, with many words, with few words, or with no words. I think that the way we relate with our loved ones can help us to understand prayer. At certain times we have the need and the desire to speak at length, at other times less so, and there are still other times when we are perfectly content simply to "be with" those we love.

Most of us were trained in initial formation to pray with what the Founder calls "multiplied reflections" and numerous "acts." Some of us are inclined, incorrectly, to identify the method of the Founder with these multiplied reflections and twenty-one acts. But the Founder is clear in his affirmation that "persons who have devoted themselves to mental prayer for a considerable time" (p. 55) can and should pray with fewer reflections and fewer words, and even with no words at all, simply "being before God with an interior view of faith that he is present" (p. 51). He calls this manner of praying "simple attention." Other spiritual writers have given it a variety of names, such as the prayer of quiet, the prayer of the heart, and the prayer of centering.

"This simple attention occupies the mind (**attention**) so powerfully and penetrates the heart so deeply, (**intention**) that the **mind** can dwell on no other thoughts, and the **heart** is inclined toward no other affection than that of God" (p. 55; *emphasis added*).

"We should remain in this attitude . . . as long as we feel drawn and absorbed by it. We should not interrupt this process by making distinct acts . . . for we can conceive the interior dispositions with a simple and implicit movement of the heart without . . . separating them into formal acts. Provided that this disposition (**intention**) remains lively and ardent, it can be maintained by a few affectionate words pronounced from time to time" (p. 97; *emphasis added*).

Advocates of what is called the "prayer of centering" give similar advice, recommending the periodic repetition of a "prayer word" to express one's consent to God's presence and to his transforming action (Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God*, p. 57).

Mental prayer is or certainly should be a very personal activity. Numerous Brothers find, by trial and error, approaches to prayer that they find helpful. But they frequently discover that they have to revise their approach after a period of time. More and more Brothers are

making directed retreats today, following which some decide to pursue regular spiritual direction. Those that find spiritual directors who are truly competent receive considerable help in their life of prayer.

A “method” of prayer

I conclude this section with a description of an approach to prayer that some might find helpful as a point of departure in developing their own personal approach:

1) Begin by recalling that it is no longer we who live, but that it is Christ who lives in us; or by recalling Christ's presence in the Eucharist or. . . .

2) Make short acts of faith and adoration that express both **attention** and **intention**.

3) Consider briefly some text or a passage of scripture related to the liturgical feast or another pertinent concern.

N.B. These preliminary steps can take place upon rising, any time before prayer, or at the beginning of the mental prayer itself.

4) Make a short “act”, inspired by the text or scriptural passage, which incorporates sentiments of faith, adoration, thanksgiving, repentance.

5) “Descend” to the “depths” or “center” of our being; in union with Christ remain quiet in

a stance of **YES** to the Father and openness to the Spirit.

6) Make use from time to time of a “few affectionate words” or a single “prayer word” to express the **intention** to consent to God's presence and transforming action.

We can be sure that we are praying well “when we leave mental prayer with renewed zeal to do our duty and to love and please God” (*Explanation*, p. 151).

It is interesting to observe that in an increasing number of instances, communities are freely choosing to schedule a time to make mental prayer together. Other communities invite Brothers to come together voluntarily for mental prayer before community morning praise. Brothers are finding encouragement and strength in the presence of others at mental prayer. I strongly support this movement, provided, however, that the position of Brothers who prefer to pray in private be respected.

6. Community Prayer

“The distinctive character of the Brothers' community is to be a community of faith where the experience of God is shared.” Accordingly, it is a “community of prayer. The Brothers pray together. Together they hear the word of God and meditate on it.

Together they recognize that they are sinners before God and they participate in the same Eucharist. Together they seek God and together they find him" (*Rule*, 48, 50).

I think it important to insist that community prayer is the prayer of the Brothers' community. The community **as such** is at prayer. Community prayer is not an activity in which the Brothers pray "individually together." It is not, in other words, an activity proposed to permit the Brothers to fulfill their personal obligations to pray.

I make this comment because a remark that was heard frequently twenty years ago is still heard occasionally today: "I am often absent from prayer and Eucharist, but there is no problem because I pray privately." On the contrary. There is a significant problem. If members of the community absent themselves because they prefer to pray privately, the community as such cannot function as a community of prayer.

