



**PASTORAL LETTER**

**ON**

**THE DEFENSE OF CHILDREN,  
THE REIGN OF GOD,  
AND THE LASALLIAN MISSION**

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1 January 1999

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*Deeply moved by the way children of artisans and of the poor were abandoned and left to themselves, John Baptist de La Salle discovered, through faith, the mission of his Institute... (Today, this Institute is) attentive to the educational needs of the poor as they strive to become aware of their dignity and to live and be recognized as human beings and children of God. In accord with what the Reign of God requires, the Institute establishes, renews, and diversifies its work.*

*Rule, 11*

1 January 1999  
Feast of Mary, Mother of God  
*World Day of Peace*

Dear Brothers,

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father... the merciful Father... who gives every possible encouragement; he supports us in every hardship, so that we are able to come to the support of others in every hardship.” (2Co 1:2-4)

Paul begins this letter to the Christians in Corinth by wishing them God’s grace and peace. He assures them that God is a “merciful Father,” who will encourage and support them in their daily hardships. Moreover, that encouragement and support will enable them to strengthen others.

Brothers, grateful for the support and encouragement your birthday, Christmas, and New Year greetings give me each year, I make Paul’s words my own: I ask God our Father to grant you grace and peace. I remind you that God is “the merciful Father,” who encourages and supports you and enables you to strengthen others “in every hardship.”

I have chosen this expression of Paul because it calls attention to God as “merciful Father” and because it reminds us that we who have received strength

must in turn “come to the support of others in every hardship.” More specifically, it reminds us - Brothers of the Christian Schools - that an essential dimension of the Lasallian charism is “to come to the support” of children who are destitute, abandoned, neglected - children St. De La Salle describes as “poor and far from salvation.” (*Rule*, 47)

This greeting of Paul is appropriate also because *God the Father* is the focus of this final year of preparation for *The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*: “The years of preparation have been placed under the sign of the Most Holy Trinity: through Christ - in the Holy Spirit - to God the Father.” (*Incarnationis Mysterium*,3)

The Gospels call God “Father” 170 times. Jesus addresses God in this manner in twelve places. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, many religions invoke God as “Father.” This language of faith shows “that God is the origin of everything and transcendent authority.” God is at the same time “goodness and loving care for all his children.” While the Bible frequently employs “Father,” particularly in the New Testament, “God’s parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood.” (cf. *Isa* 66:13; *Ps* 131.2) Nevertheless, God “is neither man nor woman” and “transcends human fatherhood and motherhood . . . God is pure spirit.” (*CCC*, 239, 370)

### *Jesus: revelation of the Father*

To understand what Jesus meant when he called God “Father,” we need to look at Jesus himself. As the Pope says, Jesus of Nazareth “reveals the Father . . . he reveals the face of God the Father as compassionate and merciful.” (*IM*, 3) In his daily life and teaching, Jesus shows who God is and what God is like. We observe Jesus in the Gospels: loving, attentive, compassionate, healing, encouraging, teaching the meaning of the Reign of God, defending the rights of the poor and oppressed, confronting hypocrisy . . . It is Jesus therefore who makes it possible for us to know God as a “compassionate and merciful Father.”

This image of God is consistent with that of the Hebrew people and recorded in their scriptures. God is the God of patience, compassion, forgiveness, love of the poor and oppressed.

“He gives strength to the weary, he strengthens the powerless; youths grow tired and weary, the young stumble and fall, but those who hope in Yahweh will regain their strength . . . The oppressed and needy search for water . . . I, Yahweh, shall answer them, I, the God of Israel, shall not abandon them. “ (*Is.* 40: 29-31, 41:17)

Persons in authority in Israel - whatever their titles - were to represent God in taking care of the poor, the downtrodden, the marginalized. When they failed

to fulfill this major responsibility, the prophets reprimanded them severely.

***Make visible the loving and saving presence of Christ***

It is this loving, compassionate, and merciful Father “who gives every possible encouragement” and “supports us in every hardship.” At the same time, however, God expects us - as Christians, as consecrated men - to bring that encouragement and support “to others in every hardship.” (2Co 1:2-4) As consecrated religious men, we ought to be *signs* of God’s loving compassion. We become such when we live our vocation wholeheartedly and thus “make visible the loving and saving presence of Christ.” (*Vita Consecrata*, 76) Speaking directly to consecrated persons, the Pope says 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). When we “become” Christ, we reveal - or rather Christ reveals through us - the face of God the Father “compassionate and merciful.” As we think, judge, and act, we “say” to all with whom we are in contact that “God is love” and “sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him.” (*I Jn.4:9*)

Like Jesus, therefore, we have to be men who are attentive, loving, compassionate, men who reach out effectively to the needy, men who defend the rights of

the poor and oppressed, men who “bear witness with the boldness of a prophet who is unafraid of risking even his life.” (*VC*, 85)

***Respect for Human Rights, the Secret of True Peace***

I have still another reason for quoting Paul’s greeting to the Christians of Corinth. His call to “support others in their hardships” is pertinent to John Paul II’s *Message, World Day of Peace of 1999: Respect for Human Rights, the Secret of True Peace*.

The Pope recalls, as he did a year ago, the 50th anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. This historic document states that recognition of the dignity inherent in all members of the human family and of their equal and inalienable rights constitutes the basis of freedom, justice, and peace. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and they must act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood. Respect for human rights is, therefore, universally recognized as the basis of peaceful coexistence among nations.

Nevertheless, the Pontiff writes, the number of victims of poverty, conflict, or oppression is great. They long for recognition of their dignity and for the possibility to participate fully in society. With moving sensitivity to the plight of the weakest and most vulnerable of these victims, the Pope confronts the ques-

tion, "How many exploited children do not even know they have rights!" That remark, so pertinent to this pastoral letter, recalls the Holy Father's *Message, World Day of Peace* of 1996: *Let us give children a future of peace!* There he calls attention to the children who are victims of armed conflicts and other kinds of physical and sexual violence, and to 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. He reminds us of those who suffer the consequences of unhappy, unhealthy, and "broken" homes.

Such children are at the heart of this letter. Brothers, I am addressing these words first to each of you. I think that as Christians, as consecrated men, as Brothers of the Christian Schools, as animators of the Lasallian Family, we can and must respond with love and creativity to the cries of oppressed and exploited children. I think that commitment to the defense of children is an urgently needed and valid response to the obligations inherent in our fourth vow: association for the human and Christian education of poor children. We must intensify our efforts to make the education of poor children and adolescents our "effective priority." (*Rule*, 40a) Concurrently, we need to struggle against the destitution, injustice, manipulation, and exploitation that prevent children from being children and make a mockery of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

### *A message for all Lasallians*

While I am addressing this letter to the Brothers, I intend its message for all members of the Lasallian Family. I leave the matter of its diffusion to initiatives on the local levels. Few groups, associations, or organizations in education today have our numerical power. Trying to take maximum advantage of our possibilities for significant service, we have been moving steadily and effectively toward a common vision of our mission of human and Christian education. Never before in the history of the Institute - in my opinion - has there been a more informed commitment to the Lasallian mission. We have enormous potential, a potential that we are striving - effectively, thank God - to actualize.

