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A Christmas Letter from Brother Superior

CASA GENERALIZIA
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Immaculate Conception of Our Lady

My dear Brother,

As the season of Christmas approaches and the birth of a new year is not so far away, I wish to write you my annual personal letter to wish you the blessings of grace and joy that Christ came on earth to bring to us, and with you to prayerfully hope that the year 1975 will be for all mankind a year of greater justice, greater peace greater human solidarity than was our experience during these past several years. I should like, too, to encourage you to make your personal and valuable contribution toward the preparation of our General Chapter of 1976. You are doing a part of that valuable contribution today, together with me and with all our Brothers throughout the world, as we respond to the questionnaire prepared for us by the sub-commission of the Preparatory Commission of the Chapter. Before long you will have to exercise the co-responsibility for the Chapter and for the future of the Institute by being an elector of your District's representatives in the Chapter. And then the capitulants you elect will need your generous col-

laboration to prepare themselves to make significant contributions within the Chapter. And let us not forget that we need to pray much that the Holy Spirit will be our First Collaborator in all our preparations and then throughout the Chapter.

It was been my privilege and joy to meet practically all our Brothers throughout the world during my visits to our provinces on the six continents, so as I write to you I do not write to a stranger but to a cherished confrère who has touched my life and blessed it. But there will be some Brothers who will read my Christmas message who are strangers in one sense, because I have been hindered by political situations from actually meeting them. But you, too, are not really strangers, you share with me the spiritual sonship of St. De La Salle, you were trained in the same spiritual ideals as I, we are both professed with the same vows, we both strive to live by that spirit of faith which, as our holy founder explained, is our motivation and our insight. So though I have not seen your face, you are not a stranger but a brother, whom I would know anywhere we might meet, since we are sons of a common father and motivated by the same ideal. In a very special way I think of you as I write this letter and I pray that you will continue to have the strength and the grace needed to be faithful until the end. God alone can tell us what blessings your fidelity has brought upon the Institute throughout the world.

As I write this letter to you the Synod is still reverberating in my mind, my heart. It was an

exceptional experience to be a full member of one of the Church's most important bodies, with right of voice and vote, to hear Bishops from all parts of the world speak of the joys and the sorrows of their local Church. Certain impressions remain very vivid and some of these I should like to share with you. First, the Holy Father attended practically all the general sessions in the Synod Hall, he listened attentively as more than a hundred members spoke of some aspect of evangelization that was important for their dioceses, regions or countries, taking notes on what was said or underlining a point of particular interest in the text before him. If the purpose of a Synod is to enable the Pope to hear the facts first hand about the Church in the four corners of the earth, then I would say that the Synod achieved its end.

Another impression is the utter freedom and candor with which the members of the Synod spoke out in the presence of the Holy Father. Unpleasant as well as pleasant truths were frankly discussed, the failures of the Church's official representatives as well as their successes were openly spoken about, the special needs of the churches in the developing areas were clearly explained, and solutions, that can only be called unpopular from a « Roman » point of view, were suggested in all simplicity and honesty. If the purpose of a Synod is to associate the Bishops of the world in a collegial pastoral care of all the Church together with the Holy Father, then I would say that the Synod was a success, since so many of the Bishops shared their pastoral

insights with the Pope. And another indication of that success is the fact that after listening for a whole month, the Holy Father summed up for us his impressions, specifically mentioning seven areas of the evangelization problem that he now felt he had ample information about — all seven being points that had been much discussed and debated — and then he mentioned four other questions that had been the object of as many interventions and reports but which, he thought, needed more study and precision and definition.

Another impression that remains vivid in my memory is the high calibre of the Bishops of the local Churches of Africa and Asia. In comparison with the churches of the western world most of the churches of Asia and all those of Africa are very young, especially young in having native Bishops. But young as they are, these Bishops showed a striking maturity in their interventions, a strong sense of the need for unity among all the Churches and with the Holy See, but at the same time an awareness of their need to be allowed to grow and develop as African and Asian Churches, the need to implant rather than to transplant the Church in Asia and Africa. I think our missionary congregations can be quietly proud of the pastors they prepared for the African and Asian churches of today.

