



PASTORAL LETTER

**LOOK TO THE FUTURE:
BUILD COMMUNITIES TODAY
THAT ARE
INNOVATIVE, CREATIVE
AND HOLY**

Brother John Johnston, FSC
Superior General

1 January 1998

You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things.

Institutes of Consecrated Life are thus invited to propose anew and with courage the enterprising initiative, creativity, and holiness of their founders in response to the signs of the times emerging in today's world.

This invitation is a call to perseverance on the path of holiness in the midst of the material and spiritual difficulties of daily life ... it is a call to pursue competence in personal work and to develop a dynamic fidelity to their mission, adapting forms, if need be, to new situations and different needs.

Rise, and have no fear. (Mt. 17.7)

John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* 110, 37, 40

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1 January 1998

Feast of Mary, Mother of God

World Day of Peace

Dear Brothers,

May God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ send you grace and peace. (I Cor 1:3)

Grateful for your greetings and prayers throughout the past year, especially on the occasion of my birthday and that of Christmas, I ask God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ to bless you with the grace and peace of the Holy Spirit as you begin the year 1998. I pray that you experience meaning and tranquility, whatever the circumstances of your life, remembering always that "if God is for us, who can be against us ... there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord." (*Romans* 8:31,39)

I. INTRODUCTION

Justice and peace ... and our Mission as Brothers

Each year I begin my pastoral letter with a salutation from one of Paul's letters to the early Christians. Some weeks ago I selected another passage to open this letter. But after reading Pope John Paul II's forceful *Message for the World Day of Peace, 1998*, I decided to use the quotation from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. I chose this passage not because it expresses the Holy Father's thought, but because, on the contrary, it can serve to remind us how easy it is to wish others well and to pray for them - and to stop there! I remembered this passage of James:

"If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" (*James* 2:15-16)

When suffering people cross our paths or confront us through the media, we feel compassion for them and wish them well. We ask the Lord to help them. The powerful message of the Pope reminds us poignantly, however, that while it is indeed necessary and required of us to pray for the poor, the marginalized, the neglected, we must do more.

The theme of the *Message* is that “justice goes hand in hand with peace and is permanently and actively linked to peace.” The Pope has in mind the economically poor, the marginalized, the exploited, those caught in the midst of bitter conflicts ... in short, all those “who are experiencing in their own flesh the absence of peace and the terrible effects of injustice.” He calls vigorously for “a clear-sighted and vigilant” justice that ensures the balance between rights and duties, a justice that is “active and life-giving,” concerned for the common good and “defends and promotes the inestimable dignity of every human person.” (*Message*, 1) Fifty years ago, he reminds us, the United Nations solemnly proclaimed the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, recognizing formally and unambiguously

that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.” (*Message*, 2). He asks earnestly that governments accept the implications of this principle and make laws that are consistent with it.

The Pope insists that in this era of increasing globalization and growth of new information technologies, individuals as well as governments and international organizations must promote *solidarity*, the firm and persevering commitment to the common good for which he has consistently called during his pontificate. Solidarity, he writes, is a clear duty and the only way to build a world community based on the mutual trust, reciprocal support, and sincere respect that alone can ensure a “globalization without marginalization.” (*Message*, 3) Once again he advocates a reduction of the external debt,

“... which compromises the economies of whole peoples and hinders their social and political progress ... we can no longer tolerate a world in which there

live side by side the immensely rich and the miserable poor, the have-nots deprived even of essentials, the people who thoughtlessly waste what others so desperately need. Such contrasts are an affront to the dignity of the human person.” (*Message*, 4)

He affirms the indispensable role of the family, the responsibility of parents, the idealism and commitment of the young. He denounces abuse of power, corruption, the lack of access of the poor to credit, the increasing violence against women and children, the neglect of education and other forms of cultural promotion. In words we should consider addressed directly to us, he challenges educators engaged at every level to form the young

“... in moral and civic values, instill in them a lively sense of rights and duties, beginning with the experience of the school community itself. Educate in justice in order to educate in peace: this is one of your primary tasks.” (*Message*, 7)

Finally, as men for whom “solidarity with the poor and with the work of the Institute

in their favor” (*Declaration*, 32.1) is integral to religious consecration, we can find stimulus in these words:

“The distinctive mark of the Christian, today more than ever, must be love for the poor, the weak, the suffering. Living out this demanding commitment requires a total reversal of the alleged values which make people seek only their own good: power, pleasure, the unscrupulous accumulation of wealth. Yes, it is precisely to this radical conversion that Christ’s disciples are called.” (*Message*, 8).

Synod on America

As you know, I had the privilege of participating as an auditor in the month-long Synod of Bishops on America, which concluded on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, 12 December. I entered the synod somewhat skeptical about its prospects, given the enormous differences among the countries that constitute America. I left, however, convinced that the mutual communication and education that the synod promoted was in itself a very

significant achievement. Moreover, to assist the Pope in the preparation of the post-synodal document, the participants presented him with an impressive quantity of valuable material in the form of personal interventions, reports of group discussions, the *Message of the Synod*, and the propositions and recommendations.

It is interesting to observe that the synod gave major attention to themes that John Paul II brought to our attention in his *Message for the World Day of Peace, 1998*, and asserted that the Church must give them very serious consideration in pastoral planning today: themes such as globalization, neoliberalism, foreign debt, poverty, religious indifference, abandonment of the Church, family problems, new information technologies, corruption, arms and drug trafficking, etc.

The same or similar themes were central to the Synod on Africa in 1994, and will surely be important aspects of the synods on Asia, Oceania, and Europe, all of which will take place in the next year and a half.

International Congress of Young Religious

More than 800 young religious, most of them under 30 years of age, gathered in Rome last September for a congress on religious life. Superiors General of women and of men religious, with the help of young religious themselves, planned and organized the program of six days. Eight Brothers of the Christian Schools were among the participants. Confronting squarely the problems and challenges they face in their particular sectors, the young religious manifested pride and enthusiasm in their vocation of total consecration to the Lord and to the service that corresponds to their particular charism. Far from an obsessive preoccupation with internal concerns or with fears concerning the future, they grappled directly and constructively with the theme expressed in the sub-title of this pastoral letter: *building communities today that are innovative, creative, and holy*. They centered their attention on living consecrated life more authentically, creating religious communities that are worthy of the name, and on contributing constructively and ef-

fectively, in accord with the mission of their Institutes, to the building of a world in which all live in peace and harmony as sons and daughters of God, and as brothers and sisters.

Lasallian Assembly of Young Religious in the Asia-Pacific Region

I have just returned from a second congress of young religious, a gathering that was for me and I think for all the participants a remarkable and encouraging experience. Eighty young Brothers from Asia and the Pacific Region, together with five Lasallian Sisters - representing both Institutes of Sisters - came together in Pattaya, Thailand, for nine days of reflection, prayer, and communion. The program was superbly planned and executed, a credit to the organizers and animators. It was surely the most ambitious project ever undertaken by the PARC Region. Members of this vast and complex region can be proud and grateful. I am convinced that our young Brothers and Sisters returned to their sectors with a more profound understanding of their vocation, a new appreciation of their member-

ship in our international religious family, and an experience of loving communion that will be a source of encouragement for months and years to come..

What impressed me during this assembly was the love our Brothers and Sisters manifested for their Lasallian vocation. They are "at home" with Lasallian apostolic spirituality. Their very evident love for John Baptist de La Salle, together with their conviction that the Lasallian charism continues to be a precious gift to the world, the Church, the young, and the poor, moved me profoundly. Moreover, they spent a full day analyzing the social, economic, and political realities of their sectors and gave constructive attention to the topics that are central to the *Message for the World Day of Peace* and the Synod on America. The young religious recognize that the Lasallian mission of human and Christian education must respond effectively to these realities.