I began this letter with a reflection on God as "Father." In explaining that this language of faith draws upon the human experience of parents, "who are in a way the first representatives of God," the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledges that "human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood." (CCC, 239) How pertinent these words are to the situation of many of the children upon whom we are reflecting. Some hardly remember their fathers, if they remember them at all; others do not even know who their fathers are; some have suffered the scars of neglect, abandonment, physical and sexual abuse.

A careless and superficial presentation of God as “Father” will not help such youngsters to know that God loves and cares for them. It could even have the opposite effect. No. We Lasallians have to “reveal” God to children and teenagers. We reveal God as compassionate and merciful when we allow Christ to make his loving and saving presence a reality *in us* - as we are: physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. He has chosen us - as we are - to be his representatives, his ambassadors, his ministers. We communicate God and his Good News to young people not in the first place by what we say and what we do, but by who we are:

“It is not first in words or in books that young people meet the God who calls them by name, but in the person of the one who catechizes them.” (*Decl.* 40.5)

Young people meet God in the person of their religion teachers, yes. But they meet God also in the person of all loving teachers and educators, whatever the subject they teach or service they render, especially when they believe in God as a compassionate and merciful Father and are willing to share their faith directly and indirectly with those “confided to their care.”

### ***This Pastoral Letter***

I have given this letter a complicated title: *On the Defense of Children, the Reign of God, and the*

*Lasallian Mission.* My intention is to situate the defense of children squarely in the context of our faith and of our Lasallian heritage and mission.

I write with a sense of urgency, with conviction, and, I hope, with “ardent zeal.” Nevertheless, I write with acute awareness of my lack of particular expertise in the field of children’s rights and of my lack of regular contact with young people during the last three decades. I say that not to apologize but to caution against unrealistic expectations. My purpose is not to pose as an expert. It is instead to promote reflection, dialogue, and, I hope, effective action.

## **I. VIOLATING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN**

Amnesty International insists that as human beings, children are endowed with all the rights laid down in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, accepted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and since ratified by some 180 countries, defined universal principles and norms for the status of children. The *World Summit for Children* in 1990 contributed “to building international momentum for the rights of the child,” and various countries have taken concrete steps to improve the status of children. “This, however, is only the beginning. Most of the work for the realization of

the rights of the child is ahead of us.” (Brochure, *Swedish Save the Children*, p.3)

Society today, actively or passively, consciously or unconsciously, often disregards the rights of children and denies them their childhood. I think that many of us, when violations confront us, claim powerlessness and futility. We too often close our eyes and mouths and unwittingly play the role of the priest and Levite in the parable of the *Good Samaritan*. A character in one of George Bernard Shaw’s works states that “The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them; that is the essence of inhumanity.”

Information on violations of the human rights of children is abundant in books, magazines, newspapers, and sundry reports. Those of you who are able “to surf the net” can easily find an extraordinary number of “items” concerning all aspects of the failure to respect the rights of children, as well as information on groups and organizations dedicated to promoting these rights. It is not my purpose, therefore, to present a comprehensive and balanced presentation of the violation of the rights of children. My intention is instead to describe some situations that can serve as a point of reference for our reflections. The five colloquia - on families, globalization, urbanization, new information technology, and communication of the faith - have helped me to become more sensitive than ever to such violations.

## ***Abortion***

Tragically, society today lacks a moral consensus concerning the right to life of children before birth. Millions of unborn children are aborted every year. The position of the Church is, of course, unambiguously clear: “From the first moment of existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person” - among which is the inviolable right to life. This life must be respected and protected “from the moment of conception.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2270) Reacting to the anti-life policy of abortion on demand, a Bishops’ Conference has stated that the “ultimate example of powerlessness is to be destroyed before birth.”

Although opposition to abortion is not always an objective of organizations dedicated to the defense of children, I have deliberately included it as a violation of the most fundamental of the rights that children possess, the right to life.

## ***Poverty***

The poverty and even destitution in which millions of children live is well documented. Many inhabit makeshift structures in the slums of major cities throughout the world. Nevertheless, alarming numbers of children are victims of poverty not only in economically poor countries, but also in economically developed countries. Between 20% and 25% of chil-

dren in some of the richest countries of the world are categorized as poor. Children are the principal victims of socioeconomic problems, and few governments have policies that effectively address the situation.

While poverty affects children of all ethnic groups, it strikes primarily those of the so-called "minority" groups, including immigrants and refugees. They are often victims of blatant racism and xenophobia. Many children suffer when the slow rate of economic growth drags down wages, particularly when they are from single parent families. These single parents, usually women, are often young and possess limited work skills. Government assistance is often not sufficient or efficacious.

### *Street children*

The United Nations estimates that there are more than one hundred fifty-million street children in the world, with the number rising daily. They range from age three to eighteen. Forty percent of them are homeless. The other 60% work on the streets to support their families. They are unable to attend school. Increasingly, these children are the defenseless victims of brutal violence, sexual exploitation, abject neglect, chemical addiction, and other violations of human rights. Officially some of these children have as their address their parents' home or an institution of social welfare. In practice, however, they have few if any

contacts with their parents, school, welfare institutions, or social services. Some of these children have to pay for "protection" and even for the right to sleep in open areas. They are malnourished and frequently sick.

### *Sexual Abuse*

Gender, ethnicity, caste, economic status are significant factors in the violation of the human rights of children. Female children face particular disadvantages. The birth of a girl is in some places considered a liability and less is invested in her health and education. In these areas gender-selective abortion and infanticide are common. Among girls there is a high rate of mortality and illiteracy. Harmful practices such as dowry and child marriage continue to exist. Female children suffer frequently from domestic servitude, violence, sexual exploitation, rape, and even murder.

Millions of children, both female and male, are victims of sexual abuse, often accompanied by physical abuse. Their abusers are sometimes, it is sad to say, members of their own families or trusted friends, teachers, priests, and religious. Yet their abusers are also skilled professionals who administer or participate in international child sex tourism, including child prostitution, child pornography, and trafficking of children for sexual purposes. Participants in our colloquium on globalization, held in Sri Lanka, met vic-



tims of child sex tourism, as well as dedicated men and women who are struggling against the evils infesting the tourist industry.

### ***Health***

A report on the *State of the World's Children, 1998*, says that twelve million children less than five years of age die every year in economically developing countries. The causes of death are hunger or malnutrition, AIDS, malaria, diarrhea, common and preventable infections, failure to receive immunizations, unsafe water, and general poverty.

According to a United Nations Report in October 1998, malaria is reaching epidemic proportions, killing nearly one million people a year. One child dies of this disease every thirty seconds. Globally, malaria kills three thousand children less than five years of age every day, a higher mortality rate than AIDS.

During this past year television has brought the starvation of children in the Sudan and other countries of the world into our communities. That children are dying today from lack of food is a tragedy of scandalous proportions. To the problem of starvation we have to add that of malnutrition, which stunts not only physical but also intellectual growth.

### ***Physical, mental disabilities***

Over the years I have had the opportunity to visit a number of institutions for partially or totally aban-

doned disabled children, teenagers, and adults - disabled mentally and/or physically. The Brothers operate a few of these institutions. The condition of many of the disabled defies description. Some are victims of physical or sexual abuse and of alcoholism. When I asked the Brothers about the contacts the parents have with their children, they responded, to my dismay, "Very little, if any." When I asked why disabled adults are present in centers designed for children and teenagers, they responded that they are there because they have nowhere else to go. These disabled persons are "privileged" in that they have people who love and care for them. How many others are left to die, abandoned and unloved.