The Synod gave a wonderful opportunity to me to enable the voice of youth to be heard and heeded by the chief pastors of the Church including the Holy Father himself. That this could be done in a convincing way was due to the wonderful cooperation of Brothers (and some Sisters

and a few interested priests) in 32 countries on the six continents. These educators had engaged their oldest students in sessions of discussions and reflection on two questions: What does youth want the Church to do for them that they may be fully evangelized? What does youth wish to do to take its part in the evangelizing mission of the Church?

The responses that I received, some of which were of exceptional value, enabled me to present a panorama of the thinking, the aspirations, the needs of youth, as well as their disillusionment with many facets of Church life, and their insights into the causes of the alienation of many young people from the institutional church. I prepared an eight page analysis and summation of the hundreds of pages of material I had received, and this became part of the dossier of the members of the Synod, a dossier that was the more convincing and impressive because it was the voice of youth speaking to the members of the Synod, a voice that was heard with attention and which became the second most discussed subject in the language group discussions. Two groups were so impressed with the importance of what youth had said to them that they requested the Holy Father to consider the advisability of making « Youth » the subject of the Synod of 1977.

Valuable as was the contribution that you and your students made to the Synod, I should point out, as not a few Bishops remarked, that our youth survey had not touched two groups of youth that are in need of special evangelical attention, working youth and delinquent youth.

Should youth become the subject of the next Synod, certainly the term « youth » must be taken in all its contexts. However, even in the more limited context of our survey, youth made an important contribution to the Synod, thanks to the generous collaboration of our Brothers. On one day I was called upon to present to the Synod in the presence of the Holy Father the highlights of the longer analysis I had made for the Synodal dossiers; this I did in Latin (which was the regulation for all interventions in the assembly hall) thanks to the assistance I had been generously given by one of our talented Italian confrères, a very gifted classicist.

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I think there are some messages for us as educators in the data that I received from our students. I shall share some of the more important matters with you, it is a way of showing my gratitude for what you did to help me, it is a way of hearing what youth is telling us. First, I found in the great many replies few indications that the students have a clear understanding of what the Church is. For them the Church is either the Mass, which they find rather boring, with its usually banal homily, or it is the local parish priest and the diocesan bishop, the former far more than the latter. Maybe this was because in my questions I spoke of the Church as institution. But I think we do have a challenge here for our catechesis, to try to convey an understanding of the Church as mystery, as sacrament of salvation, as people of God; maybe a series of lecture-discussions on the first two chapters of *Lumen Gentium* might

enable a glimmer of understanding of the Church to come home to our students. I say a glimmer because after all the Church is a mystery inserted into history, which cannot be fully captured by human thought or language.

Then there is the question of the Mass, the eucharistic sacrifice, which should be the heart and center of devotion, the point at which we come into palpable contact with Christ. While so many of our young respondents indicated that they found the parish Mass insipid and boring, every once in a while a boy or girl did indicate that they know that the Mass can be meaningful and spiritually enriching because of a Mass that was celebrated in a small group in school or because they had been invited to participate in the community liturgy in the Brothers' residence. I am at a loss what to suggest, except to urge you to give some thought to making the Mass better understood and better appreciated by our young people, to preparing the Mass and animating it in the parish, especially the Mass which the greater number of young people are likely to attend. Many of the young people are asking to have an active role in the Mass celebration, reading the lesson, making the intentions for the bidding prayers, presenting the offerings at the altar, exchanging the pax with the celebrant.

