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A Christmas letter from Brother Superior

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My very dear Brother,

At this time of year, when our thoughts turn to those who are dearest to us, my thoughts turn to you and to all our confrères in the six continents of the world and in the isles between the continents. To you I send my prayerful fraternal greetings and my wish that Christmas may bring to you much grace, and peace with justice, the gifts that Christ came on earth to sow among us; and I prayerfully hope that 1974 will see these blessings spread throughout this troubled world, that all men may enjoy peace and the benefits of justice, and have the necessities of an honorable human life. I invite you and all our Brothers to join with me during these days of the Christmas season in praying that governments and international business combines, that politicians and statesmen and the representatives of businesses big and small, may all see their duty to assure to all the peoples of the world a fair share of the necessities of life.

In a special way my thoughts turn to our Brothers who live in countries where human rights are curtailed, in countries still troubled by wars

and revolutions, in countries where want is known more often than sufficient food and medicine and shelter, in countries where our Brothers must live in isolation and are forbidden the advantage of community life. I am thinking too, of our Brothers who are living in situations of doubt and uncertainty of the future, where vocations are not forthcoming and men are growing older, where the magnitude of our apostolic commitments surpasses the limited number of Brothers who are valiantly trying to continue them, where the signs of the times are causing soul-searching as to the legitimacy of the traditional forms of our educational apostolate, where these signs seem to indicate that new and creative forms of the educational apostolate are called for and needed, perhaps urgently needed. My heartfelt prayers go out to these our Brothers, to try to aid them in their hours of anguish, and I invite you, too, to join your prayers to mine in fraternal solidarity. May these troubled and suffering Brothers of ours be strengthened by that Fait which our Holy Founder says is our life and our spiritual insight.



During these past three weeks I have been very much occupied in fulfilling missions that were confided to me by Vatican Sacred Congregations. Three weeks ago, at the request of the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education I worked with the representatives of the episcopal conferences of the world in studying the question of vocations for the future service of the Church.

This week of intense work has resulted in a program for the guidance of Bishops in the development of priestly and religious vocations. The tone of the meetings was optimistic. The young are still eager to give themselves to the service of Christ and mankind within the varied vocations in the Church, but they seek dioceses and religious congregations that know where they are going, that have clear objectives and programs of action, that are open to the changes that the signs of the times indicate are God's Will.

They are not afraid of congregations or dioceses, for example, that are questioning their way of life, their exercise of the apostolate, their place in the designs of Providence for the world, provided that this questioning is a real search, a real effort at re-discovering the ideals of the Gospel and the basic inspiration of the founders of congregations, an open and confident search in which we remain in close touch with the Spirit of light and truth by prayerful discernment. In due time the document of this week of study and discussion will be published by the Sacred Congregation, but I would strongly urge you, Brother, to reflect personally and with your confrères in community on the brief summary of the congress that I have given above, and to seek to respond to the message that youth is giving us, the generous youth of today who want to serve.



The week before last I participated in the semi-annual conference of the Union of Superiors General, with the officials of the Sacred Congregation for Religious collaborating with us. At the

suggestion of the Holy See we consecrated that week to studying the topic of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops, Evangelisation. We took as our particular theme one paragraph of the working paper prepared for the Synod, the paragraph that deals with Evangelisation and Humanisation. This was a topic of special interest and relevance for those of us whose vocation of service is education, in all its dimensions, for it is our special mission to spread the ideals of the Gospel through education and to enable men to develop to the full their capacities for a full human life. It was emphasized by several thoughtful interventions that in the coming Synod the voice of youth will have to be heard and it is through religious congregations like our own that this can be assured. I will shortly be asking your help in this regard.

We will have to give youth a chance to indicate what they expect of the Church in order to help them to fully grasp and live the Gospel ideals, and to indicate, as well, how they feel they can collaborate with the other people of God in bringing to the world an acceptance of the Gospel standards. Perhaps in your own class you can initiate a study and reflection in this sense with your students, without waiting for my subsequent appeal through the Brothers Assistants and Visitors for a more concerted action.