### ***Illiteracy***

A UNICEF report for 1999 states that one billion persons today are illiterate. Two-thirds are female, one sixth are children. One out of six persons can neither read nor write. One hundred thirty-million children of primary school age are not in school. Another twenty million do not complete four years of school, the minimum required to consider a child "literate." Therefore, one hundred fifty-million children can be considered illiterate. In economically developing countries 25% of children are deprived of their right to study. Poor families frequently permit only one child to go to school, nearly always a male child. Another problem is that the quality of education is often very

low. UNESCO calls for literacy training of African women and for the multiplication of "itinerant schools," such as the twenty-six classroom vans we Lasallians operate in France for itinerant people.

### *Child Labor*

A recent publication carries a photo of a child factory worker dozing in front of a box of softballs that he is stitching. It occurred to me that someone would punish that child, while other children of the same age would pitch and bat those balls.

A UNICEF report states that in the economically developing countries, 25% of children between the ages of five and fourteen work. Estimates are that two hundred fifty-million children are working. More than half of them labor nine hours per day or more. Tens of millions work in appalling and hazardous conditions as prostitutes, slave laborers in factories or plantations, street peddlers, imprisoned and hidden domestic laborers.

### *Children and Armed Conflicts*

UNICEF declares that during the last decade two million children have been killed during armed conflicts. Amnesty International claims that militants are increasingly targeting children merely because they come from certain geographical areas or because of the politics, religion, or ethnic origin of their family. Four to five million have been disabled, twelve mil-

lion left homeless, ten million traumatized, one million orphaned. According to Amnesty more than 100 million land mines have been laid in more than fifty countries. Ninety percent of those killed by the mines have been civilians, one third of them children. John Paul II expresses astonishment "that we are now witnessing an unbelievable and inhuman paradox: mines are still being laid even in places which had already been cleared." (*Message, World Day of Peace*, 11)

In their well-documented book, *Children, the Invisible Soldiers*, Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin estimate that two hundred fifty-thousand children under the age of eighteen are serving in government armed forces or armed opposition groups. Being more precise is impossible because they are "invisible" - that is to say, those who employ them deny their existence. Children are easier to recruit than adults, whether by persuasion or by force. As soldiers they are exploited as combatants because they are less likely to question orders and are more likely to be fearless. Some children have been recruited as rebel or opposition forces as young as nine years of age. A publication of the *Jesuit Refugee Service* states that children between the ages of twelve and sixteen make up 85% of rebel forces in some countries. The report says that children are made to kill each other to break down their resistance to committing atrocities. Girls are routinely raped and used as sex-slaves as rewards and incentives for the soldiers. A notorious revolutionary

band of guerrillas wrote a textbook for children of ten years of age. These guerrillas formed generations of youth revolutionaries by means of this book.

Often when armed conflicts end, former child soldiers, disoriented, unemployed, and still armed, are left to roam the streets and often succumb to lawlessness.

### *Youth Violence*

What I have said so far could give the impression that I think that defense of the rights of children concerns almost exclusively children in economically developing countries. Nothing could be further from the truth. Problems in economically developed areas are enormous.

Murders committed by minors occur with alarming frequency. Mass killings in a number of schools in two such countries in recent years have shocked the world. Explaining the phenomenon of children and teenagers who kill is not easy. Still, the availability of guns is undoubtedly a major factor. That countries in which guns are easy to acquire have the highest percentage of killings cannot be dismissed as a coincidence.

Schools in some countries - government schools particularly - are experiencing a significant lack of discipline and even violence. As incredible as it may seem, professional police are assuming normal secu-

rity and disciplinary functions in some schools. Many young people are not motivated and remain in school against their will. I think that compulsory schooling is good policy, if school programs are adapted to the capacities and needs of the youngsters and if teachers are both capable and dedicated. Otherwise, school makes no sense. Youths fail to experience the pleasure of learning. Furthermore, the high rate of unemployment in some countries leads some teenagers to the conclusion that education will make little difference. It is not surprising that so many young people abandon school.

### *Youth Offenses*

Research shows that today the most dangerous hours for children in industrialized countries are the after-school hours when both parents are still at work. Police reports in one country reveal that after-school hours account for more than 50% of youth offenses. Some schools try to respond to this situation by providing after-school opportunities for play and study. Such programs are essential. Nevertheless, many schools have no such activities or have eliminated them for budgetary reasons. Private agencies are increasingly providing services, but their high costs are out of the range of poor families.

Surveys in one area reveal that the average youngster spends nine hundred hours a year in school and fifteen hundred hours watching television. Many par-

ents have abdicated supervising what their children watch. Programs contain increasing amounts of explicit sex, vulgar language, immoral behavior, and violence. Producers of such programs are deliberately - and scandalously - targeting children and teenagers. They justify such programs, claiming that they merely mirror contemporary society. Some parents reluctantly admit that the programs do reflect reality. They say that battling with their children about television is almost pointless, "given the anti-social humor, foul language, and sexual innuendo young people hear everywhere else." Television, of course, is not the only problem. Films, music, and now the Internet also make inappropriate material readily available.

Essentially related to youth offenses is the problem of incarceration. Overcrowded prisons and inhumane conditions and treatment in many countries militate against rehabilitation and have the opposite effect.

### *Denying children their childhood*

In all the above we observe a common denominator: societies - nations, their governments, their citizens - are violating the rights of children by not permitting them to be children. Reverence for children demands that we take them as they are and help them transform themselves into the children they should be and have a right to be. Cardinal William Keeler has

severely criticized societies that deny children their childhood - their directness, innocence, and sense of wonder: "A culture that mocks, threatens, stifles, or kills that innocence and that sense of wonder is a culture that stands under grave judgment."

I conclude this section with a poignant story. You may draw your own conclusions.

*A town of 13,000 inhabitants has witnessed the suicide of eight teenagers during the last three years. One, a boy of fifteen years of age, shot himself in his bedroom with his father's pistol. It was just before Christmas. He left a note for his parents, who had been separated for ten years: "I really don't know what to say in these dam [sic] things, but I want you to know that I love you mom and dad. I'm not in English class so my spelling doesn't have to be perfect." He asked his mother "to quite [sic] smoking" and asked his parents to remarry. "Take good care of my cat . . . also I'm putting my will into this letter." He left a collection of pictures of sports stars to one friend, his bee-bee gun to another. To still another he left his favorite sports outfit - mentioning that it was in his backpack and needed washing.*

*He never said why he took his life.*

## II. DEFENDING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

Brothers, I think it useful to provide basic information on the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and the *World Summit for Children*.

Fifty years ago the United Nations adopted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, an event of great significance. This historic document recognizes the dignity of all members of the human family and of their equal and inalienable rights. That recognition, according to the declaration, constitutes the basis of freedom, justice, and peace. Since all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, they must act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood.

