



Christmas Letter

1977

CASA GENERALIZIA
dei Fratelli delle Scuole Cristiane
Via Aurelia, 476 ● C.P. 9099
I - 00100 Roma, Italia

Rome, 8 December 1977

Dear Brother,

At this time, when Christmas once again approaches, I renew my wish that the peace and joy of this feast may be with you during the coming year. I pray to God, whose coming into this world we commemorate, that my wish for you may be not in vain but that it be fully realized. May your loved ones also share abundantly the blessings of this season.

In keeping with the spirit and the customs of these last days of the year, I would like to recall some of the events of special interest for us during 1977. These are events which have become part of our past history, but which to a certain extent will continue or will have some effect in the year ahead.

1. During the year, the Institute has carried on the work of assimilating the capitular directives and of putting them into practice. This is a fundamental task, the one which provides the best answer to some sterile doubts and fears, to so many conjectures

and questions about our present prospects and possibilities and about our immediate future. But before entering into the details of the principal aspects of this duty, let us give a general opinion in answer to the oft repeated question: Does the Institute really correspond to what is stated in the documents the Chapter prepared and in those which we are now receiving?

We would answer by saying that the Institute is responding to the programme traced out by the Institute without going so far as to say that the Institute has already reached the state assumed or proposed by such documents. Such an answer, of course, does not apply universally nor is it complete. It does not apply universally because, according to the ancient and inevitable law, to every call there are as many different echoes as there are interested individuals or groups. It is incomplete because it is a question of programmes of spirit and action by which we try to attain the proposed ideal, in the hope, an active hope as is all genuine hope, that slowly but surely we may gradually decrease the distance. But rather than waste time saying what others are doing or have ceased to do, what is most pressing is that we all, you and I for example, continue to raise the general level of fidelity by our own living faith.

To this end the fundamental means is our common study of *the Chapter documents*. Such study has been enriched with the publication of the new edition of *The Rules and Constitutions* and *The Book of Government*. The original edition in French was published on the 8th September. Shortly afterwards the versions in the other official

languages of the Institute appeared and further duly authorized translations are in preparation. We must pay a brief but sincere tribute of thanks and admiration to Brother Maurice-Auguste and the other members of the postcapitular committee for their months of extremely meritorious work and exemplary dedication.

A Chapter document on *Formation* has been published during the year. At the present time a first study by the General Council on *Consecration* is about to appear, according to the express recommendation of the Chapter (Cf. Circular 403, proposition 35). The other three documents of the Chapter on the Brother's Mission, the Institute in the Young Churches, and Community will appear in that order during 1978. It is up to each Brother and each community to see what reactions and what practical results each of these documents will have, for each will include a plan of work and a call to action and reaction so that it does not become a dead letter.

However, these documents are not the exclusive, or even the principal medium for communication and animation by the Brother Superior and his Council in the mission and service confided to them. During the course of the past year, and apart from other shorter and more casual contacts, the General Council visited Africa, the southern part of Latin America, and Canada. These visits covered some months and were divided among two groups with Brother Superior leading one and Brother Vicar the other.

More than 1600 Brothers, individually or in groups, were able to tell us their ideas and concerns

and to listen in their turn to what we thought opportune to tell them. It was an enrichment of great benefit to the whole Institute and its true unity. Although the facts, always complex and extremely diverse, cannot be contained in a few paragraphs, I will endeavour to report the more general and more important observations we made. In the 24 districts or areas visited, we noticed more or less importance given to...

... a) various Chapters and Assemblies of Brothers trying to grasp the realities of the Chapter message and its effect on their own particular situation. Their purpose was to adopt the orientations and solutions which would assure internal renewal and provide the most suitable answers to local needs. We took part in a number of these assemblies but only to a limited extent so as not to inhibit the legitimate degree of autonomy in the reflection and decisions of the Brothers. It appeared to us that the active and responsible involvement of the Brothers is becoming everywhere even more active and responsible. The idea of co-responsibility, inseparable from that of well understood subsidiarity, permeates the assemblies, manifesting itself in various ways. It is assured and regulated by the adoption of a well ordered system of representation. Thus, while avoiding the confusion and a certain amount of disorder resulting from too numerous a participation, it assures that the principles and plans correspond to the actual situation of the whole district and of all the Brothers. This system of representation provides appropriate means to insure that all, in various ways, are associated in the proceedings and decision-making in the chapter

sessions. We can never overvalue the importance of these chapter meetings for assuring for each district a suitable plan of animation and action, and the framework which will ensure both.