The Five Colloquia

The 42nd General Chapter asked the Superior General and Council to draw upon

the expertise of persons well qualified in the multiplicity of fields and disciplines that have an impact on education today. The Chapter intended that these persons help the central government of the Institute to propose sound courses of action for all those engaged in the Lasallian mission. The implementation of this General Chapter proposition has taken the form of five colloquia, the last of which will take place in June of this year. Following the fifth colloquium, a commission will synthesize all the proceedings and conclusions and will publish a comprehensive report for the use of Brothers and partners throughout the world, as well as for the use of participants in the Chapter of the year 2000.

What I find particularly satisfying is that the topics we chose for the series of colloquia, with the help of our permanent committee of Brothers Nicolas Capelle, Herman Lombaerts, and José Maria Martinez, are the very topics that have been central to the *Message for World Peace Day, 1998*, to the recent Synod on America, to the International Congress of Young Religious, and to the assembly of young Lasallian Brothers and Sisters of the PARC Region: the

situation of families today, globalization, urbanization, new information technologies, and evangelization.

I. LOOK TO THE FUTURE

It might have occurred to you that those lengthy introductory comments appear to have little to do with the title of this pastoral letter: *Look to the Future! Build Communities Today That Are Innovative, Creative, and Holy*. I believe, however, that the reflections on certain realities of our world today, on the implications for our Lasallian mission, and on the presence and role of our young Brothers are very pertinent.

A great history still to be accomplished

The Pope has called us to *Look to the Future!* He is in no way advocating that we simply dream about an idealistic future and wait for it to arrive. On the contrary. He urges us to avoid dwelling excessively on the past, remembering and recounting our "glorious history." How easy it is to fall into

that trap. He reminds us that we have “a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things.” (VC, 110) The Pope’s words, therefore, affirm and encourage consecrated women and men at a moment of history when, he says,

“Many people are puzzled and ask: what is the point of consecrated life? Why embrace this kind of life, when there are so many urgent needs in the areas of charity and of evangelization itself to which one can respond even without assuming the particular commitments of consecrated life?” (VC, 104)

His response to his own pertinent question is that throughout the history of the Church, the Lord has always called *some* persons to give their life to following Christ as consecrated persons, as women and men who make the primary objective of their life a full, radical, and coherent living of the Gospel. Why the Lord calls *some* persons and not others we do not know, but a reading of the Gospels and of history itself reveals clearly that these persons have

not been chosen because they are necessarily the “best” persons available. Nevertheless, for these particular persons, religious life is a response to their quest for meaning: “Life doesn’t make sense for them on any other terms.” (Sandra Schneider)

John Paul II insists that consecrated life is at the heart of the Church, expresses her very nature, and can never fail to be one of her essential and characteristic elements. (VC, 3, 29) Religious have a mission, he says, that is far more than performing certain needed services. Their primary task is to make the loving and saving presence of Christ a visible and active reality in the world today. (VC, 72, 76) The Pope, nevertheless, knows history and is realistic: “Individual institutes have no claim to permanence ... it is necessary to distinguish the *historical destiny* of a specific Institute or form of consecrated life from the *ecclesial mission* of consecrated life as such.” (VC, 63) At the same time, however, the Holy Father issues to consecrated women and men the moving challenge: “Look to the future!” (VC, 110)

Despite this forceful affirmation of consecrated life, there was a marked absence of references to religious life in the interventions of Bishops during the recent synod on America. It was clear to me that, particularly in areas where the average age of religious is advanced and there are few vocations, many Bishops are contemplating a Church that will have in the not-too-distant future a numerically minimal commitment of religious, notably Sisters and Brothers, who constitute more than four-fifths of religious in the world today.

Bishops must be realistic in planning for the future. To focus on the laity is an appropriate response to needs that are becoming progressively more urgent. Nevertheless, as I stated in my intervention during the synod, it would be a very serious mistake to conclude that because lay men and women can perform the services rendered by Sisters and Brothers, the diminution or even demise of their Institutes need not be taken seriously. On the contrary. The loss of the presence of Sisters and Brothers would be a sad loss for the Church.

“What would become of the world if there were no religious? Beyond all superficial assessments of its usefulness, the consecrated life is important precisely in its being unbounded generosity and love, and this all the more so in a world which risks being suffocated in the whirlpool of the ephemeral ... The Church and society itself need people capable of devoting themselves totally to God and to others for the love of God.” (VC, 105)

Look to the future as MEN OF HOPE

While I think that Bishops should affirm religious life publicly and encourage vocations to it, I believe that we have to take primary responsibility for our own charism and not depend on anybody else, a responsibility rooted deeply in conviction:

“This world has more need than ever, even at the very center of human and temporal existence, for the witness given by those who are consecrated and who know and love God as a living reality” ...
“The need for this Institute is very great. The young, the poor, the world, and the

Church still need the ministry of the Brothers.” (*Decl.* 11.4, *Rule*, 141)

Nevertheless, Brothers, I am well aware that despite these affirmations, some Brothers themselves, particularly in areas which have had few vocations in the last two decades, find it difficult to sustain their hope that the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools has “not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished.” (VC, 110) For this reason I think it important to distinguish *optimism* from *hope*. Optimism is a feeling that results spontaneously from awareness of a particular reality. I concede that few if any people experience optimism while examining the vocational situation of most institutes of Sisters and of Brothers. But HOPE is another matter. Hope - and here I am not talking about the theological virtue - is 1) a vision of the future we want to become a reality, 2) a conviction that the vision can be realized, and 3) a commitment to work that the vision become a reality. It is with this description of hope in mind, Brothers, that I propose that we look to the future as **MEN OF HOPE**.

The Signs of the Times

In the initial pages of this letter, I referred to a number of *signs of the times*: the religious, social, economic, political, and technological realities of our day; the presence of dynamic, but fewer, young women and men religious; the questions facing religious life today. We need to observe and listen carefully to “what the Spirit is saying to us” (*Rev.* 3:13) in such *signs*:

“... the Brothers live in this world and ought to be sensitive to the problems which arise in every period of human history ... The signs of the times alert them to the importance of their mission today, as well as to the urgency of renewing their religious life, their apostolic ministry, and their presence among people ... it seems important, therefore, that the Brothers be ready to heed and to discern the challenges that the Holy Spirit is addressing to them.” (*Declaration*, 8.1)

This pastoral letter is a reflection, in the spirit of that assertion, on some of the challenges that the Holy Spirit seems to be addressing to us today. In making deci-

sions at this moment of history, we must take into consideration what I have described as religious, social, economic, political, and technological realities. I have written all I intend to write concerning these realities. But I want to comment on "the presence of dynamic, but fewer, young women and men religious" - and, more specifically, on our own young Brothers.

Our young Brothers

It has always been true, of course, that in considering the future of an organization, veteran members must acknowledge and take into consideration the presence, role, and positions of the younger members. But in speaking today of the future of our religious family, we must recognize an important difference. In the past, at least in most areas of the Institute, the younger Brothers represented an increase in the total number of Brothers. The District expected, and the young Brothers themselves expected, that they would assume responsibility for the works established by their predecessors, as well as have the opportunity to build upon that foundation with their own

apostolic ventures. Today, however, we must recognize that in many sectors, the number of young Brothers is significantly out of proportion to the number of apostolic institutions for which the sector has responsibility. A certain discontinuity with the immediate past is, therefore, inevitable.

The General Chapter will probably provide some orientations for the use of Districts, Sub-Districts, and Delegations. But these sectors need not wait for the General Chapter. In fact the capitulants will need both the opinions and the lived experience of the Institute. All sectors ought, therefore, to begin, without delay, calm discussions on the future of their institutions.