Despite the beautiful expression, however, society overall has not given the priority required, or at least sufficient priority, to making respect for human rights a principle of fundamental importance. We have just reflected on a long list of violations of human dignity, specifically the human dignity of children. The question the Holy Father addresses in his *Message, World Day of Peace* again comes to mind: "How many exploited children do not even know they have rights!"

Children are endowed with all the rights expressed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Nevertheless, the United Nations, to its credit, carried

that declaration a significant step further in 1989 by adopting the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. This document, which defines universal principles and establishes norms for the status of children, is the fruit of ten years of consultation and drafting. To date one hundred eighty-seven out of one hundred ninety-three countries have ratified it. It is the mostly widely ratified human rights instrument in international law.

As an international treaty the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* has the force of law. Its provisions legally bind governments that ratify it. It is therefore different from a mere declaration or statement of principles. UNICEF calls it unique in that "it is the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights - children's civil and political rights as well as their economic, social and cultural rights - thus giving all rights equal emphasis." The convention sets minimum legal and moral standards. Governments that have ratified it have committed themselves to its implementation and have assumed a legal and moral obligation to advance the cause of child rights through administrative, legislative, juridical, and other measures.

### *What the convention requires*

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* is a document of eighteen pages. It is available from the United Nations, from human rights organizations, and

from the Internet. The following are major provisions, without detail. The convention requires nations to ensure that each child enjoy full rights:

- *The right to survival:* nutrition, clothing, housing, medical care . . .
- *The right to develop:* adequate standard of living for physical, mental, spiritual, moral, social development; education, play, cultural life, freedom of thought, religion . . .
- *The right to protection:* from discrimination, exploitation, cruelty, abuses of justice, arbitrary separation from families, harmful effects of armed conflict . . .
- *The right to participation in society*

Following the adoption of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1989, the United Nations organized in 1990 the *World Summit for Children*. Seventy-one heads of state issued a *World Declaration* and a *Plan of Action* and committed themselves to work for the physical and mental development of children. The convention, declaration, and plan of action call for significant progress before the year 2000. In 2001 a special session of the General Assembly will review the achievement of the goals of the summit.

### III. DEEPLY MOVED BY POOR AND ABANDONED CHILDREN

Brother José Pablo Basterrechea, my predecessor, used to remind both Brothers and Lasallian partners that they must not “take the name of De La Salle in vain.” What he meant is that we have to avoid, attentively and painstakingly, an interpretation of our Lasallian heritage that is partial or fragmented. Two “temptations” come to mind immediately. The first is to downplay the religious dimension of our mission, yielding too complacently to the religious indifference among our young people. The second is to downplay the preference of the Institute for the education of children and young people who are poor, primarily economically poor. I am concentrating today on the second temptation, but in reality the two dimensions are inseparable. Our love for poor children and our educational commitment on their behalf spring from our baptismal and religious consecration.

Our *Rule* concisely and poignantly links De La Salle’s progressive awareness of the situation of poor children with the origin and development of the Institute. As he became aware, by God’s grace, of the human and spiritual distress of “the children of artisans and of the poor,” their neglect and abandonment moved him profoundly. (The French text says literally that their abandonment “seized” him.) Our founder responded positively to inspirations that he had dis-

cerned as coming from God: he founded a community of men associated to respond to the needs of young people “poor and far from salvation.” (Paraphrase, *Rule*, 1, 11, 47)

In the second of the meditations De La Salle wrote for the time of retreat, he describes the children the Brothers were called to educate, children not unlike those I described earlier in this letter. He says that artisans and poor people too often allow their children “to live on their own, roaming all over like vagabonds.” They cannot go to school because their parents cannot afford to pay the teachers. Because their fathers and mothers work outside their homes, the children are left to themselves. Accustomed to idleness, they find it difficult to adjust when it comes time for them to go to work. Moreover, because of the influence of “bad companions,” they contract sinful habits that are not easy to eradicate. To remedy such misfortune, God has established the Christian schools. There children are taught reading, writing, and religion - always free of charge. They are constructively occupied all day and prepared for employment when the day comes. (*Med.* 194.1)

“You should look upon the children whom you are charged to teach as poor, abandoned orphans. In fact, though most of them do have a father here on earth, they are still as if they had none and are abandoned to

themselves for the salvation of their souls. This is the reason God places them as if under your guardianship. He looks on them with compassion and takes care of them as their protector, their support and their father, and it is to you that he entrusts this care. This God of goodness places them in your hands and undertakes to give them everything you ask of him for them: piety, self-control, reserve, purity, the avoidance of companions who could be dangerous to them.” (*Med.* 37.3)

De La Salle and the first Brothers clearly understood themselves as men called primarily to the education of poor, abandoned, marginalized children. In his moving meditation for Christmas Day, our Founder, employing the first rather than the second person, writes:

“We are poor Brothers, forgotten and little appreciated by the people of the world. Only the poor come looking for us; they have nothing to offer us but their hearts.” (*Med.* 86.2)

We know well, Brothers, that our call is not only to administer schools of academic or professional quality. Our call is to give a human and Christian education to youth, especially youth who are poor. (*Rule*, 3) Aware of and deeply moved by the human and

spiritual distress of many children, De La Salle modeled his life on that of Christ: "Jesus drew especially near to those on the margins of society, and showed them special favor" . . . he enabled them "to experience liberation even now" . . . he made them "feel loved by God, thus revealing his tender care for the needy." (*Redemptoris Missio*, 14)

Would we describe ourselves today as De La Salle describes himself and the first Brothers? Most of us would not. Nevertheless, in some areas of the Institute education of poor youth is in fact the "effective priority." (*Rule*, 40a.) Moreover, throughout the Institute we have increased significantly the number of schools and centers designed for education of poor children and youth. In 1990 the United Nations Organization for Education, Science, and Culture (UNESCO) awarded the Institute the NOMA prize. This award recognized the outstanding contribution the Institute has made during its three hundred year history to basic education of poor children and of illiterate youths and adults. Institute *Bulletin* n.234 reports on the NOMA prize and describes many initiatives of Brothers and Lasallian partners throughout the world.

#### IV. IN ACCORD WITH WHAT THE REIGN OF GOD REQUIRES

Today the Institute is "attentive to the educational needs of the poor as they strive to become aware of their dignity and to live and be recognized as human beings and children of God. **In accord with what the Reign of God requires**, the Institute establishes, renews, and diversifies its work." (*Rule*, 11)

Brothers, the experience of our Founder enlightens and inspires us to commit ourselves to educate poor children and to support them in their quest to live in dignity. We strive today to establish, renew, and diversify our apostolic endeavors *in accord with what the Reign of God requires*. The last chapter of this pastoral letter will focus on renewal of our current commitments and on new apostolic initiatives. In this chapter I reflect upon the italicized passage: *in accord with what the Reign of God requires*. I think that the idea of the *Reign of God* can serve as an excellent framework for deepening our understanding of the Lasallian mission. More specifically, it can help us to situate the defense of children and of their human rights within a theological and ecclesial framework. Yet what precisely does the Reign of God mean? What does it require of us?



De La Salle says that our mission is honorable in God's sight "because it seeks to spread his Kingdom." When we devote ourselves to that mission with zeal, he says, "God will reward us even in this present time." Elsewhere he exhorts us to devote ourselves to fostering "God's reign in our hearts and in the hearts of others." (*Med.* 143.3, 207.1, 67.2) The Founder makes references, therefore, to the Reign of God. Nevertheless, he does not give the concept the attention it enjoys among many thinkers today. Pope John Paul himself devotes a long chapter to the topic in his important encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*.