Mutual rights and duties

This matter is important because it touches the mutual rights and mutual duties that we all have as members of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. As the *Declaration* says very incisively:

"The Institute is the instrument of the religious consecration of its members. . . . When the Brother enters religion to seek God and serve his kingdom, he expects that the congregation will help him in his search and service. This it does by using every effort to help each Brother in his personal way to God. Thus rules and structures are not established simply that they be kept, but their purpose is the service of persons. . . . The Brother in turn respects these rules and structures in his concern for the common good and recognizes that they are an integral part of the religious life" (19).

In the Institute there are reciprocal commitments: the individual has obligations to the Institute, and the Institute has obligations to the individual. These mutual rights and duties are expressed clearly in the *Rule*. Each of us, for example, has the right to the prescribed structures of community prayer, and each of us has the duty to sustain these structures in order that the rights of each Brother be respected. Obviously, when every Brother is fulfilling his obligation to support community activities, then the rights of all are honored.

Accordingly, we all have to collaborate with the members of our community in creating structures of prayer which correspond to Institute orientations:

“Ordinarily the Brothers give to God at least two hours of each day in meditation, the Eucharist, community prayer, spiritual reading, and personal prayer”. . . . (73) “The Brothers meet together at least in the morning and in the evening to celebrate the liturgy of the hours . . . (or other) forms of prayer” (71). “The Brothers regulate the order, times, and rhythm of their community prayer. Then they live out in practice what they have decided” (73a).

I have emphasized the concept of “duty,” but in a particular context: our obligation to honor the rights of our Brothers. But in no way am I advocating a “moral imperative.” On the contrary. As the *Symposium on Prayer* insisted some fifteen years ago, we have to develop an “existential imperative” to pray, that is to say, an interior imperative that leads us to be faithful to personal and community prayer because we are convinced of its role and want to be faithful, whatever the cost.

I think that we suffered in the past from a “moral imperative” that was very unhealthy: prayer and Eucharist were often considered as duties to be fulfilled; “understanding” directors” granted “breaks” from prayer on feast days, holidays, or other occasions. This kind of “moral imperative” coupled with paternalism created immature attitudes towards community prayer.

Creative Participation

Thanks be to God, there has been a change for the better in recent years. While situations vary considerably in the Institute, it is evident that many of us are developing an “existential imperative.” As a result we are giving high priority to creative participation in activities of the community. “High” priority does not mean “absolute” priority. There can occur and will inevitably occur very legitimate reasons for absences: conflicts of schedule, needed rest, and other motives. The important thing is that we personally **want** to be present, make every effort to be present, and experience a feeling of regret when we cannot be present.

I have used the expression “creative participation.” Physical presence is, of course, not sufficient. We need to contribute creatively to the prayer of the community by wholehearted participation and, perhaps, by agreeing to take responsibility for leading the prayer from time to time. And, of course, to participate wholeheartedly in community prayer, we must have the degree of realism and asceticism required to live gracefully with the diversity of ages, formation, temperaments, theological positions, and sometimes cultures, which characterize community life today. We need to place our accent on what unites rather than separates us, and to avoid “dramatizing” situations resulting from minor irritations or disagreements.

We have to bring to community prayer both **attention** and **intention**: an awareness of God's presence and a conscious commitment to consent to God's action upon us during the prayer. Conditions, therefore, must be conducive to a sense of reverence. Lack of organization of community prayer can militate against recollection. But so can excessively long oral instructions and an exaggerated quantity of sheets of paper, books, and hymnals. Moreover, just as affections rather than intellectual considerations should characterize mental prayer, expressions of praise, thanksgiving, repentance, and petition ought to characterize community prayer.

In the planning of our community prayer, we need to remember that a special devotion to Mary, Mother of Jesus and of the Church, is a mark of Lasallian spirituality.

“. . . the Brothers honor the Virgin Mary each day, whether personally or in community, by the recitation of the rosary or some other practice of devotion to Mary which is in keeping with the guidelines of the Church" (*Rule*, 76a).

The *Rule* also reminds us that we should pray through the intercession of St. Joseph and our Lasallian saints and beati, particularly on their feast days.