It is essential that ALL the Brothers of the sector - that is to say, Brothers of three generations - face these questions. Retired Brothers, many of whom have an emotional investment in the works of the sector, must strive to understand and appreciate the situation. Brothers of my own generation, who occupy a number of the positions of authority, must be keenly aware of the implications of the decisions they make today, as well as of the decisions they fail to make. It

is the responsibility of my generation to pass to the next generation a viable situation. But it is essential that throughout the Institute, young Brothers take an active part in the process of deciding the future of the corporate commitments of the sector:

“Most of our present members have already been agents of significant change in our congregations ... We have to trust those who come after us to be equally creative, based on their own life experience and their Spirit-given insights.” (Doris Gottemoeller, RSM)

Young Brothers must participate directly and indirectly at every level of the Institute, including the General Chapter. The modality of that participation is a topic that the General Council and the Preparatory Commission will have to study. We would welcome your thoughts on this topic!

Build communities today that are innovative, creative, and holy

I acknowledge that the sub-title I have chosen for this pastoral letter is long and “wordy.” It is shorter, however, than an

earlier version. I wanted to state explicitly that we have to build *apostolic* communities of *consecrated men*, communities that are innovative, creative, and holy. Every word of the original version has special significance and will form the basis of the reflections to follow.

II. CONSECRATED MEN

Live to the full your dedication to God

Towards the end of *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II addresses consecrated women and men personally and directly, appealing to them to *live to the full your dedication to God*. “Your particular mission,” he says, is “to bear witness to Christ by your life, works, and words.” In a pertinent and trenchant passage, one that I think describes very accurately our own personal and communal experience, he writes,

“Young people will not be deceived: when they come to you, they want to see what they do not see elsewhere ... They want to see in you the joy which comes from being with the Lord ... Do not forget that

you, in a very special way, can and must say that you not only belong to Christ but that *you have become Christ!*" (VC, 109)

Committed to a ministry of charity with truly loving hearts

John Baptist de La Salle understood our vocation in the light of a personal interpretation of his experience with the Brothers, the Institute, and the schools over many years. Describing that experience, he wrote that God led him "in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, with the result that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning." Fundamental to his understanding was his firm conviction that it was God who had taken the initiative, God who had guided him and his Institute to that point, and God who would continue to sustain him and the Brothers.

When, towards the end of his life, De La Salle wrote the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, he was able to look back on some thirty-five years of lived experience. It was then clear to him that God had intervened

in his life, calling him to found a society of consecrated men who *together and by association* would give themselves to the Christian education of youth, poor youth especially. In the first three of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, he leaves us an extraordinarily clear reading of that itinerary, as well as his understanding of the Brother's vocation.

Paraphrasing a passage of Paul to Timothy (1 Tim. 2:4), the Founder says that God wants all persons to come to knowledge of the truth and be saved. But if that phrase sounds a bit abstract, he is vividly concrete in the second meditation. Here De La Salle looks back on more than three decades of contact with children and describes them as he remembers them: children of artisans and of the poor, many of whom "live on their own, roaming all over like vagabonds." Parents, he says, who cannot afford to pay teachers and have to work outside their homes, abandon their children to themselves. These children become accustomed to an idle life; they associate "with bad companions" from whom they learn to commit sins and form unfortunate habits that are very difficult to remedy.

It is *these* children that God, in his Providence, that is to say, in his loving care and concern, wants to come to knowledge of the truth and be saved. But God, De La Salle says quite frankly, "cannot truly desire this without providing the means," and, therefore, without giving children the teachers they require. For this reason, he says, God kindles a light in the hearts of certain persons, persons he has "destined to announce his word to children." On the first day of their annual retreat, he communicates to the Brothers that they are such persons: "God in his mercy has given you such a ministry ... look upon yourselves as ministers of God."

According to Blain, the *schoolmasters* of 1680 had gradually become *brothers*, men who lived together in "tender but spiritual friendship"; men who perceived themselves as "elder brothers of the children who came to be taught by them;" men who committed themselves to a "ministry of charity with truly loving hearts." (Blain, Ch.3, Vol.2, Bk 2). In his beautiful meditation for the feast of Pentecost, the Founder writes: "You carry out a work that requires you to touch hearts, but this you cannot do except by the Spirit

of God." (43.1) Therefore, he says in another meditation, "ask God often for the grace to touch hearts ... this is the grace of your state." (81.2)

The needs of youth today

To live our vocation with the love and enthusiasm that De La Salle intended, we need to recall frequently that God established our Institute to help young people, poor young people particularly, come to knowledge of the truth and be saved. As the Founder was "deeply moved" by the miserable situation of the children of his day (*Rule*, 11), so we must be particularly attentive and responsive to young people and to children today.

"The Institute will find in its attentiveness to the needs of young people an indispensable source of renewal ... These needs are not less urgent today than they were at the time of the foundation of the Institute ... The community effort to identify and understand the challenges of the young people of our time and to respond by generous apostolic

commitments ought to be given top priority." (*Decl.* 23).

Given the great diversity of religious, economic, and social conditions which influence the lives of the young, effective human and Christian education demands extraordinary dedication and creativity. On every level - Institute, District, community, and personal - we need to be especially sensitive to the loneliness, alienation, and lack of hope that many young people manifest, as well as their thirst for meaning and community. We need to recognize the fundamental goodness and idealism of young people and communicate to them our love and respect. Moreover, we need to share with them our own life of faith. In this way we call them to become the persons God wants them to be. We must manifest a truly missionary zeal for those who are victims of economic poverty, discrimination, unemployment, illiteracy, drugs, alcohol, sexual abuse; for those who have become immigrants and refugees; and in a particular way, for youth who, in profound loneliness, turn to gangs or religious cults.

This zeal must be especially evident in addressing the tragic and scandalous circumstances of so many children today: extreme poverty, hunger, malnutrition, ill health, general neglect, abandonment, lack of educational opportunity, homelessness, forced labor, racism, ethnic discrimination, loneliness, despair, sexual abuse, exploitation for purposes of pornography, prostitution, physical abuse, brutality, and even murder. Do not these situations sound a prophetic call to the Brothers of the Christian Schools of 1998?

Love God and neighbor ... with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength

To fulfill our prophetic "ministry of charity with truly loving hearts," we must strive to become the unique human persons that God wants us to become, that is to say, persons who love the Lord our God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength; and who love their neighbor as themselves. (*Mark*, 12: 30-31). In a passage of *Vita Consecrata* which I find particularly moving and personally challenging, John Paul II says that

“... in the washing of feet Jesus reveals the depth of God’s love for humanity: in Jesus, God places himself at the service of human beings! At the same time, he reveals the meaning of the Christian life and, even more, of the consecrated life, which is a *life of self-giving love*, of practical and generous service ... directed in particular to the poorest and neediest.” (VC, 75)

The Spirit of faith, communion, and zeal

Brothers, we can understand our religious consecration only in the context of our mission of human and Christian education of youth, poor youth especially, a mission pursued in a *life of self-giving love* and *together and by association*. We can understand consecration only in relation to community and mission; we can understand community life only in relation to religious consecration and mission; we can understand mission only in relation to religious consecration and community. The three major dimensions of our charism can be distinguished, but not separated in time or

space. Each of us has to make a personal synthesis of the dimensions, that is to say, to integrate the dimensions in accord with his own unique personality, temperament, talents, strengths, and weaknesses.

Being counter-cultural and politically incorrect

As we make progress in integrating and synthesizing these dimensions, we manifest more and more a spirit of faith, communion, and zeal. We become “public Christians,” that is to say, men who have made public profession of belief in Jesus Christ and in his Gospel. We become increasingly able to see, judge, and act in accord with our faith.