Article 11 of the *Rule*, parts of which I quoted above, presupposes that the injustice and affront to human dignity suffered by many children is incompatible with "what the Reign of God requires." Consequently, we have to evaluate and, to the extent necessary, revise our apostolic activities to respond more effectively to children impeded from living in accord with "what the Reign of God requires." The Lasallian school or other kind of center must be a "sign of the Kingdom." Its orientations, atmosphere, and quality of relationships must "signify" the interpersonal communion that the Reign of God requires. The Church is the "sacrament of salvation for all." (*RM*, 20) As an international community within the Church, the Lasallian Family must maintain and create schools and centers that are "means of salvation." (*Rule*, 3).

In the first chapter of the *Rule*, devoted to the purpose and spirit of the Institute, we read that "in faith the Brothers, *cooperators with Jesus Christ*, consecrate their whole existence to building the Kingdom of God through the service of education." (*Rule*, 5) We commit ourselves to the "liberation" of oppressed children not because we are social activists, but because we are Brothers of the Christian Schools. Our vocation in its very nature requires such a commitment. "We believe that the community exists for the Kingdom, which it should make present through signs of faith, fraternity, simple life style, openness, and availability." (*Circ.* 435, p. 53)

God wills, therefore, that we consecrate our whole existence to the building up of the Reign of God. Our commitment is obviously more comprehensive than the promotion of the human dignity of children. Nevertheless, it is incomplete if that dimension is lacking. Article 69 links very beautifully the commitment to build the Reign of God with mental (interior) prayer:

"Each day they undertake 'the ascent to God through mental prayer,' as apostles responsible for the salvation of those confided to them. In this way they hope to receive from the Lord the internal freedom and the spiritual discernment that their ministry requires, and the graces they need *to work effectively for building up the Kingdom of God.*" (*Rule*, 69, emphasis added)

## *The Reign of God*

After receiving the Holy Spirit at his baptism, Jesus goes about Galilee preaching the Gospel and saying that the Reign of God is at hand. He exhorts the people to repent and believe in the Gospel. He proclaims the Kingdom by what he says, by what he does, and, above all, by who he is. To proclaim and establish the Kingdom is the purpose of his mission: "I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God ... because that is what I was sent to do." (*Lk* 4:43).

The Reign of God is "at hand," that is to say, already close and at work in our midst. Jesus himself reveals this God who reigns. He addresses God by the intimate term *Abba*, Father. Through parables he describes this Father as sensitive to the needs and sufferings of every human being, as filled with love and compassion, as granting forgiveness. One enters God's Kingdom through faith and conversion and not because of ethnic background. God invites every person to "repent" and to "believe." (*Redemptoris Missio*, 13)

Jesus gradually reveals the characteristics and demands of the Kingdom through his words, his actions, and his own person. "The Kingdom aims at transforming human relationships; it grows gradually as people slowly learn to love, forgive, and serve one another...

The Kingdom's nature is one of communion among all human beings - with one another and with God...

Christianity is open to universal fellowship and sisterhood, for all men and women are sons and daughters of the same Father and brothers and sisters in Christ." (*RM*, 14, 15, 43)

The Kingdom therefore is meant for all. God calls all persons to be members, including those on the margins of society. Jesus drew especially near to such persons:

"He proclaimed that he was anointed to preach the good news to the poor. To all who are victims of rejection and contempt Jesus declares: 'Blessed are you poor.' What is more, he enables such individuals to experience liberation even now, by being close to them, going to eat in their homes, treating them as equals and friends, and making them feel loved by God, thus revealing his tender care for the needy and for sinners." (*RM*, 14)

According to the Pope, the liberation and salvation brought by the Kingdom of God have both physical and spiritual dimensions. Healing and forgiving are characteristic gestures of Jesus' mission. He manifests his great compassion in the face of human distress. Healings are signs of spiritual salvation, of liberation from sin. They are signs that the Kingdom of God has come.

John Paul II says that “the Church is not an end unto herself, since she is ordered toward the Kingdom of God, of which she is the seed, sign, and instrument. Yet, while remaining distinct from Christ and the Kingdom, the Church is indissolubly united to both” The Church is at the service of the Kingdom. She calls to faith and conversion, establishes communities of Christian faith, is sign and promoter of Gospel values. The Church contributes to the building up of the Kingdom through “witness, dialogue, human promotion, commitment to justice and peace, education, the care of the sick, aid to the poor and to children . . . Building the Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms . . . The Church is called to bear witness to Christ by taking courageous and prophetic stands in the face of corruption of political or economic power.” (*RM*, 18, 20, 15, 43)

### ***The Reign of God and the Lasallian Mission***

Brothers, we consecrate ourselves totally to the building of the Kingdom of God as cooperators, ministers, coworkers, ambassadors of Jesus Christ. De La Salle says that we are to “represent” Jesus. Our pupils ought to be able to recognize Christ in us and receive our teaching as if Jesus Christ was teaching them. John Paul II uses similar language when speaking of consecrated persons: “Consecrated persons make visible, in their consecration and total dedication, the loving and saving presence of Christ.” (*Vita Consecrata*, 76)

God wills that we “re-present” the Jesus who “was so charged with God’s own compassion and love that any cry of pain or confusion drew from him an instant response of healing and restoration.” (Donald Senior, *Jesus, a Gospel Portrait*, p.116)

In response to the mission he received from his Father, Jesus dedicated himself to the proclamation and establishment of the Reign of God. Because we have “become Christ,” we also dedicate ourselves to the proclamation and establishment of the Reign of God. Since the nature of the Kingdom is “communion among all human beings - with one another and with God,” we build up the Reign of God when we promote universal brotherhood and sisterhood. The theology of the *Reign of God*, therefore, provides us, and also our collaborators, with a very helpful framework for understanding our Lasallian mission.

We contribute to the building of the Reign by the human and Christian education of some 800,000 youth in more than eighty countries. They are of a fascinating diversity of races, nationalities, cultures, ethnic heritages, languages, and religions. Some countries are well or moderately developed economically, others are moderately or extremely poor. Some countries enjoy relative peace and stability, others suffer violence and even war. We strive to help the young people of all these nations to develop themselves in accord with their personal gifts and talents, whatever

they are. At the same time we aid them to learn to be faithful sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters among themselves, and brothers and sisters to others.