Then last week I took part in the seminar of Educ-International, which is an organization composed of the teaching congregations who have an educational director or directress attached to the general house of the congregation in Rome.

The current president of Educ-International is our secretary general, Brother Aloysius Carmody, who was the organizer of this seminar. You will recall that a previous seminar, eighteen months ago, dealt with the vital topic of Educating for Justice, a copy of whose report entitled, *Let No Flame Be Quenched*, inspired my Christmas letter a year ago, in which I promised to send to each Brother Visitor a copy of that report, a promise which was fulfilled. This year's seminar was an effort to contribute positively and imaginatively to the UN's program for World Population Year 1974. As I listened to the exceptional group of experts who were invited to address the seminar, experts in The Marriage Encounter Movement, demographers, sociologists, moral theologians, medical doctors, marital and family counsellors, and later as we discussed with them in small groups, it came home to me that this is a challenge to our Brothers in the classrooms of the world. We should be making a positive contribution through education to the solution, or at least to the understanding, of the problems that will be studied in the World Population Year. If we stay outside these world problems and international movements, then we will have reason to question our relevance in the Church and in society.

I would urge you, my dear Brother, to act in unison with your fellow teachers in the school, with your confrères in community discussions, to prepare a positive program of education for the students of your school in order to give them an introduction to the many facets of the "population question", a question that is not only

family planning but has many other facets as well. In some countries the National Catholic Education Association has prepared a program with which we can collaborate, in other countries the National Conference of Bishops has inaugurated a program, the national office of the Secretariate for Justice and Peace in some countries has prepared literature that you can use, the UN Secretariate for the World Population Year, at the UN headquarters in New York, has a folder of information free for the asking. Frequently all that is needed to start a positive movement is for one interested and persuasive person to take the lead. Maybe you are that person in your school, maybe you have the dynamism and initiative that is needed. Meanwhile, I will use the funds at my disposal to order for each Brother Visitor a copy of the Educ-International Seminar volume, to be entitled "Many Homes - One Family", as soon as it is off the press; this may help to plan on a District level. If your school wishes to subscribe for a copy, you can do so through our Secretary General here at the generalate. But do try to inaugurate in your school some positive program for the 1974 Population Year, in order that your students, their parents and your alumni may be tuned in to a very important international program and be sensitized to a pressing international problem, sensitized in a Christian way.



Before I attended these three congresses, it was my intention to write to you on one subject only, our witness to and practice of poverty, a

subject that was studied seriously and long in our semi-annual month of study in the general council during the four weeks from mid-October to mid-November. I want to write about this subject in the spirit of my previous letter to you on September 8th., in which I outlined the spirit in which we hope to prepare for the general chapter of 1976. You recall that the Preparatory Commission for the Chapter urged us to be involved in the preparation, all of us, as individual religious, as members of community, as staff members of educational institutions. And this preparation should be a personal and community effort to discern the Will of God for our Institute in its apostolate and in its witness to the Gospel during the following decade. Now, I am sure that one important area of our life as sons of St. De La Salle is our witness to the Gospel paradox, "Blessed are the Poor in Spirit". In the world of the 1970's, where the eagerness for more and more possessions has become a dominant feature of life, where smart advertising is creating more and more artificial needs, where human values are being determined by how much one possesses, where men are becoming the slaves of the philosophy of the consumer society, where 20% of the world's population is enjoying more than 80% of the world's wealth and resources while the 80% of mankind lack proper nourishment, health care, education, and opportunity for a decent human existence, where the nations that have the wealth of the world can force other less favored nations to adjust their economic and agricultural programs and the use of their natural resources to

the will of the more favored nations or else get squeezed into a condition of utter misery, in this world of the 70's there is urgent need for committed Christians to bear witness to the ideal of poverty as evidenced in the anawim, the "poor of Yahweh", described by the old testament prophets, and more clearly and forcefully described for us by Jesus in his example and his teachings. And it is you and I, religious committed by vow to witness to the evangelical ideal of poverty, and committed by the solemn mandate of our renewal chapter to renew our dedication to serve the poorest through education, it is you and I who must take seriously to live the Gospel ideal of poverty, to live detached from the goods of this world, to adopt a simplicity of life style as becomes men committed to serve the poorest.