... b) the work for vocations shows renewed concern and more definite planning in nearly all the districts visited. The results in some have been extraordinary, and in all there is a slowly but clearly rising curve in both projects and results. We can say that, in general, the Brothers' interest in this fundamental apostolate is taking on a new rhythm and a briskness offering greater hopes and better results.

... c) an increase in the sense of responsibility and realism regarding *initial formation*, especially for that very important period following the canonical novitiate. However, in some districts the planning of this phase of training suffers from too great a dispersion of the student Brothers so that it becomes difficult to provide them adequate animation. Such an attitude does not seem to reflect sufficient reaction to the losses and negative results obtained in so many districts due to the lack of serious attention to the needs of this stage of training.

... d) a notable increase in the consciousness of the pastoral dimension of our professional work. Generally speaking more thought is given to the missionary and personalized value of our work which so often in so many ways seems to have been suffocated by attention to academic prestige and results... This increased consciousness finds expression in the community discussions about the

pupils and the significance and extent of our influence on them and on the neighbourhoods in which we work...; in greater creativity in educational plans for the marginalised...; as also in the desire to rejuvenate and bring pastorally up to date institutions which are old fashioned or insensitive to new circumstances. This latter is more arduous but not less necessary. It sometimes degenerates into a noxious polarization, in which those who wish to set up new works for the most neglected confront those who are fighting to renovate and bring to life those works for which we are already responsible. It is our duty to add new capital, in the form of excellent educational activity, to a history charged with the highest testimonials of gratitude and appreciation. Such a polarization does not correspond to the meaning and directives of the Chapter and could compromise the success of good planning for the years to come.

This increased attention to the pastoral value of our work shows clearly the urgent need for better participation in the corporate pastoral work of the local and diocesan church. This participation, highly recommended during the meetings of the Synod, must be dynamic, generous, and truly Christian. Without it our pastoral effort loses its meaning, strength and continuity. Those who are reticent concerning this participation or even opposed to it, should meditate seriously on the true meaning of the Church and on the genuine doctrine of the Founder (Cf., for example, Mds. 106, 199, 200).

... e) as far as Africa is concerned, more than one district is living in the throes and difficulties

inherent in the process of the transfer of the responsibility from those who formerly came to implant the Institute there to the Brothers of the country. One can see that the former are giving progressively more attention to the quick and guaranteed transfer while the latter show a certain amount of impatience to be confided with a larger share in the discharge of higher responsibilities. They know that this presupposes a deep and serious preparation of manpower and a more accurate understanding of the true nature of our consecration and our specific apostolate, in order to be able to adapt it to local conditions without distorting what is most genuine in it.

... f) in Latin America, the collaboration of Brothers-teachers-parents-pupils is resulting in a constellation of very active *educative communities*, a pledge of the renewal and pastoral creativity in places ministered to by our Institute.

... g) in all the regions we have visited there is an effort made to renew and revitalize *community life*, which is always threatened by individualism, a "bourgeois" style of living, and the tensions caused by badly integrated pluralism. The care displayed in understanding and organizing the *community project* is as extensive as it is hopeful. It is studied and followed with a greater understanding of co-responsibility though there are shadows... Those who are in the grip of routine and fear will not take part "in the game", resisting the communal effort to coordinate the preparation, realization and evaluation of the various aspects of community life. They are thus not resolved to

“create community by giving themselves with joy to the service of others” (Rule 3, b). There are grounds for hope that this process of building up the community together will go forward with no slower a rhythm than that shown up to now.

... b) Finally, it is our impression that in many Brothers the intuition is confirmed that if the Institute is to be revitalized we cannot wait for a spontaneous happening nor for something to occur from outside. This renewed consciousness is perhaps more noticeable in those districts with a long past history. Revitalization has to be forged daily from the serious and hopeful work of all. We must search together and initiate new ways to fulfill our perpetual mission. We cannot permit ourselves to lose touch with contemporary youth or with the poor who always have new needs.