Our charism requires us to bring the loving presence of Christ to the world of education and that of youth. But we know from lived experience that making public profession is one thing, becoming “public Christians” is quite another. You have probably heard the remark, “If you were arrested for suspicion of being a Christian, would you be found guilty?”

How easy it is to permit a dichotomy to develop between our "professional" life and our "religious" life. Just a few days ago, a Brother told me that in his opinion a major reason that we are not attracting vocations in his particular country is that we have become too "secular" - that is to say, that the "religious" dimension of our life seems limited to specific periods of prayer or worship, and that in our professional life as administrators, teachers, and educators, our manner of thinking, judging, and acting appears more in line with what is "politically correct" than with the Gospel.

To live today as "public Christians" will often require us to be "counter-cultural" and "politically incorrect." As I wrote in my pastoral letter two years ago, society today trivializes religion, treats it as an unimportant facet of the human personality, one that should be kept "private," one that is easily discardable. A widespread position is that religious convictions are irrational, arbitrary, unimportant, and, therefore, irrelevant. Religious people should "bracket" their religious views 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."

Our struggles ... and those of Peter and of Paul

Brothers, we all know and acknowledge that our personal history of loving God and neighbor has been - and will continue to be - a history of "ups and downs." Some of us have the impression that although we have been in religious life for many years, we are still beginners in living the Gospel as we should. As I mentioned to the Visitors in a letter last August, I have always found consolation and inspiration in the lives and struggles of Peter and of Paul. Like you and like me, the Lord called them to a special service. And as he called you and me *as we are*, so he called them *as they were*, with their virtues and vices, with their qualities and defects, with their talents and their limitations.

In the scriptures we see Peter and Paul as two men striving to be instruments of Christ, struggling to maximize their strengths

and to minimize their weaknesses in order to be effective ministers, confident that the Lord was with them and would manifest his power through them. Paul acknowledged with extraordinary frankness that he frequently failed to do what he wanted to do and often did what he did not want to do. Peter wept bitterly when he became aware of his failure to take a public and heroic stand for his Master, but he didn't wallow in self-pity. He "got up" and continued to follow Christ. With honesty, humility, and gratitude that the Lord has chosen us, we must do the same.

Men of personal prayer

But in order to "get up" when we fail and continue to follow Christ, we have to be men of personal prayer. Two years ago I devoted an entire letter to prayer. I limit myself now to reaffirming the necessity of meditating on the Scriptures each day, of devoting at least one period of twenty to thirty minutes to personal communication with the Lord, of "stopping" from time to time for "moments" of *attention* to the loving presence of the Lord and of renewal of

our *intention* to live "fully" and "faithfully" our consecration. These "moments" might last only thirty seconds to a minute, but can help us live as men of faith. They are easily structured into the rhythm of our daily activity. The Lasallian tradition of recalling the presence of God and of adoring him is precious - and more needed than ever.

III. THE COMMUNITY LIFE OF THE BROTHERS

Our story: a fundamental source of inspiration

From time to time over the last twenty-five years, I have used the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* as a point of departure for reflection on the meaning of belonging to a particular society of people and, specifically, of belonging to the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

In the opening scene, Tevye, addressing the audience, describes the life of a Jewish community in the village of Anatevka in Russia at the end of the last century. It was a time of discrimination and persecution which eventually led to revolt, then to

suppression. He portrays the life of the villagers as that of a fiddler on a rooftop, "trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck." He says that the villagers are able to maintain their balance because of their traditions - traditions that touch every aspect of their lives and are means to express their devotion to God. "Because of our traditions," he says, "everyone of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do." But life on that roof is difficult and dangerous, and strangers spontaneously ask the obvious question, "Why do we stay up here?" Tevye responds without hesitation, "We stay because Anatevka is our home."

Tevye and his companions knew who they were and what God expected of them because of the stories, symbols, rituals, and practices - all of which he captures in the word *tradition* - that were integral parts of their daily life. These traditions expressed and nourished their sense of identity and promoted progressive interiorization. Eventually, they are able to say that "Anatevka is our home," meaning that "Anatevka is where we belong; it's where we find meaning, significance, and profound inner peace;

it's where we want to stay, whatever the difficulty."

Traditions have always expressed and nourished the identity of peoples. The fundamental tradition is often the story of their origin. Jews celebrate throughout the year the great events of God's action in their history. Christians celebrate through the liturgy and all the sacraments the passage of Jesus from death to life. We Brothers of the Christian Schools are a society sustained and nourished by our traditions. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the story of our foundation. For this reason the decision of the capitulants in 1986 to begin the chapter of the *Rule* on "Community Life" with the following article was an inspired decision:

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

torical event a fundamental source of inspiration.” (Rule, 47, italics added)

Intentional communities ... and associations

Our Institute is not a federation of autonomous Districts, Sub-Districts, and Delegations; our Districts, Sub-Districts, and Delegations are not federations of autonomous communities; our communities are not federations of autonomous individuals. We are members of an international religious family, sustained and nourished for 318 years by a *tradition*: stories, symbols, rituals, and practices. Our “traditions” have helped us know who we are and what God expects of us. Of course we live in specific Districts, sub-Districts, and Delegations, and we live in a community. Nevertheless, we are first and foremost members of an international family.

The story of our origins, as well as our development over three centuries, leaves no doubt that the Founder and the early Brothers considered their new society to be what sociologists call an “intentional com-

munity”: 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)

De La Salle and the early Brothers frequently employed the word “association” - and that word has become an important element of our *tradition*. Nevertheless, it is very important to recognize that their understanding of the word “association” was fundamentally different from the meaning sociology gives to the term today. De La Salle used the word “association” to express what sociologists call “intentional community.” For sociologists, “association” describes groups which make comparatively few demands on their members. Members of associations invest a certain amount of their resources in the attainment of some

common goal or objective, but they retain their personal autonomy. (Wittberg)

A community of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is in its very nature an intentional or total community. In some communities all the Brothers participate in a common apostolic activity, such as a school, educational center, or youth pastoral center. In other communities the Brothers have multiple apostolic ministries, but they are united in a common mission. (*Rule*, 16) As members of their community, the Brothers live interdependently. Interdependence contrasts sharply with dependence on the one hand, and with independence on the other. Interdependent relationships will necessarily involve a consistent quest for balance between the common good and respect for the human person, between the demands of the community and those of the individual. (*Fraternal Life in Community*, Vatican, 1994, 39)

Reciprocal right and obligations

Living together comprises reciprocal rights and obligations. Every Brother has clear rights, because, as the *Declaration*

states very well, the Institute is an *instrument*:

“When the Brother enters religion to seek God and to serve God’s Kingdom, he expects that the congregation will aid him in this search and in this service. The Institute then ought to use every effort to help each Brother in his personal journey. Thus rules and structures are not established simply for their own preservation, but their purpose is the service of persons.” (*Decl.* 19:1-2)

If each Brother has the right to this assistance from the Institute and consequently from the Brothers with whom he lives, each Brother obviously has the obligation to honor the rights of his fellow Brothers: “The Brother in his turn will be concerned for the common good through respect for these rules and structures, convinced that these are a necessary part of religious life.” (*Decl.* 19.2)

We, therefore, have responsibilities as members of the community, which means first of all that we have to take responsibility for our own lives and live as mature, interdependent persons. Our Brothers are not responsible *for* us and we are not re-

sponsible *for* them. Gabriel Moran, in a recent book entitled *A Grammar of Responsibility*, argues, quite convincingly in my opinion, that to be *responsible* is first to listen and then to answer. The first moment is being *responsible to*; the second moment is being *responsible for*. To *respond to* is to be attentive - to God, to our loved ones, to those placed in our care, to nature, to ourselves - to be *responsible for* is to be responsible not for what others decide to do or not to do, but for the actions we ourselves take in answer to what we have perceived, seen, or heard.