At this season the thoughts of most Brothers drift back to the meditation written by our Holy Founder for the feast of Christmas, in which he tells his sons of every generation that the poor should be able to come to us with ease and without embarrassment, because they find us to be men of simple life, living the Gospel ideal, witnessing to the poverty of Christ, in solidarity with the poor.

I do not want to get specific about how we should practice poverty and witness to the evangelical challenge. We are an international congregation, our nearly 13,000 members are spread over some eighty countries in all the continents, and we live under different conditions; to be specific in terms of Europe and America could sound ridiculous to those who live in the southern he-

misphere or in southeast Asia; to be specific in terms of Upper Volta, India, Pakistan or the Alta Plana of Latin America, would have little significance for the United States or western Europe.

I think it is a wiser course to leave it to you as an individual religious, to you with the Brothers of your community in fraternal sharing, to you with the Brothers who are engaged with you in the same apostolic work, to seek to discern the practice of poverty that God is asking of you, to discern what poverty of spirit should mean to a son of St. De La Salle, to discern what evangelical simplicity of life demands of you, to discern how you should be responding to the call of our general chapter to each Brother "to make his own the decision of Saint John Baptist De La Salle to go to the poor 'with the heart of a poor man'," and to discern how you have responded to the call of the general chapter "that communities and districts that are better off should share with the communities and districts that have less".

If every Brother will start the New Year with such a serious effort at discernment, if every community will do so, and the Brothers engaged in special apostolates will do so, and do so prayerfully, seeking the light of the Holy Spirit in simplicity and humility, we shall be responding to a need in the Institute and we will be entering significantly into our preparations for the general chapter of 1976. I think it would be very helpful in this work of discernment if we began by a careful reading of the *Declaration* of the Chapter of 1966-67, numbers 28 to 34, which deal with our service of the poor through education, and also

the *Rule and Constitutions*, the chapters on Poverty and Service of the Poor through Education, and finally the capitular document entitled *Religious Consecration and the Vows*, the three chapters on Poverty and the section on Service of the Poor through Education. I recommend this reading because I think it will give us a sound basis, a balanced perspective, for our reflection and our subsequent discussions. But I would further suggest that we not get bogged down in textual criticism, but that we simply get perspective by reading these fundamental documents and that we then proceed to see how we stand before God here and now in our practice of evangelical poverty and in our service of the poor. And let us not be afraid to face the facts of our failures and to humbly seek the means to be more conformed to the Gospel and to the norms set for us by the general chapter, and to strive to be faithful to the example and the doctrine of St. De La Salle.

It will be very helpful too, I am sure, if each of us once more takes the Gospels in hand and reads them with an eye to the example and teaching of Jesus on poverty, detachment, simplicity, humility of heart, love of the poor. It is through the scriptures that the Holy Spirit will speak most clearly to us to aid us in our discernment of His Will.

May the Christ who was born in the poverty of a stable, who lived the life of a working man in a poor village for thirty years, who for three years had not whereon to lay his head as he ministered to the needy and preached the Gospel

to the poor, and who in the end died deprived of everything, be our model and our inspiration for the New Year 1974. May the year 1974 be a year of great grace for you and for your pupils and for all those who are in contact with you, and may they find in you an inspiration for Christlike living, by your example and your instruction. And may I ask a remembrance in your prayers, my dear Brother, "lest preaching to others, I become myself a castaway."

Fraternally in Christ,

Brother Charles Henry