With regard to the General Council visits in 1978, various members of the Council will go to Spain for the centenary of the Institute in that country, to the United States, Australia, Belgium, and Holland. These districts, their communities, their Brothers and their problems will be the particular subject of our thoughts from now on with the wish and prayer that our meetings may be happy and fruitful.

In concluding this panoramic view of the process of renewal in the Institute, I think it indispensable to mention, because of its international interest, the extraordinary acceptance of the International Lasallian Centre (C.I.L.). The first group after the Chapter finished its work at the end of April with a high degree of satisfaction

and enthusiasm shown by all the participants. Since the first group filled all the vacant places, in spite of the difficulties caused by the shortage of time available after the General Chapter, it is not surprising that it has been impossible to accept all the requests made for the second group. This in no way prevents us from calling the attention of those districts, few in number, which have not yet made contact with our C.I.L. This we cannot consider normal unless those responsible have studied with us their special and concrete reasons.

You know, Brother, and we all know, that the familiar parable of the wheat and the cockle has a universal and perpetual application. What I have mentioned so far is a series of processes taking place which, thanks be to God, are very positive. Obviously there are groups and, even more, individual Brothers, who do not find it easy to follow the rhythm and the tempo of this renewal in common, who do not take part with sufficient self surrender and generosity. We must in no way surpass the zeal and patience of the Lord of the harvest who “allowed both to grow till the time of the harvest”. Let us show the greatest care and special attention for those Brothers or groups and firmly hope we can help them to resolve their difficulties favourably.

2. THE SYNOD ON CATECHESIS was for us, in the Church and in the Institute, an event of the highest order this past year. As members of the Church we see in the Synod one of the highest and richest expressions of the catholicity and collegiality of the episcopate. As Brothers in the

Institute, this last Synod held particular interest arising from the subject matter, which approached so nearly the objectives of our specific mission: catechisis and youth.

I think it would be useful to cast a backward glance of evaluation on *the preparation* of the Synod. In general, from within the assembly of the Synod, it was possible to see that the work done at the level of the universal Church in studying the subject was already as a whole a very real fruit of the letter of convocation. As to the Institute, it would be well for each community, each Brother, to ask himself what he did, or left undone, to share in some way in such an ecclesial effort. Special mention must be made, because of the honour it brought to the Institute and because of its great efficacy, of the work and participation of the 31 Brothers who, at my request, sent me very valuable documentation, particularly on school catechesis and on youth.

Neither would it be a waste of time to analyse *the way in which we followed* the work of the Synod. As professionals in catechesis and the training of the youth, we could not limit ourselves to the simple attitude of curiosity, anticipation or criticism which was the attitude of not a few who were scarcely interested in any news or anything special which might happen there. We had at our disposal various means — still incomplete, till the appearance, above all, of the final document — of seizing upon and co-ordinating the most important points dwelt on by the Synod. Not trying to make the doctrine agree with our personal points of view, but bringing these into line with what would be

agreed upon and promulgated universally. I think that the doctrine of the Synod offers the following main lines of thought for our attentive consideration.

1) the fundamental role of the ecclesial community as “origin, place and target” of all catechesis, as the People of God and universal Sign of Salvation. The fundamental importance of the real and sincere insertion of our catechetical work, of whatever kind it may be, in the various catechizing communities (the traditional ones like the school and the parish, and the “catechumenal” and basic ecclesial communities which are becoming more important every day) or with them, but in true coordination and communion with the local and the universal Church.

2) the fundamental right of all men, particularly children and young people, to receive a complete and progressive communication of the revealed message, a right we have to exercise and defend with courage, a right we have to administer by paying much greater attention to studying the message and the appropriate language so as to make it more intelligible, avoiding distortions or lacunae which would be a real betrayal.

3) the prime importance of good “acculturation”, that is, respect for the people and the culture who are to receive our message, and a real incarnation of the Church, as the Sign of Salvation, in every human reality... The complete acceptance of the principle

according to which every culture must be entered and penetrated by the Gospel, endeavouring to find in each the "seeds of the Word", mysteriously but really deposited in it, and to gather, purify, order and improve all the values included in each.

4) the urgent need to multiply the "places" of Catechesis, the human media where initiation and the systematic and continued Christian training, which is catechesis, can be and is effectively given. What an inexhaustible list of possibilities we have for completing and assuring the formation of our young people through evangelizing initiatives with adults who are in contact with both them and us, helping in their continued Christian training.