I said above that we are not *responsible for* the Brothers of our community. Unfortunately, some Brothers too readily blame themselves, the Institute, the superiors, or the community when the behavior of others is inappropriate or disappointing. On the other hand we are indeed *responsible to* our Brothers and *responsible for* the actions we take in their regard. We are *responsible for* others only in those instances when they are impeded physically or psychologically from exercising their gift of freedom. But I don't want you to misunderstand me. While we are not *responsible for* the

members of our community, we are certainly *responsible to* them and *responsible for* the actions we take in their regard. We are "community men" when we keep one another in focus and respond appropriately.

We are members, of course, not only of the community of Brothers, but of a number of groups and "associations," including the educative or school "community." Furthermore, most of us enjoy warm relationships with the members of our families. But the community of Brothers is our *home*, the *core* community of our lives. We have to measure our relationships with those outside the community and Institute against the commitment which takes priority, that is to say, the commitment to the community of Brothers.

Living together ... as opposed to "living alone together"

To live in an intentional community is, therefore, to "live together." The community is far more than an instrument for apostolic service, far more also than a kind of "service station" where we satisfy our physi-

cal needs. It is not a residence at the service of a federation of individuals, that is to say, a residence where men "live alone together." Perhaps the residents are quite amiable in their relationships, but they have no binding commitment to one another. They live together perhaps as a "fraternal association" or as an effective "work team" ... or both. But they do not live intentional community life.

Some of us - because of temperament, character, or even culture - have strong tendencies towards individualism and must be on our guard. Individualism can have a deleterious effect not only on the community, but also on our own personal life. It can nurture loneliness, alienation, sense of meaninglessness, and unhappiness. Some of us become individualists because we fear interdependent relationships and the personal risks that they demand. Perhaps we have "scars " from some unfortunate interpersonal experiences in the past ... influencing us now to turn inward rather than expose ourselves to the chance of being hurt again.

Sharing our community life with others

Members of intentional communities, including religious communities, can share their communal experience with persons who are not members. John Paul II, in a section of *Vita Consecrata* entitled "associates and lay volunteers," speaks very positively of lay people's sharing in the richness of consecrated life as associate members, as well as their sharing "for a certain period of time the Institute's community life and its particular dedication to contemplation or the apostolate. This should be done in such a way that the identity of the Institute in its internal life is not harmed." (VC, 56)

We have had limited but significant experience of sharing community life with persons who are not members of the Institute. It is interesting to note that Proposition 44 of the 40th General Chapter in 1976 stated that "young men or men of mature age can be associated with the apostolic activity and the community life of the Brothers without having to make religious profession." But only a few concrete experiences followed that decision. In recent

years, however, some communities in several countries have welcomed Lasallian Associates and Lasallian Volunteers.

Ambivalent understandings of “openness” or “inclusivity”

There must be no doubt, however, that it is the intentional community of the Brothers of the Christian Schools that welcomes others to share its life. The community remains a community of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, one that has opened its door to others for a certain period of time. This model is radically different from a certain model of “openness” or “inclusivity” which proposes welcoming people of other walks of life and of other religious beliefs, not in order to share the community life of the Brothers, but in order to form a “community” based on whatever they find they have in common. In my opinion, such a venture is doomed to failure from the start. A true community must have a focus, a common vision, common goals, a common story, symbols, rituals, and practices. Even with a rich tradition - which is our situation - the creation of authentic community life is

a formidable challenge! I am in complete agreement with Sister Doris Gottemoeller, a respected leader in renewal of religious life, when she writes:

“Some use *inclusivity* to mean incorporating men and women, married and single, temporarily and permanently committed, full-time and part-time Catholics and non-Catholics, Christians and non-Christians in the same Congregation. They seem to envision religious life along the lines of a social movement in which people participate in various ways and with varying degrees of intensity ... Instead of every member making essentially the same commitment through the profession of perpetual vows, there are varieties of ways of belonging ... I would suggest that that type of inclusivity erodes clarity about the central meaning and purpose of religious life and will ultimately destroy a religious congregation. Religious life is a corporate lifestyle, not a collection of individual interpretations of personal call ... clear boundaries exist between members and non members.” (*Address, National Vocation Conference, USA, 1996*)

Lasallian educative communities, groups, movements

But it is certainly possible to form “community” with persons of different walks of life and beliefs on another level. In fact, such groups exist already. There are, for example, “Lasallian educative communities.” Sociologists might prefer to give these “communities” the title of “associations.” Regardless, they are groups of people who are truly united in commitment to animating Lasallian schools. Whatever their walk of life and whatever their religious beliefs, members share in various degrees in the Lasallian tradition and heritage. Some even become members of groups such as Signum Fidei, Lasallian Associates, Third Order, or Lasallian Teams. Young people become active in Lasallian youth movements or as Lasallian volunteers - and sometimes share community life with the Brothers.

Nevertheless, we must distinguish the intentional community life of the Brothers of the Christian Schools from the life of these other forms of communities, societies, groups, and movements. Similarly, I think that we need new structures on the District

level that correspond to the new reality of what has come to be called “shared mission”. I am convinced that we have to create original forms of boards or councils to permit participation of lay women and men, together with the Brothers, in the planning and animation of our Lasallian network of schools, centers, and pastoral activities. Some Districts have experimented with having lay women and men participate in District Council meetings, particularly when matters concerning mission are under consideration. But District Councils have to deal with all aspects of the life of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Rather than adapt existing Institute structures, we need to respond to evolving needs with creativity. Given that we are still learning, however, I think that we should experiment for some years with structures that are provisional in nature.

Community: “a God-enlightened (theological) space”

Pope John Paul II refers to community life as a “*God-enlightened space* in which one can experience the mystical presence of the Risen Lord.” (VC, 42) The French, Spanish, and Italian versions of *Vita Consecrata* use the expression *theological space* rather than *God-enlightened space*. *Theological* refers to the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, virtues one does not acquire by personal effort but receives as gifts from God. It would seem, therefore, that a *theological space* is a space in which Christians live the gifts of faith, hope, and charity in such a way that they experience the mystical presence of the Risen Lord and “become, in a certain way, a prolongation of his humanity”; they “make visible, in their consecration and total dedication, the loving and saving presence of Christ.” (VC, 76) The English translators try to capture this rich meaning with the expression *God-enlightened*.

Several articles of our *Rule* express similar insights. Article 47 reminds us that the Lord led John Baptist de La Salle “to found

a community of men who were *enlightened* by God to respond together to the needs of young people.” One can say that, according to the *Rule*, De La Salle understood his new society and the communities in which the Brothers lived as *God-enlightened spaces*. The “distinctive character” of the Brothers’ community “is to be a community of faith where the experience of God is shared” .. The Brothers model their relations with one another on “the relations of knowledge and love that constitute the life of the Holy Trinity” ... They open themselves to the animation of the Spirit of love who unites them and enables them to build a community at the service of others. (*Rule*, 48, 49) Moreover,

“The members of this Institute are called by the name of *Brother*” and strive “to be brothers among themselves, brothers to the adults with whom they are in contact, and older brothers to the young people confided to their care” ... “By the fraternal character of their community life and their active and selfless presence among those they serve, the Brothers witness to the possibility of creating

true brotherhood among people and nations." (*Rule*, 9, 53, 9)

It is clear, therefore, that our understanding of community life is in harmony with that of *Vita Consecrata*. The conviction underlying this entire pastoral letter is that preparing for the future into which the Spirit is sending us "to do even greater things," is directly related to building intentional and theological communities *today*, communities that are innovative, creative, and holy. Our communities will be God-enlightened spaces in which the Brothers live together in faith, hope, and love only if praying together as a community is an integral dimension of daily life. Article 50 captures very well what is meant by "community 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 participate in the Eucharist. Together they seek God and together they find him."