As I wrote several years ago, we have youth in our Lasallian world today - often in the same school or center - who are "living" their Catholic faith and those who are not; youth who are Christian but not Catholic; youth who profess other world or local religions; youth who are indifferent or even hostile toward "organized" religions. In this variety of "situations," the Church recognizes "dialogue" and "proclamation" as distinct but related expressions of evangelization. Lasallian schools are Catholic schools and for that very reason are places where teachers accept all their young people, whatever their race, culture, economic situation, belief or lack of belief. The loving reverence they show for their pupils is the first step of dialogue. As John Paul II says,

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

condition for salvation is already satisfied."  
(*Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, pp. 141, 193)

Understanding the Reign of God as "communion among all human beings - with one another and with God" helps us, therefore, to recognize the defense of children and of their human dignity as integral dimensions of our total consecration to God as followers of John Baptist de La Salle. The Pope declares that "building the Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms" and mentions explicitly the necessity of "aid to the poor and to children . . . The Church is called to be on the side of those who are poor and oppressed in any way." He invites all Catholics to examine their lives "regarding solidarity with the poor." Moreover, in the face of political or economic power that exploits and violates the human rights of children, the Church must take "courageous and prophetic stands." (*RM*, 15, 20, 60, 43)

## V. THE DEFENSE OF CHILDREN: A NEW FOCUS FOR LASALLIAN MISSION

### *New answers to new problems*

"It is necessary to be open to the interior promptings of the Holy Spirit, who invites us to understand in depth the designs of

Providence. He calls consecrated men and women to present *new answers to the new problems of today's world*. These are divine pleas which only souls accustomed to following God's will in everything can assimilate faithfully and then translate courageously into choices which are consistent with the original charism and which correspond to the demands of the concrete historical situation." (VC, 73)

This plea of the Holy Father is consistent with orientations the Institute has provided since the 39th General Chapter. The *Declaration* states that one of our primary objectives is to recognize, understand, and respond to the needs of the young people of our day. (Decl. 23.3) This prophetic document declares also that solidarity with the people of today, attention to appeals from the Church, and fidelity to the specific intentions of the Founder show clearly "that it is to the poor to whom we are sent by preference." (Decl. 28) The *Rule* calls us to be attentive to the educational needs of the poor and sensitive to their right and to their struggle to live in dignity as human beings and as children in the Kingdom of God. More than be attentive, we have to create new works and renew existing works in response to these needs. (Rule, 11)

### *The 42nd General Chapter*

Our last General Chapter urges us to "go to those" who do not have the means to learn and assume their place in society because of famine, war, oppression . . . to "go to those" who are victims of economic and political turmoil and who suffer the brunt of the spasms of a disturbed world - unemployment, substance abuse, AIDS, suicide. The chapter endorses the position of Brothers who call for a "deliberate return to those who are most affected by collective injustice." It urges us to promote the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, to work constructively and effectively against illiteracy, which blocks development, hinders social integration, affronts dignity, condemns millions to hopelessness, contributes to outbreaks of violence, and breeds degrading passivity. (Circ.435, pp.19, 20, 23)

Earlier I mentioned the five colloquia, organized to carry out a proposition of the chapter. The colloquia focused on families, globalization, urbanization, new information technologies, and communication of the faith. In each colloquium, children and youth were at the center, poor children in a particular way.

### *Thesis of this letter*

The thesis of this pastoral letter is that the situation of poor children in today's world is an unspeakable scandal and that our Lasallian charism invites us to make solidarity with neglected, abandoned,

marginalized, and exploited children a particular focus for our mission.

This position is consistent with that of the Pope when he challenges consecrated men and women “to show concern for what the world neglects, and to respond generously and boldly to new forms of poverty through concrete efforts, even if necessarily on a small scale, and above all in the most abandoned areas.” (VC, 63) John Paul II wrote those words while reflecting on the impact that declining numbers are having on current apostolates and even on the future of some Institutes. His context explains the phrase, “even if necessarily on a small scale.” Yet viewed in the context of “shared mission” - and our force of 67,000 Lasallian teachers and many thousands more of other partners - our response to the needs of poor children can be “on a large scale.”

The *Declaration* says that the Institute will find in its attentiveness to the needs of young people today “an indispensable source of renewal.” (*Decl.* 23.1) We Brothers of the Christian Schools - and all other members of the Lasallian Family - should be in solidarity with disadvantaged children on the local, national, and international level, clearly identified with their struggle, and creatively and effectively active for them through our mission of human and Christian education. This focus can enable us to make a major contribution in the quest for justice for children. At

the same time it can be a significant source of renewal of the Institute and of the Lasallian mission.

Sister and sociologist Patricia Wittberg says that “if there is to be religious life within the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century, then its basic charism - the fundamental definition of what it is and why it exists - must resonate with the deepest anguish, discontinuity, or strain” of at least one aspect of contemporary culture. (*Pathways to Re-Creating Religious Communities*, p. 77) I am suggesting that one aspect of contemporary culture that provokes anguish, frustration, and anger is that of exploited and neglected children.

Experiences of the past few days confirm my position. Italian police have discovered the existence of child slaves. They are undocumented children who entered the country clandestinely with adults who have become their “masters.” Several nights ago Italian television projected an extraordinary film on the life of Iqbal Masih, the young Pakistani whose destitute parents sold him into child bonded labor at four years of age. He escaped at the age of ten and began to speak out against child slavery and for freedom of all Pakistani children. In 1995 persons profiting from this aberration brutally murdered him at the age of twelve years of age. Such situations - and so many others - are sources of anguish, frustration, and anger.

We Brothers of the Christian Schools should be in the vanguard of the struggle for justice for such children. This focus can give us new life. It will, I think, attract to our Institute brave, generous, idealistic young people who believe in Jesus Christ and are ready to follow him as consecrated religious.

### *Solidarity with Poor Children*

Solidarity with poor children is a concrete way of responding to our vow of association for the education of poor children. Solidarity gives all of us a way of living our fourth vow, whether or not we are in direct contact with poor youth. It is not enough that *some* Brothers and Lasallian partners educate the poor. *All* Brothers and *all* Lasallian partners, whatever their particular ministries, must be in solidarity with the poor. "It is important that every Brother make his own the decision of Saint John Baptist de La Salle to go to the poor with the heart of a poor person." "Whatever their specific educational commitment, the Brothers will want always to be in solidarity with the poor and with the activity of the Institute that favors the poor." (*Decl.* 32.1, 34.2)

Calling solidarity a Christian virtue, John Paul II defines it as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all." (*Solicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38, 40) This letter is a call to all of us - Brothers and

partners - to commit ourselves with firm and persevering determination to the good of children who are victims of human depravity.

We express solidarity with poor children when, by word, action, and quality of presence, we manifest to them profound love and reverence. In solidarity, we strive to help them grow in "resilience." Experts on the care of disadvantaged children describe resilience as the capacity to do well in spite of stress or adversity. Resilience resists destruction of the human spirit. It cultivates the capacity to construct a positive life in spite of difficult circumstances.

Nevertheless, concern for the needs of individual persons and apostolic activities in favor of the poor "can never dispense with efforts to establish a just social order aimed at the elimination of poverty." (*Decl.* 30.3). Consequently we have to cultivate the consciousness of our students by teaching them the social doctrine of the Church and by encouraging them "to participate effectively in the struggle for justice and peace." We are obliged to help them "become aware of human suffering in its concrete forms" and to grow in a "sense of universal brotherhood and sisterhood." (*Decl.* 32.1, 2).