5) the essential necessity of organizing better, of integrating more adequately, and encouraging with greater generosity, the initial and continued formation of catechists, so that they feel more qualified and have greater ease, confidence and enthusiasm in corresponding to what is expected of them and of facing with greater confidence the present difficulties they are experiencing...

6) and with respect to the "adolescent generations" to which the Synod wanted to pay special attention according to the general theme, it insists on the very special importance of youth today. It is not a question of flattering them or of mythicizing them, but of taking into consideration their abilities and charisms,

of paying greater heed to their appeals and problems. The Synod calls for giving youth more opportunity for action, initiative and responsibility suited to their special characteristics.

Thus summarized, these lines of thought developed in the Synod discussions are a mere outline and do not exhaust the directives contained in the 34 propositions agreed on in nearly every case by more than 90% of the votes and presented to the Holy Father. It will be easier to understand and apply the riches of the ideas when we have the promised document or Apostolic Exhortation. But even now it is possible and necessary to consider attentively these main ideas in order to evaluate, animate and orient our catechetical activity.

We refer to a hope that will be active. There is a great deal to be done to understand better and integrate the school-catechesis relationship in the diverse cultural frameworks, in harmony with our best Lasallian tradition, and with the new circumstances and planning. Such a relationship which so closely affects us has been the object of controversy, confusion, and desertion, as was reflected in the Synod.

A continual object of our study today must be the analysis of the catechetical value of the school, the possibility which the school in general has of evangelization in the different cultures and, in particular, the responsibility, potential, limits and conditions of the catechetical function in the Catholic school, a study imposed on us by the very notion of our vocation and mission in the

Church. We consider it to be an essential task, a vital necessity, a pressing need. We must undertake the study seriously, objectively and responsibly.

The catechetical value of the school has been, as we have observed, an object of controversy in many countries. Even among religious, both men and women, who embraced school catechesis as their vocation, there have been numerous desertions and escapes to other fields of action as is acknowledged in the document of the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education of the 19 March, 1977. Some of the conclusions of the Synod, when referring to the great importance of the Catholic school, point out that "in various regions, it is the object of doubts and objections regarding its very *raison d'être* and its educational efficiency". We must examine ourselves loyally and sincerely to see how far we are responsible for this situation, in so far as we have not succeeded in expressing with sufficient clarity, especially by the facts, the true nature and adequacy of our schools. Are our schools as our Founder conceived them? Or have they become among those, also cited by the Synod, which appear as an "anti-witness to the Christian faith"?

My personal intervention in the Synod revolved around this subject because of its importance and relevance and because, in my view, the working paper which was distributed to the Fathers of the Synod some months before, referred to it in very vague and imprecise terms. So much was this so that we thought it opportune to organize, in the middle of September, a meeting of Superiors General and others in authority of religious teaching orders, together with experts in pedagogy and catechesis,

to draw up a few propositions and criteria which could be presented to the assembly of the Synod.

Within the necessarily brief oral intervention and in a document deposited with the Secretariate of the Synod, I asked the Synod itself for clear concepts of the role of the school in catechizing, the limits and conditions of participating in it, and directives for better coordination of the diverse catechizing bodies and their initiatives.

The results of the discussion of the Synod are indicated in the conclusions which were accepted. After recognizing the restrictions which in certain countries prevent and hamper a better catechetical activity in the school, they point out some of the fundamental characteristics which particularize the work of evangelization in the Catholic school:

- explain cultural progress in the light of the Gospel;
- answer the questions which are generated in the minds of young people by cultural advances and help them to give a Christian dimension to the knowledge they are acquiring;
- be one of the few places of freedom where the complete liberation may be prepared and signified;
- create a "catechumenal spirit" or atmosphere where young people are helped to a better understanding of revealed truth and to acquire a Christian "cosmovision";
- prepare them to change the world according to the values of the Gospel.

The primordial condition for realizing such a programme is pointed out as being the formation of *an authentic Christian educative community* of acknowledged competence, which thus becomes "one of the privileged places of the Christian community".