Of fundamental importance in this article is the word *together*. But we must interpret the word with care. The times des-

ignated for community prayer are not occasions for us "to pray alone together" and thus satisfy our personal obligation to pray. Community prayer is not a time in which Brothers pray as individuals with other individuals who are present. No. In community prayer the *community as community* prays, hears the word of God, meditates on it, and celebrates the Eucharist. It is for this reason, as I have suggested in past letters, that we have to give high priority to creative presence at every community activity. Our presence with our Brothers at morning and evening prayer, for example, makes it possible for the community to pray as community. Of course we cannot always be present. But we should want to be present with the community and feel regret when we are absent.

Brothers, our associates and those God confides to our care "know" that our communities ought to be "religious" communities - whether or not they are able to express that "knowledge" in words. They expect us to live as "religious" men and are very sensitive to the "messages" that our communities transmit. I don't think that they expect us to be perfect. But they do expect

that we are striving to live in a manner that is coherent with our religious consecration.

Living in fraternal communion

The authors of *Fraternal Life in Community* acknowledge that in speaking of the “common life,” the former Code of Canon Law concentrated excessively on exterior elements and uniformity of lifestyle. The new Code makes a clear distinction between “living in fraternal communion” and “leading a common life,” that is to say, residing in the same house, observing the same norms, and collaborating in common services.

In the past our official documents and our superiors certainly emphasized uniformity and “regularity.” Nevertheless, there were a number of beautiful expressions in our former *Rule* (although qualifiers or words of caution followed some of them): “The Brothers shall have a cordial affection for one another ... they shall take singular pleasure in rendering their Brothers any service ... they shall speak to their Brothers in a respectful manner ... they shall always pre-

fer their Brothers to themselves ... “ (*Common Rule*, Ch. 13)

Our present *Rule* describes the community as *home*. There the Brothers live together in friendship, esteem, trust, and mutual respect, actively present and sensitive to one another. They enjoy dining and recreating together. They render generously the various services that community life requires. They are particularly attentive to the young Brothers, to the elderly and to the sick, and to those who are discouraged or undergoing other kinds of trials. (54, 56)

To state that love for one another is an essential characteristic of an intentional community rooted in faith, hope, and charity is, I acknowledge, to state the obvious. I am reminded of a passage in II John: “I ask you, let us all love one another. This is no new command I am writing to you; it is the command which we have had from the beginning.” (*II John* 1:5).

Although it is my impression that in general we manifest “friendship, esteem, trust, and mutual respect,” we have to examine regularly our fraternal love. We can thank God that incidents of serious conflict and

lack of love among us are rare. But we do have to admit that we are guilty from time to time of lack of sensitivity to one another. In his closing remarks to the synod a few weeks ago, the Holy Father made an observation concerning relations among the diverse countries of America that is quite pertinent to this reflection. He said that the opposite of love is not necessarily hatred; it can also be indifference, disinterest, or lack of concern. We are certainly not indifferent, disinterested, or unconcerned in community relationships. Nevertheless, given the pervasive and intrusive influence of individualism, to which I would add the consequences of the very busy days that we normally live, it does happen at times that we are not as attentive to one another as fraternal love requires.

Loving one another as brothers

In my personal and too often unsuccessful struggle with community living, I have found helpful three definitions or descriptions of love. Two of them are "classical" while one is more recent. The first states that to love is to yield to the excellence of

the other. In the context of our own life, this description implies that we must first become aware of the excellence of our Brothers. For this purpose, we have to know our Brothers, recognize the goodness of their lives, and be attentive to them. The Brother Visitor during my early years used to remind us regularly that we needed to recognize and resist the tendency to concentrate on the 5% "bad" in our Brothers and to overlook the 95% "good". The second definition is "to will good to the other," another way of expressing "to yield to the excellence of the other." Yielding to the excellence and willing the good of the other lead us to take concrete and appropriate action.

The third description of love is that of Erich Fromm: to love fraternally is to manifest "active concern." We all know how important "little things" are in living together. To omit certain "little things" can have negative effects out of all proportion to the omission - such things as daily greetings, expressions of gratitude, words of congratulations, apologies, failure to answer the telephone or door, failure to volunteer for various services ... Conversely, faithfulness in such "little things" can contribute very

significantly to the fraternal life of a community. A well-loved Brother in my District revealed before his death something that helped us understand why so many of his confreres considered him an outstanding "community man" and liked to live with him. He said that throughout his life he had made an effort to converse, or at least have a few friendly words, with each Brother in his community every day.

"Active concern" means taking the initiative and not just reacting to what others do. Carl Rogers once spent several days with a friend who passed a street vendor each morning and always greeted him with a respectful "Good Morning!" But Rogers noticed that the vendor never reciprocated the greeting. He asked his friend why he continued to greet the vendor. "I greet him because it is the right thing to do. I hope that eventually he will respond as he should." Consciously or not, Rogers' friend was yielding to the excellence of the vendor, whether or not the vendor appreciated his own excellence.

Brothers, we should not underestimate the need for community social activities and

recreation. With initiative and creativity many communities succeed admirably in structuring into their weekly, monthly, or quarterly programs periods of community recreation. We ought to give particular attention to weekends and holiday periods. Some communities have a certain number of activities together, while other communities almost cease to exist during weekends and holidays! Visits to our own families and friends are important aspects of our life. But we have to subordinate them to our responsibilities as members of the community of Brothers.

"Union in a community is a precious gem" (Med. 91.2)

Brothers of varying ages, temperaments, characters, races, ethnic groups, and even nationalities constitute our communities. The Pope reminds us that religious communities are "signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony." (VC, 51) But we know that achieving unity in such diversity is not easy. Certainly it is essential that we have realistic expectations. St. De La Salle

wrote that "union in a community is a precious gem." But he also said that "a community in which charity and union are lacking is a hell." (*Med.* 91.2, 65.1) With striking candor he asserted:

"It is impossible for several persons living together not to have to suffer from one another ... If you believe that you have come to community without being obliged to suffer the defects of your Brothers, you are deceiving yourself and you made a mistake in coming here. Take proper measures in this regard for the future and for all the rest of your life." (*Med.*74.1, 2)

To declare that there is more that unites us than divides us has become perhaps a cliché. But clichés often contain profound truths. If there is far more that unites us than divides us - and that is undoubtedly the situation - we must avoid placing Brothers in artificial categories which accent the differences and foster faulty generalizations. Such language - unfortunately still too common in the Church and among religious - can have very detrimental effects: it nourishes a "win-lose" mentality and fosters di-

vision. We need to accent what we have in common, then isolate the specific areas of difference and dialogue constructively concerning them.

We need to grow regularly in our knowledge of the Brothers with whom we live. How much do we know about their families, their vocation, their community and apostolic experience over the years? How much do we really know about what they are doing today? More and more communities are providing opportunities for Brothers to "tell their stories." Such sharing sessions help us to know, appreciate ... and love one another more profoundly.

Pay special attention to ...

"The community shows affectionate concern for the Brothers who are elderly, sick, discouraged, or undergoing trials." (*Rule*, 56). We have to pay special attention to Brothers who have lost their autonomy and require special care. The love and care that many Brothers manifest toward such confreres, visiting them frequently and encouraging them in their solitude and suffer-

ing, is inspiring. Dependent Brothers need to know and sense that they are still part of the life of the Institute and District and share in the mission. For this reason we have to inform them, as far as possible, of decisions and developments. They remain religious apostles for their entire lifetime, participating in the mission of the Institute by their prayer and acceptance of suffering.