In the responses we received there was not a little criticism of the catechetical instruction in the school, the complaints ranging from the instruction they received in primary school, to secondary school, and to university college. They speak of uninterested teachers, teachers who are not in

touch with the real needs and problems of youth, lessons that are directed to the head only, never to the heart, unmethodical lessons, teachers who seem more interested in the fine points of doctrine or theological controversy than in the young people who are hungry for the bread of life. In my working group in the Synod the problem of catechesis was discussed at some length; all the members were aware of the difficulties which face the religion teacher today — theological confusions, difficulties of method, contestation of some parents and older clergy, new text books that require us to change our approaches, unwillingness of some teachers to change from a method or text with which they are at home, to a method or text in which they feel less competent, less at ease. Perhaps this is a Providential occasion for us Brothers to renew our dedication to the mission of religious instruction and formation of the young, to re-read and meditate articles 35 to 42 of the *Declaration* of the general chapter of 1966, to examine whether our religious instruction is bookish or whether it is directed to the real needs and aspirations of the youth of today. When I noted in several instances an appraisal of catechetical instruction that seems to say it is « directed wholly to the head and never to the heart », I thought of our Lasallian tradition in catechesis which emphasized two moments, the morning « reflection » in which we talked heart to heart to our students, and the daily religion lesson in which we methodically instructed them. Maybe this is also a Providential occasion to come back to our tradition and in some form to restore the heart to heart appeal of

the reflection. And to come back to another tradition, if we have wandered away from it, that of making our religious instruction not merely a theological discursus but also an application to the real life of the students of the theological truths that we explain. And was it not a Lasallian tradition, too, to impart savor to our instruction with the salt of the Gospel, to make our religion lessons truly evangelical?

In both the responses of our students and in the interventions of the Bishops in Synod, there was a frequent insistence that evangelization of the world must begin at home, it must be ourselves who must be evangelized first of all. This had many ramifications in the vast terrain that is evangelization. Here I would use just one reference, that which relates to the closing words of the previous paragraph. If we ever hope to make our students gospel-minded, if we ever hope to introduce them to the riches of the gospels, if we ever hope to form them to live by the gospel ideals, if we ever hope to get them to put on the Christ of the gospels, to transform themselves into Christlike men, then we must take more seriously the teaching of St. De La Salle concerning the study and meditation of the gospels, and the incorporation of the gospels into our lives. In an effort to assist me in preparing for the Synod one of our Brothers Visitors prepared a questionnaire for all the older students in the schools of the District. In response to one question it was revealed that only about 10% of the students had ever read the four gospels, and another question revealed that the same number read the gospel

from time to time. It seems clear that in that District we are not making the students gospel-minded, but is the situation any better in other Districts? I think it would not be unfair to suggest that we are not making our students gospel-minded because we ourselves are not committed to the tradition of St De La Salle, to read the gospel daily and make it the subject of our meditations, and the *we* of this sentence definitely includes me, *mea culpa!*

I remarked in the earlier pages of this letter that « youth » was the second most discussed subject in the working groups. The most discussed subject, discussed in every single one of the twelve working groups, was the spiritual life of the evangelizer as a *sine qua non* of effectiveness in his apostolate. And it is interesting that in very many of the responses to the survey made in our schools, the young people spoke of just that subject. In all the discussion groups and in many assembly interventions, the Bishops called upon the hierarchy, the clergy, the religious, to deepen their spiritual life, to intensify their prayer life, in order that we might make a greater impression on the people we serve, in our case the youth whom we serve. It was pointed out by many Bishops that a new spirit of prayer is moving through their dioceses, and that it is the laity who are most engaged in this prayer. They spoke of shared prayer in university student prayer meetings, of charismatic prayer groups, of small groups of families united for prayer, of a renewal of certain devotions that had fallen into disuse for a time. The conviction was rather

universal in the Synod that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, is at work in a very evident way in the Church today, moving people to prayer, to gospel reflection, to contemplation. I have no doubt that the Holy Spirit of prayer is moving through the Institute, calling us to a deeper spirit of prayer, a return to the meditation that St. De La Salle encouraged with such earnestness. It is vital that we respond to this movement of the Holy Spirit, that we make our communities centers of prayerfulness, that we encourage prayer groups among our lay collaborators and among our students, that we invite our collaborators and groups of students to join with us from time to time in an hour of shared prayer. Unless our communities and schools have an atmosphere of prayerfulness, we will not succeed to our maximum possibility in the evangelization of our students, or in engaging them to enter into the mission of evangelization themselves.