Certainly, a vast and exacting programme. In every case we have to ask ourselves in what way and to what extent it is realizable in our actual circumstances. We must examine ourselves at the same time to see if we are really exhausting all the possibilities we have or if, on the contrary, we do not too easily give ground and leave the initiative to others who ill conceal their desire for us to desert our post. And it is not exactly, as perhaps they say, to establish a purely neutral school (which is not possible) but rather to give a different guide to youth on the problems of existence.

It is never a question of defending the Catholic school in the abstract. It does not exist. It is rather a question of creating and re-creating it so that it becomes worthy of its name. And if in some countries we cannot enjoy the autonomy required by the organization and animation of such a school, we must always find the way to Christianize the school, to inject Christian values into the education of young people, using those means which diligent creativity inspires.

In order to help and co-ordinate the action of everyone in this field of reflection and catechetical activity, particularly school catechetics, we are thinking of setting up an International Catechetical Committee to continue, with somewhat different methods,

the work of the Committee formed in 1972 to fulfil the wishes of the Brothers Visitors at their meeting in Rome, in 1971. It would be smaller than the previous one to facilitate the frequency of its meetings and ease of contact. Immediately concerned in its work would be Brothers Councillors Pedro Ruedell and José Cervantes. Those Brothers who in the various regions fulfil animating and co-ordinating functions would also be asked to co-operate.

One of its first tasks could be to circulate more widely throughout the Institute the diagrams for the analysis of our catechetical and school work which were prepared and published by the previous committee and not sufficiently utilised. They could help in a systematic and generalized calibration of our evangelizing activity and prompt similar analyses and studies. If "everyone" begins to work in order to have a better knowledge of what we are doing and of the real evangelizing capacity we have, that in itself will be a test of our interest and responsibility. We have not forgotten the grave words of our dear predecessor, Brother Charles Henry, in his 1975 Christmas letter, which I quoted in my Letter at the end of 1976. Help us to see clearly, and to work together and creatively in the activity of the C.I.C. (International Catechetical Committee).

The other subject of my intervention in the Synod was that of *Young People*. I decided to call the attention of the bishops to this point for several reasons: for obvious "vocational" reasons; because the term "above all" ("praesertim") found in the general theme of the Synod referred to the young generation and had special cogency for us; because even the words of the Pope at the private meeting

I had with him in January referred to the same subject.

The ideas I stated in the hall had all the more force and became the more factual because of the 1500 Letters of Young People to the Pope, written under the happy inspiration of our Brothers of North America, and followed later by others which reached me during the months preceding the Synod. These admirably spontaneous letters became the focus of special attention during the Synod and in the weeks that followed. It will always be very useful and inspiring to hear judgement and criticism of young people on what we try to do for them... What stands out above all in these letters of young men and women between the ages of 16 and 18 is their reiterated desire that more attention be paid to their real problems, that we use more intelligible language in dealing with religious and human problems and that we acknowledge, in a practical and effective manner, their capacity to speak and to participate on their own initiative in catechetical action, as true and responsible agents of evangelization.

If, as one of the principal propositions adopted by the Synod recalls, "Christian commitment" is to be explained and proposed in its entirety in catechesis, real initiation in such a commitment cannot be found wanting in catechesis itself. It is not at all infrequent that we give no signs of that faith in youth and children which stands out in the life and writings of our Founder. And we cannot think that he or his first Brothers were working among a particularly select class of young people!...

In concluding these brief notes on catechesis for the young, as being the chosen theme of the Synod as it was also the historical choice of De La Salle and the Institute he founded, let us say that such a preference would be ill understood if it excluded adults. Thus it was that the Synod called together to speak "above all" about catechesis for children and youth, devoted the greater part of its time and the larger part of its reflections and documents to general subjects concerning the diverse Christian communities. It insisted on continued catechesis for all age groups and the need for adults to commit themselves as both agents and subjects of catechesis. It stressed the importance of small ecclesial communities, of the catechumenate as a process. It called for profound community experience of Christian life for those already baptized... Catechetical action limited to or almost exclusively confined to minors would have no future and no real existential roots.

Far be it from us, therefore, to think that it is intelligent fidelity to our preferential dedication to youth to forget the adults among whom they live: parents, teachers, former pupils... And here we call to mind the work started in many districts and always possible in all, of being the inspiration for committed and efficient educative communities, really conscious of their possibilities of action among young people and the less favoured members of society. Undoubtedly there are socio-political or structural difficulties which in some countries give no little hindrance to the work. But in the long history of evangelization difficulties are nothing extraordinary. They have usually been a challenge

provoking zeal and generosity, when such zeal existed...