Many Brothers are lovingly attentive to their confreres who are sick, particularly those who suffer illnesses of many months, and in a very special way, those who are terminally ill. Sometimes we feel frustrated that we can do so little to help. But the Brothers need more than anything else our loving presence and concern.

Many of us experience crises at particular moments of our lives: crises related to change of assignment of community, difficulties in work or lack of success, misunderstandings and feelings of alienation, physical or mental illness, discouragement or depression, confusion or disorientation in the life of faith, spiritual aridity, deaths of loved ones, difficulties in personal relations, strong temptations, feelings of uselessness,

concern for the future of the Institute. It is not always easy to know what the most appropriate response is to Brothers who are suffering such trials. Essentially, however, we need to communicate to them that they are not alone, that their Brothers are there and available to walk with them in their suffering.

Fraternal correction

One of most challenging aspects of community living is fraternal correction. With prudence and tact inspired by fraternal love, we can propose during community meetings consideration of minor matters requiring correction. But when it is a question of substantive matters, experience indicates that the most effective way is to confront the Brother in a personal encounter. Sometimes, however, the presence of a few other Brothers can help. Such meetings bear fruit when conducted in an atmosphere of loving concern. Our role is not at all to judge or condemn. On the contrary. It is to help the Brother to recognize his weakness and to take responsibility for his actions and for their consequences. It is to help him to

acknowledge the negative effect the weakness is having upon him personally, as well as upon those he loves and those who love him. Some Brothers will need professional assistance and treatment. But they will all require our compassion and support.

A community that fails to reach out to Brothers with serious problems or addictions is a community that is failing in fraternal love. Unfortunately, it happens that Districts and communities close their eyes to certain problems for many years. The reason is that Brothers - including major superiors and Directors - lack the brotherly love and necessary courage to take action.

Brothers, there are obviously numerous other important aspects of fraternal life in community, such as the role of the Director, community meetings, the community annual program, continuing formation ... But the considerations I have offered will have to suffice. We must now reflect on the apostolic dimension of community life.

IV. APOSTOLIC COMMUNITIES THAT ARE INNOVATIVE AND CREATIVE

I do not intend to discuss the mission of the Brothers as comprehensively as I attempted to do last year in the letter entitled *Being Brothers Today*. Everything I say here, however, implies what I wrote at that time. My intention now is to reflect briefly upon Pope John Paul's appeal to religious to build apostolic communities that are innovative and creative.

God in his Providence ...

John Paul II asks consecrated women and men to summon whatever courage is required to manifest today "the enterprising initiative, creativity, and holiness" of their founders ... and with "dynamic fidelity" to adapt their mission "to new situations and different needs." (VC, 37) Religious must open themselves to the Spirit "who invites us to understand in depth the designs of Providence." (VC, 73) This passage reminds me of the itinerary that a young French priest embarked upon 318 years ago, as

well as of the title of the first meditation for the time of retreat: "That God in his *Providence* has established the Christian Schools."

In language the frankness and sense of urgency of which I find surprising, the Pope writes that the Spirit is issuing "divine pleas" to consecrated men and women to present new answers to new problems. To assimilate these "pleas" and translate them into concrete responses, religious must be "accustomed to following God's will in everything" and disposed to elaborate and put into effect *new initiatives of evangelization* for present-day situations. (VC, 73) It is important to observe that in making these remarks, the Pope is fully aware of the declining numbers of most Institutes. But he insists that religious "respond generously and boldly to new forms of poverty ... above all in the most abandoned areas, even if necessarily on a small scale." (VC, 63)

That statement clearly affirms the position the Institute adopted in the 39th General Chapter and has maintained through successive Chapters: "The Institute estab-

lishes, renews, and diversifies its works according to what the kingdom of God requires" (*Rule*, 11) ... "The Brothers offer themselves to be sent by the Institute to places where there is a greater need for their services." To meet these urgent demands, they are disposed "to hand over to others" some of their works" (19a) ... The Districts "establish a plan for the development of their apostolic works which will make the direct service of the poor more and more their effective priority" (40a) ... "In their desire to make it possible for poor people to live with dignity and to be open to the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Brothers show genuine creativity in responding to these new needs." (41)

The new situations and needs to which both the Pope and the General Chapters urge us to respond with initiative and creativity include but are not limited to the education of the poor and missionary activities. The call to creativity is comprehensive, embracing every dimension of our life, including those of religious consecration and community which we have already considered. We have to bring initiative and creativity to every aspect of our mission of

human and Christian education of youth, poor youth especially. Of particular importance is the ongoing renewal of our schools and centers, as well as the creation of other forms of teaching and education adapted to the needs of time and space. (*Rule*, 3)

It seems to me, therefore, that both Districts and communities must heed the call to build apostolic communities that are significantly innovative and creative. District Chapters have to make sure that there is a District plan which provides for all aspects of collaboration with our partners in the Lasallian educational mission, as well as for the strengthening of our programs of religious education, pastoral ministry of young people, education in the social teachings of the Church, student service programs, outreach programs in literacy, Lasallian Youth and volunteers ... The chapter of every District, Sub-District, and Delegation should, as far as possible, inaugurate some new activity in favor of the education of the poor or strengthen existing works. Moreover, chapters should encourage Brothers to offer themselves for communities in poor localities of their own country and for service in missionary areas, a

position which accepts as a consequence the inevitable difficulty of replacing the Brothers in their current apostolic activities.

The future of our institutions ...

All of these recommendations concern the Lasallian mission *today*. But we have to think also about *tomorrow* and begin to formulate plans for the future of our schools, centers, and programs. We are convinced that God continues to call young men to be Brothers of the Christian Schools, and we are confident that we shall see an increase in the number of novices and young Brothers. Nevertheless, we do not expect to have the number of Brothers that we had in the past. It seems clear that Brothers in the not-too-distant future will not be able to maintain the quantity of institutions we have at the present time.

Some Districts have had for some years a network of schools which includes institutions *with* Brothers and institutions *without* Brothers. In these networks, however, Brothers participate actively as members of the District administrative team, in the ani-

mation of the schools, and as members of local boards. In the future, however, at least in many sectors of the Institute, there will not be a sufficient number of Brothers to function even in these capacities. I believe that rather than assign Brothers to fill a large number of District-level administrative positions or attempt to disperse them among numerous schools, we ought to regroup the active Brothers to form communities of from five to eight members, communities that are truly innovative, creative, and holy. Brothers in these communities would have direct contact with young people as heads of the institutions, teachers, catechists, pastoral ministers, and would witness - *together and by association* - to lives given totally to God and to the young.

Both *Vita Consecrata* and *Fraternal Life in Community* recognize the problem of reassessing apostolates:

“This task, which is difficult and often painful, requires study and discernment in the light of certain criteria. For example, it is necessary to safeguard the significance of an Institute’s own charism, to foster community life, to be

attentive to the needs of both the universal and particular Church, to show concern for what the world neglects, and to respond generously and boldly to new forms of poverty.” (VC, 63) “Reorganization will be creative and a prophetic sign if it takes care to announce new ways of being present - even if only in small numbers - in order to respond to new needs, especially those of the most abandoned and forgotten areas.” (FL, 67)

We shall soon have to decide the future of schools currently in the District network. These decisions will not be easy to make. For how many schools can the Brothers of the Christian Schools take responsibility and provide animation? Which schools should the Brothers maintain? Certainly no school that is viable should close. But who will take responsibility for the schools we can no longer keep? Associations of Lasallian lay women and men? Dioceses? Governments? We don’t have to make these decisions today. But we should begin to consider our options.