Solidarity with the poor - poor children especially - ought to be evident in the mission statements of every district, school, and apostolic center and in their annual programs. It must be evident also in the commu-

nity annual program and in our personal programs. Moreover, solidarity with the poor and with neglected children ought to become a dominant and determining factor in the decisions that Visitors, district chapters, school boards and administrators, religious and educative communities take regarding the present and future mission of the district. (*Decl.* 34.2,4)

### ***CIL, 1999-2000***

Brothers, as you know, the theme of the next session of the International Lasallian Center (CIL) is *Brothers in Association for the Education of the Poor*. The program will offer the usual elements for personal and community renewal as well as provide participants the opportunity to explore ways of living our fourth vow with creativity and dynamism. Before going to Rome for the residential portion of the program, participants will live and work for two months in specific programs of education of the poor. Those Brothers habitually engaged in such work will have the experience of an apostolic activity different from their own.

I hope that this CIL will have a major impact not only on the lives of the participants, but also on the 43rd General Chapter and on the future of the Lasallian mission.

### ***How can we live solidarity with poor children and youth today?***

What follows is not an authoritative or definitive list of concrete actions. It is a list of possibilities that I hope will serve as a point of departure. To simplify the presentation, I have used the first person plural to indicate Brothers and other Lasallians.

- As a logical follow-up of the five colloquia, we can make defense of children and of their rights a major theme of the 43rd General Chapter. This Jubilee Year Chapter can adopt the defense of children in need as a particular focus for Lasallian Mission throughout the world during the next seven years.
- We can organize at regional and district levels gatherings of interested Brothers for discussions and “brainstorming” sessions.
- We can declare ourselves in writing at district and local levels as committed to the defense of children as an integral dimension of the mission of the district.
- We can carry out the General Chapter recommendation to evaluate the effectiveness of our programs and action for “the promotion of justice, especially concerning literacy, the rights of the child, values education, and advocacy.” (*Circ.* 435, pp. 25-26)



- We can provide materials for the ongoing formation of teachers, personnel, parents, board members, and former students in the social teachings of the Church and orientations of the Institute. We can organize colloquia, seminars, lectures, discussions, workshops for members of the Lasallian family. Some of these programs can use as point of departure the proceedings of the five colloquia. This material is the subject of an Institute *Bulletin* currently in preparation.
- Convinced that the school that is the “privileged instrument” of our mission is a school that is “accessible to the poor,” (*Rule*, 3) we can develop scholarship funds to provide full or partial financial assistance to as many needy youngsters as possible.
- We can create educational programs to educate all our young people to awareness of the consequences of poverty and inadequate social structures. We can help them to develop a social conscience and to accept their responsibility for change. In the spirit of articles 14 and 40 of the *Rule* we can develop programs that include suitable information, instruction in the social doctrine of the Church, practical experience of working with the poor, and opportunities to reflect upon that experience in the light of the Gospel.

- Those of us involved in higher education can strive to carry out the recommendation of the last General Chapter to foster research into the causes of poverty and social injustice and into ways of eliminating the causes. (*Circ.* 435, p.26) We can organize conferences and seminars on the topic of exploited children. We can participate in the political system as advocates for children. By honorary doctorates or other awards, we can recognize persons dedicating their lives to promoting the human rights of children. In our teacher training programs, we can make sure that future teachers know well the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and their implications for teachers and educators.
- We can promote the notion of “every school an impact center.” We can foster the creation of “outreach programs” in the local neighborhood, town, or city. We can urge teachers, parents, former students, and pupils themselves to participate in programs of service to needy children.
- We can encourage Lasallians - Brothers, partners, parents, former students, board members, pupils - to become actively involved with international, national, civic, Catholic, and ecumenical organizations dedicated to confronting in a

political manner unjust structures and inadequate legal protection of the young. I think that our associations of former students can become much more actively engaged in such activity.

- We can vigorously promote the development of Lasallian Youth and Lasallian Volunteers on long and short term bases, recommending that they devote themselves in a particular way to neglected and marginalized children and youth. The Lasallian Youth movement is growing in strength and effectiveness. We have various structures for full-time volunteers with impressive results, but the total number of volunteers in the Institute is still much too small. On the other hand the number of volunteers during vacation times is outstanding. Many such volunteers, both older students and adults, have participated three or more times. The last General Chapter recommended that Brothers who have sabbaticals or other renewal opportunities include in their program “involvement with the less fortunate.”
- We can strive to put into practice articles 40a and 19a that mandate districts to develop a plan to make the direct service of the poor progressively “their effective priority” both in the geographical area of the district and abroad. We Brothers can support proposals “to hand over

to others some works of the district to meet more urgent demands.” Moreover we can offer ourselves for service in “places where there is a greater need for the ministry of the Brothers.” (*Rule*, 40a, 19a)

- To make the presence of the Church more a reality among the poor, we can reinforce current endeavors and initiate new communities and “projects of insertion” in poor sectors. (*Circ.* 435, pp. 25, 55) “There are many communities that live and work among the poor and the marginalized; they embrace their conditions of life and share in their sufferings, problems, and perils.” (*VC*, 90)
- Particularly in poor areas of the world but also in impoverished sectors of industrialized countries, we can strengthen our Lasallian presence in elementary and lower secondary education. In his current *Message, World Day of Peace*, the Pope writes of the need for adequate elementary education and manifests his concern that “in some of the poorest regions of the world, educational opportunities are actually decreasing, especially in the area of primary education.” Sometimes, he says, “money seems to be available for prestigious projects and for secondary education, but not for primary schools.” (8) Several districts have initiated new and ef-

fective primary and middle schools for “minority” youngsters in recent years. We can also explore the possibility of “itinerant schools,” such as the network of classroom vans in France that I mentioned earlier.

- We can reinforce existing programs and establish new centers for street children, orphans, and abandoned children. We have an impressive number of such centers in various countries. They are of different forms and shapes, but all are at the service of poor children and youth. Sometimes the centers are under the direction of the Institute. In other instances Brothers and lay partners collaborate in programs directed jointly by several religious institutes, religious conferences, ecumenical associations, or civic organizations. In some schools, Brothers, lay partners, parents, former students, and pupils devote several hours each week in projects with street children.

“Prevention” is an important aspect of some centers and programs. They strive to help families in difficulty so that their children do not end in the street. Others have nurseries that provide care for babies and young children while their mothers are working. Some centers for street children provide temporary housing. Others are day centers where children can play games, rest,

receive medical attention, bathe, receive advice - and what is most important, experience loving care.

- We can maintain our long Lasallian tradition of working with children with behavioral problems by providing specialized assistance in our schools or by reinforcing or creating centers specifically designated for this purpose. We have many such centers, but because of decreasing numbers of Brothers, changing governmental policies, and financial constraints, they are fewer than in the past.
- We can provide necessary facilities and care in our schools for children who have mental or physical disabilities but can function in an ordinary school environment. We can also work directly or indirectly with children who are severely disabled, particularly when they are neglected and even abandoned. In areas where we have institutions for disabled children, we can improve the quality of our professional formation, and we can strive to involve our school educational communities in our work.

### *Kids Help Line: Australia*

Although we have many extraordinary programs for disadvantaged children and youth throughout the Institute, I want to provide some information on a pro-

gram that is unique and highly effective. Whether similar programs are feasible in other areas of the Institute is a question I cannot answer.

*Kids Help Line* is a twenty-four hour, national telephone counselling service for young Australians aged five to eighteen. The De La Salle Brothers, led by Brother Paul Smith, established the program in 1991. It became a national service in 1993.