3. To end this account of the historical events we have lived through recently and which are still fresh in our memory, I would like to recall the unusual one which brought special joy and honour to our Institute during 1977, *the double beatification of our Brothers Mutien and Miguel*.

This was the occasion for universal joy and profession of sincere solidarity with the work and spirit of De La Salle, raised to the altars in the persons of two who lived them and served them in such an exemplary manner. Obviously those who were able to assist in person at the ceremony were able to savour the jubilation and the ceremonies to a much higher degree. Everything was exceptionally beautiful, but we can in no way content ourselves with that. An event of this kind is not meant merely for festive rejoicing but for the inspiration and orientation of our lives.

These events are a grace only for those who take them to heart with reflection and love, as is the case for any grace. For many, for all those who piously gathered in Saint Peter's Square on the 30th October, the beatification of our two Brothers was very much a renewed "Magnificat", the exaltation of the humble and the poor, difficult to be understood and appreciated by the wise and the powerful of this world. Perhaps those who are too easily apt to call this empty triumphalism forget what simple people know better than any one else how to understand, accept, and proclaim.

The Church, through its highest authority, proclaimed in a solemn manner only what the people were already feeling and celebrating within the intimacy of a deep devotion, admiration, and a quite spontaneous confidence. The graves of our heroes are constant witnesses to this. Pierre Pierrard wrote very fittingly in *La Croix* a few days before the beatification: "How well you merit our love, holy Church, for you alone are able to extol what is poorest, most unknown and most sacrificed before the eyes of a world of rape, vanity and covetousness!"

While these simple people with the tenacity inspired by love have been overcoming all the juridical and material obstacles which might have made it seem inadvisable to proceed with the solemn proclamation, self-serving and erroneous judgements have been passed by those who esteem only the ostentatious and destroy what they fail to understand. And there come to mind, without having to search, certain passages of the Gospel in which similar scorn is contrasted with other spontaneous gestures of popular devotion (Palm Sunday, Mary at Bethany...).

The triumph of the two new Beati has been at the same time the triumph of catechesis of the little ones, that of school catechesis. The Pope stressed this strongly in the homily. He turned lyrical when greeting the faithful gathered together for the "Angelus" on the same day, speaking on the Christian school. There was also the happy coincidence with the closing of the Synod: a coincidence similar to the canonization of St. Benilde at the end of the first Synod. The Pope reminded us in his sermon: "*The end for which the Founder*

conceived the new religious society was to prepare specialists in educational work, able to dedicate themselves efficiently to the human and Christian formation of youth, specially those of the poor, the sons of the people...". At mid-day to those gathered in the Square he said: "We look with joyful eyes on these models of human and Christian virtues in order to pay the tribute of our highest esteem for the teaching profession...". The pictures of the two Beati, at once austere yet smiling, united together on a single canvas on the facade of Saint Peter's, transmitted their own simple, silent message to the world and to the Institute...

There is no vain self-adulation in this account of the family events of the past year, nor is there a series of predictions for the year to come. Events and human proceedings intertwine in unity without regard for the conventional divisions of the calendar. During 1978 let our communication in shared eagerness for renewal as well as our understanding and development of the mission which is our privilege, and which constrains and gives meaning to our life, continue to increase its animating force for good in young people and the poor. May it continue to be said of the Institute, with ever increasing truth: "The poor have the Gospel preached to them". At the end of the year, each district will have sent in "a report in which it describes how it has and how it intends in the future to put into practice the principles of the Declaration and the directives of the present General Chapter referring to the educational service of the poor and the effort to promote justice..." (Prop. 14, Gen.

Chapter 1976. Cf. Circ. 403). In my next letter I shall return more particularly to this aspect. The publication of the Chapter document on "The Mission" during 1978 will help us to reflect on our preferential dedication to the poor in the work of education. We will thus be able to help each other in our fidelity to Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

May he assist and guide us in our task, and, with him, Blessed Miguel and Mutien.

Cordially yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "H. José Pablo". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name "H. José Pablo".