***Ministers who are enthusiastic,
joyful, fervent, bold ...***

I conclude this section with a passage from Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that I always find inspiring:

"May (mission) be for us an interior enthusiasm that nobody and nothing can quench. May it be the great joy of our consecrated lives. And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient, or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so the Kingdom may be proclaimed." (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 80)

V. THE PASTORAL MINISTRY OF VOCATIONS

John Paul II urges religious to look to the future! At the same time he acknowledges that their Institutes "have a future to

the extent that still other men and women generously welcome the Lord's call." He recognizes also that the decrease in the number of vocations is a heavy burden on religious institutes and places in danger their apostolic works and even their very presence in certain local Churches. He counsels religious to avoid yielding to discouragement and to maintain instead their "confidence in the Lord Jesus, who continues to call men and women to follow him." He exhorts consecrated women and men to pray for vocations, to adopt a vigorous pastoral ministry of vocations, and "to invest their best resources in vocation work" as "the most authentic way to support the Spirit's action." (VC, 64)

At the same time, however, the Pope admits that no individual Institute has a "claim to permanence" and that some Institutes run the risk of disappearing altogether. He thanks such Institutes for their "great contribution" and reminds them that the trials of the present do not take away from the positive results of their efforts (VC, 63):

"New situations of difficulty are therefore to be faced with the serenity of those

who know that what is required of each individual is *not success, but commitment to faithfulness*. What must be avoided at all costs is the actual breakdown of consecrated life, a collapse which is not measured by a decrease in numbers but by a failure to cling steadfastly to the Lord and to personal vocation and mission.” (VC, 63)

Guiding principles

I appreciate these words of the Holy Father. They spring from profound faith coupled with a willingness to face reality squarely. Moreover, they affirm certain guiding principles the Central Government of the Institute has attempted to foster over many years:

- That we must live our vocation authentically and enthusiastically, regardless of the number of vocations.
- That we must maintain a well-structured vocation program at both the District and community level and regularly invite qualified young people to consider the vo-

cation of Brother in their search for God’s will in their regard.

- That we must leave the results in the hands of the Lord, look at the past with profound gratitude and legitimate pride, then remain in peace, convinced that what is required of us is *not success, but commitment to faithfulness*.

The challenge we face, however, is keeping those guiding principles in equilibrium. We must do all we can to promote vocations, convinced that “the need for this Institute is very great” and that God continues to call young people to live their baptismal consecration as Brothers of the Christian Schools. At the same time we have to be “detached” from results. But being “detached” from results is in no way a subtle invitation to passivity and resignation - nor is it a justification for abandoning active work for vocations.

Some Brothers are pessimistic about our future in their geographical areas and are reluctant to propose our vocation as a possible choice for young people. But let’s not sell our young people short. They know that our proposal is made in complete re-

spect for their freedom of choice. They are well aware of the turmoil the Church and religious life have experienced throughout their entire lifetime. They are not blind to the average age of the Brothers. They recognize that when we invite them to consider the vocation of Brother, we are asking them to consider a "daring adventure." They sense that we are looking for certain kinds of persons and they are honored that we have thought of them.

What kind of people are we looking for? Speaking to religious women and men responsible for the pastoral ministry of vocations, Sister Doris Gottemoeller declared:

"We are looking for persons who are capable of heroism, of generosity above and beyond the ordinary. In other words we are looking for ordinary people who are willing to make an extraordinary choice. We are inviting them to undertake a wild adventure of the heart."

With regard to the Brothers of the Christian Schools, I would agree that we are looking for such brave and generous young people, provided that they are also mature, believe in Jesus Christ and in the Church,

and are disposed to give their lives totally to God as members of a religious community committed to the human and Christian education of youth, poor youth especially. A number of Districts are discovering such young people in their Lasallian youth groups and among Lasallian volunteers, young people who manifest an impressive spirit of faith, communion, and service. We need to address qualified young people with the boldness and directness of John Paul II:

"To you, young people, I say: if you hear the Lord's call, do not reject it! Dare to become part of the great movements of holiness which renowned saints have launched in their following of Christ." (VC, 106)

Prayer and action ...

Brothers, I urge every District Chapter and District Council, as well as every community and Brother to re-read prayerfully articles 82 - 85 of the *Rule*, articles devoted exclusively to the topic of the pastoral ministry of vocations. The space devoted to the topic is extraordinary, but extraordinary also

is the quality of the content. I limit my commentary to only a few sentences of this very rich material.

Article 84 asks us to take seriously Christ's exhortation to pray that God send workers to his vineyard and our Founder's exhortation to "ask God to make your Institute grow and bear fruit day by day." Brothers, let us pray fervently for vocations and invite our partners and young people to join us. I use the word "fervently" in opposition to "perfunctorily": we need to pray with a conscious and ardent desire that God hear our prayer.

But to prayer we must add action in the form of a well-structured program. For such a program to become an effective instrument, the Brothers must witness to the "presence of God among people, to the liberating force of his Spirit, and to the tenderness of his love." (*Rule*, 85) This article captures poetically and poignantly what I intended to convey earlier by the adverbs "authentically" and "enthusiastically." Moreover, according to this article, young people must perceive our Institute as effectively engaged in responding to urgent needs.

Finally, we have to welcome young people to our communities and enable them to experience our "theological" life of faith, hope, and charity, by sharing in our prayer and Eucharist, meals and other social gatherings, as well as in informal discussions on all aspects of our life and mission.

I ask very earnestly that you interpret article 85a quite literally: community annual programs should provide occasions for examining the commitment of the community to promoting vocations. On the District level, article 85c reminds the Visitors that they have the primary responsibility for the pastoral ministry of vocations and that they should examine with each community of the District the initiatives it has taken. The *Rule* insists also on the appointment of one or more Brothers, on a full time basis if possible, for animating, in collaboration with a commission, the program of the District.

Invite at least one young man!

Brothers, the Pope is inviting us to "look to the future" and reminds us that we have a future only to the extent that young men accept the Lord's call. May each of us,

during this year that is beginning, have the faith, hope, love, and courage required to *invite at least one young man!*

VI. AFTERWORD

You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things.

Those are the words of a **MAN OF HOPE**. I said earlier that few if any people experience optimism while examining the vocational situation of most institutes of Sisters and of Brothers. But **HOPE** is another matter. Hope is a vision of the future we want to become a reality, a conviction that the vision can be realized, and a commitment to work that the vision become a reality.

In summary, we can work most effectively to make the vision a reality by building *today* authentic apostolic communities of consecrated men, communities that are innovative, creative, and holy. In addition we must, with faith, hope, love, and courage, **INVITE** young men to become Broth-

ers of the Christian Schools. The challenge is formidable. But God wants us to embrace it and respond to it as **MEN OF HOPE**. That is precisely how our Founder acted when faced with crises in his lifetime: he rededicated himself, then took concrete, constructive actions.

OUR LADY OF THE STAR

Brothers, let us ask Jesus Christ earnestly to make his Spirit come alive in us, since he has chosen us to do his work. (*Med.* 196.1) Let us ask Jesus Christ for this grace through the intercession of his Mother, Mary, *Our Lady of the Star*.

St. De La Salle makes no reference to Mary under this title. But in his meditation for the Holy Name of Mary (164), he says that the name Mary means *star of the sea*. Mary is the clear and brilliant star which enlightens, guides, and leads us to a harbor in the stormy sea of this world.

“You have without doubt a need for light in this life, where you are always as if upon a stormy sea. Mary will enlighten you because she shares in the light of

Jesus Christ her Son. She herself is a light shining in the darkness ... This star of the sea, the Most Blessed Virgin, will guide you because she knows very well where you are going and is familiar with the way you must follow to arrive there."

***OUR LADY OF THE STAR!
PRAY FOR US.***

Fraternally in De La Salle,

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

Brother John Johnston, FSC
Superior General