Paid, professionally trained and supervised counsellors staff Kids Help Line. These counsellors strive to help young people develop their capacity to manage their own lives. They help the young callers to clarify their concerns, formulate options and strategies for positive change, and identity and understand the consequences of their actions. At the same time the counsellors encourage productive relationships with parents, teachers, and other care-givers.

Kids Help Line is the only telephone counselling service in the world that not only treats every call with respect but allows callers to continue working with the same counsellor over time. Two million young people have telephoned and received assistance. More than five hundred thousand had real, immediate problems. Children continue to call *Kids Help Line* at the rate of thirty thousand a week - a truly extraordinary sign that young people appreciate this unique service and find it helpful.

Without revealing the identity of callers, counsellors share information with persons working with children and youth to help them know and understand better major concerns. This valuable information assists in the planning of available financial resources and supports applications for funding programs for children's development.

### *International Catholic Child Bureau (BICE)*

The 42nd General Chapter encourages solidarity with associations and organizations that work for the rights of children and youth. Such associations and organizations are many at international, national, and local levels. I want to describe one specific organization because it is international, Catholic, dedicated to children in need, and because we have had a relationship with it throughout its fifty-year history.

*The International Catholic Child Bureau*, called *BICE*, came into existence in response to Pope Pius XII's urgent appeal for help to victims of World War II, specifically the "multitude of innocent children." The Brothers of the Christian Schools were charter members. BICE is headquartered in Geneva and has four regional secretariats. It has consultative status with several United Nations bodies, including UNICEF and UNESCO, and with the Council of Europe. Institute Secretaries for the Lasallian Educational Mission have been active over the years. Brother

Anton de Roeper is current vice-president of the Executive Board. Other Brothers are active on local levels. We have a particularly close association with BICE in India and in the Ivory Coast.

The organization prepares policy statements on the rights of children in a range of specific areas, provides technical assistance for projects, and supports pilot projects. Current lines of endeavor are research into methodologies suited to childhood programs, recruiting skilled workers for limited-time service to programs in crisis and disaster areas, and advocacy for children under the terms of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. BICE served as President of the group of non-governmental organizations that prepared the text that eventually became the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

BICE continues to recruit religious congregations concerned with education and mother/child issues. It works in close harmony also with other NGOs, a collaboration that gives the organization an influence beyond its limited personnel and resources. In June of this year I will join the General Councillors and other members of the Central Government in a workshop that BICE will organize and conduct. We want to explore ways that the Lasallian Family can participate more actively in this organization and profit from its experience and expertise.

## AFTERWORD

*Become heralds of human dignity*  
(*Message, World Day of Peace, 13*)

“People were bringing little children to him ... The disciples scolded them, but Jesus said, *Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs ...* Then he laid his hands on them and gave them his blessing.”  
(*Mk. 10:13*)

Exegete Daniel Harrington, SJ, says that in the time of Jesus, writers presented children “as examples of unreasonable behavior or as objects to be trained. In this passage they are taken seriously as persons and enjoy a relationship with Jesus and the kingdom.” (*Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 618). Earlier in Mark’s gospel, Jesus says that “whoever welcomes a little child such as this in my name, welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” (*Mk 9: 37*) Harrington says that “in my name” is the key phrase. Whoever receives someone’s emissary receives the person himself. “So whoever receives a child receives Jesus, and whoever receives Jesus receives God who sent Jesus.” (*JBC*, p. 616) In his moving meditation for Christmas Eve, the Founder associates that thought with Revelation 3:20:

“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)

Jesus comes to us as a poor man because he comes to us as neglected, exploited, abandoned children. The liturgical texts for the Mass of Christmas Day remind us that Jesus is the Word, the Word that became flesh and lived among us. (*Jn.* 1:1,14) “In the past God spoke through the prophets,” but in our time “he has spoken to us in the person of his Son.” (*Heb.* 1:1-2) Jesus speaks to us today in the children who come to us “in his name.”

We meet Jesus Christ in children when we welcome children *as children*, when we love and reverence them *as they are*. As Jesus makes unambiguously clear in his description of the Last Judgment, we respond to Christ when we respond lovingly to people as they are. In reply to the question, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?” Jesus explains that they responded to him when they fed the hungry. “I was hungry and you gave me food.” (*Mt.* 25:35-40) There is no question of penetrating through a kind of outer “shell” of children to find and love Christ somehow hidden in the center. No. On the con-

trary. Jesus identifies himself with children *as they are*. It is only when we meet them as they are that we meet Christ.

In the Gospel for the Christmas Day Mass, John says that those who accept Christ receive the “power to become children of God.” (*Jn.* 1:12) The Lord invites not only young people but all of us to enter the family of God as children. In his meditation for Christmas Eve, St. De La Salle exhorts us to prepare our hearts to receive Jesus so he may “make his home there . . . the Son of God has come to earth and wishes to come into our hearts, to make us share in his nature.” (*Med.* 85.3) In the opening prayer of the same Eucharistic celebration, we ask God to make us participate in the divinity of his Son.

It is our vocation to share in the divinity of the Son, to “make visible the loving and saving presence of Christ.” We “can and must say” that we “not only belong to Christ,” but that we “have become Christ.” (*VC*, 76, 109) As Christ we proclaim to children and young people in distress the truth that sets them free. We strive to establish the Reign of God. By what we say, by what we do, and above all by who we are, we proclaim “universal brotherhood and sisterhood, for all men and women are sons and daughters of the same Father and brothers and sisters in Christ.” We call to faith and to conversion those God “confides to our care.” We promote “communion among all human

beings - with one another and with God."We work for the "liberation" of children and young people "from evil in all its forms." (RM, 43, 15, 43)

De La Salle says that we too often fail to receive Jesus because he comes to us as abandoned, ignored, and forgotten children. (Med. 85.1) Jonathan Kozol relates the story of a rich lady who said to St. Vincent de Paul, "The poor frighten me." Vincent replied, "The poor are frightening, as frightening as God's justice." Then Kozol asks, "What do we do to those who frighten us? Do we put them off, as far away as possible, and hope, as one of the students said to me during the previous summer, that they'll either die or disappear?" (Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace*, p. 186) As men who consecrate ourselves entirely to God in ministry to youth, poor youth especially, and as animators of the Lasallian Family, we must not allow the tragic situation of exploited children to "frighten" or "put us off." On the contrary we must be **ATTENTIVE** and **RESPONSIVE** to them:

"The Institute is above all **attentive** to the need for education of the poor as they strive to become aware of their dignity and to live and be recognized as human beings and children of God. In accord with what the Reign of God requires, the Institute **establishes, renews, and diversifies** its work." (Rule, 11)

John Paul II says that the parable of the rich man clearly shows that "in the stark contrast between the insensitive rich man and the poor in need of everything, God is on the latter's side. We too must be on the same side." Then the Pope exhorts all Christians, "**Become heralds of human dignity.**" (*Message, World Day of Peace*, 13)

Brothers, in union with all other Lasallians, let us, as *heralds of human dignity*, renew and revitalize our commitment to promoting God's reign, to building an international communion of persons in which all children can live as the children they have the right to be.

*God of compassion and mercy,  
may your Reign come!*

Fraternally in St. De La Salle,

Brother John Johnston, FSC  
Superior General