Sharing our prayer

One of the propositions submitted to the Pope at the end of the synod on consecrated life urged members of religious communities to communicate willingly with one another the riches that they find in the Word of God. I think all of us are strengthened in our faith when the Brothers with whom we live ask us to pray for intentions that are dear to their heart, share with us reflections inspired by their reading of the Word of God, and pray aloud, permitting us to experience their relationship with the Lord.

Finally, Brothers, we need to make article 71d a lived reality: "The Brothers want their community to be a praying community open to all who wish to join them for prayer."

We have a certain number of communities which are clearly visible and appreciated as "praying communities." The Brothers invite teachers, pupils, parents, neighbors, and others to join them periodically for morning or evening prayer and for the Eucharist. Such experiences make possible and efficacious a mutual and complementary witness of faith, hope, and love.

7. Eucharist

“Do this in memory of me”

In their own extraordinary tradition, the members of the Jewish family “remember” in celebration the marvelous events of God’s action in their history. They “remember” them so vividly that in some way they relive the events and participate in them.

Our Eucharistic celebration is also a memorial: “Do this in memory of me.” We “remember” Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension. While our celebration is essentially different in that Christ is sacramentally present, it is rooted in the Jewish tradition. As the Jews relive and participate in some way in past events, so we relive and participate in Christ’s passage from death to life.

In this sacramental celebration of the Paschal mystery, we “really share in the body of the Lord” and “are taken up into communion with him and with one another. . . . By communicating his Spirit Christ mystically constitutes as his body those brothers and sisters of his who are called together from every nation” (*Lumen Gentium*, 7). United with Jesus with our “arms outstretched,” we express our praise and thanksgiving for all that God is, has done, and continues to do.

As Brothers called to make his loving and saving presence a vivid and effective reality among the young, “we must be entirely transformed by the light and the fullness of grace and by the possession of the Spirit of God” (*Med.* 152.2). At the Eucharist we give ourselves totally to God in union with Christ at the moment of his supreme **YES** to his Father. In confidence we open our arms to the transforming action of the Spirit, praying that

“we who are nourished by his body and blood may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ” (*Eucharistic Prayer III*).

Our *Rule* states that “as far as possible” we participate in the celebration of the Eucharist every day. When it is not possible to have Mass in the community and when the hours of celebration at the parish or other churches or chapels conflict with our apostolic duties, we are encouraged to organize a “celebration centered around the Eucharist” (70a). It is important, however, that at least from time to time, the Brothers celebrate Mass together, because

“there, in communion with the death and resurrection of Christ and listening to the Word of God, the Brothers are a community united in mind and heart in the same Spirit for the same mission” (*Rule*, 70).

CONCLUSION

Throughout the history of the Church certain persons have experienced a call from God to follow Christ "full-time:" to "stay with him" twenty-four hours a day, to set aside ordinary family life and the pursuit of wealth, and to enter into a community of persons committed to work together in a specific mission. These are persons who find meaning and happiness in responding wholeheartedly to this call. For them the life they are leading is "right." It is "the" way for them to live, the "only" way. For these persons the life to which they have been called is "their home."

Once again I want to quote these beautiful words of Sister Sandra Schneider:

"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."

It is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to communicate this understanding of our call to others. I suppose that married persons also would find it difficult to explain why they have decided to live their life with one specific person rather than another. But our communication difficulty is more complex, because the decision we have made is grounded in faith.

We can give no "reasons" for the life we have chosen.

We have made public profession of faith in Jesus Christ who we believe has risen from death and lives today as Lord. We believe so intensely that we have given ourselves totally to him and to his service. We have made this commitment not because we have "reasons," but because we "believe." We have made the "leap of faith" of which Kierkegaard writes. As William Johnston, SJ, writes: "Blessed are those who have not seen but believe. Blessed are those who have no reasons but believe" (*Letters to Contemplatives*, p. 5).

That is why St. De La Salle's advice is so important:

"Apply yourself much to prayer, in which Jesus will teach you secrets that to most people remain unknown" (*Med.* 88.1).

Fraternally in De La Salle,



Brother John Johnston, FSC
Superior General