This leads me to another point that was stressed in the Synod: we must engage our laity in evangelization. Many of the Bishops from the different geographical areas of the Church spoke of the laity as an important factor in evangelizing the modern world. Some urged that the laity be involved because the growth in vocations to the priesthood is falling notably behind the increase in the number of the faithful and the general growth of the population; others, and these were the more numerous, spoke of the duty inherent in our baptism to be co-laborers with Christ in the salvation of mankind, to exercise the role of evangelizers as a right of our new

birth in Christ through baptism. And the Holy Father, in his summation of the Synod discussion and in giving his personal evaluation of all that he had heard therein, added his voice to the voice of so many of « Our brother Bishops » in calling upon the laity to take their rightful, active role in the mission of evangelizing the modern world, and he placed special emphasis upon the roles of youth and of parents. Implied in all this is the importance of the role we religious educators must play in educating, forming, guiding, animating the youth with whom we are in contact, both to undertake among their peers the ministry of evangelization, and to prepare to be parents who will instill the spirit of the gospel in the little community of faith which is the Christian family. This is a very important part of our educational ministry, of our ministry of evangelization to youth. The young people who responded to our two questions on youth and evangelization had quite a lot to say about what they expected the Church to do for them, but they had little to say about what they could do to be active in the work of evangelization. Some resented that question, affirming that evangelization was the work of the official representatives of the institutional Church, the greater number were confused and embarrassed by the question, they had seen very little evidence of their family elders being engaged in any evangelizing, so they had no experience upon which to reflect or to respond. Here and there I noted evidence that the Brother or Sister or priest in dialogue with the young people had suggested avenues of possible evangelizing acti-

vity, but in most instances the young people were left to flounder in their confusion over the question. However, two areas did emerge in some of the responses: the liturgical celebration — the youth believe that here they can be of service to the parish, especially to the youth of the parish, if they are given some guidance, allowed to take an active part in preparing the Mass and during the Mass, and if they are allowed enough leeway to be imaginative and creative; the other area is the promotion of justice, and here, too, they asked for guidance, for adult leadership, but also for the freedom to carry out their action for justice without undue interference. And I might add a third area that appeared in a few group responses, the possibility of building up small communities of faith, of prayer, of service. I think we should try to build on this possibility, too, showing youth that among other small communities, the family is a natural small community within which to be a leaven of the gospel, also the school community, also the parochial community. In a word, what I am urging is that we capitalize to the fullest degree upon the wonderful opportunity we have of serving the Church in the work of evangelizing the modern world, by forming the young laity who are under our influence to assume their role in this work of evangelizing.

There is so much more I could say about this subject, so rich and varied were the insights that emerged during the Synod, insights that have a message for us religious educators. But I think I have spoken of the more important ones. I

share them with you, my dear Brother, as my Christmas and New Year gift to you, prayerfully hoping that in this way your vitally important role in the evangelization of the modern world may be encouraged and strengthened, and that you may be made more firm in your vocation which, in the words of one African Bishop "must be given ever more importance and assistance, since our young people so much need the sympathy, the understanding, the dedicated guidance, that the Brothers give to them".

If by a happy chance you still have my Christmas letter of 1972, may I suggest that you read it once again, because it has as its subject the promotion of justice in the world, a subject that is so closely allied to evangelization. These two letters are mutually complementary. May God bless you as you renew your dedication to Him in the service of the youth who "come asking for bread", the bread of life that we will break with them in our inspired instruction. And let us live close to the Holy Spirit that He may speak through us and act through us.

Fraternally yours in Christ,

Brother Charles Henry