



Letter of Brother Superior

8 December, 1980

CASA GENERALIZIA
dei Fratelli delle Scuole Cristiane
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Rome, 8 December, 1980

Dear Brother,

In this, the very heart of the Tercentenary, I send to you, as to all the Brothers, my greetings and best wishes for Christmas, and for peace and an abundance of grace in 1981. The coming year promises to be one of uncertainty as well as one of great opportunities. May it please God that, during this new year, our own reply and that of the community to God's plans may be such as our vocation demands. Only thus can we offer mankind the witness they have a right to expect from us.

I have just mentioned the Tercentenary year, and refer to it in the first place in order to tell you that the program which had been planned is being satisfactorily carried out. The results of our efforts at renewal are very satisfactory as also our efforts toward greater fidelity in following the evangelical itinerary of the Founder and toward increasing our love and veneration for him. All these objectives were referred to in my letter of May 15, 1979, page 17, when I announced the commemorative period.

To begin with I will present to you the usual panorama of the situation of the Institute. Two events were very much in keeping with the world wide Tercentenary celebrations, the Lasallian World Congress in Paris from July 16 to 21, and the Symposium on Prayer in Rome from November 10 to 15.

The **Lasallian World Congress in Paris** and the **youth meeting in Parmenie** at the same time, left a marked impression on all those who took part. Both meetings came as a great surprise to many, including some Brothers. Their courage was renewed at seeing how even today, De La Salle can call together and inspire so many young people and so many adults, who found in him and in his message a great stimulus and an excellent reason for uniting together to help us to assist, to serve, and to evangelize the poor. Notable efforts were made at both meetings to know the Saint better and to study his doctrine. A real effort was made to *apply him* more concretely to the circumstances of our life today. The atmosphere of true international understanding among the 1800 people present at the Paris Congress who came from 40 different countries, and the 1100 young people and their 140 leaders gathered at Parmenie was absolutely admirable. And to crown everything, the spirit of community prayer was excellent. The oft repeated testimony heard during our visit proved that this was no one day wonder. The young and the not-so-young who were in Paris and Parmenie clearly showed their enthusiasm and determination in planning and carrying out religious and social projects in accordance with the guidelines of these two meetings.

The **Symposium on Prayer** was a public and joint testimony to the importance we still attach to the *first and principal of our daily exercises*, as De La Salle says, for the life of the Institute and of each of its members.

The fourteen Brothers selected and summoned to take part in this Symposium accomplished a meritorious effort of reflection and synthesis which has enriched us all. Their personal witness in itself was an unqualified proclamation of the urgency and value of a life of prayer and of dialogue with God. It was seen, not as an unavoidable and daily obligation, but as a practical part of our apostolate. Quite a number of Brothers who had a hand in its preparation and those who were present at one or several of the meetings connected with the Symposium shared in its fruits.

In their analyses, the members proved to themselves and to others the importance of the relationship between faith and life, between prayer and work, in a community surrounded by a secularized society. Their studies were centred on the riches of the method the Saint left us, and they realized, in passing, how relevant it still is. The wealth of our texts and the Saint's legacy came as a revelation to the three competent observers from different Institutes who closely followed the proceedings of the Symposium, and, to a lesser degree, to those Superiors General and Assistants who attended the closing session. As one observer said: *One felt there was a fifteenth member in the Symposium, the Founder, whose presence seemed like a dynamic reality in the meeting.*

We are highly desirous that this be seen, not as a mere event, but that its significance and mean-

ing be diffused throughout the Institute. The members of the Symposium have promised to share with all the Brothers and to *multiply* their own spiritual experience by all means at their disposal. In addition to the contribution of their personal testimony, we look forward to having their work and their conclusions published at various levels in the Institute. The Credo they adopted as a result of their discussions will be found in an addendum at the end of this letter. I cannot end this brief summary of the event without cordially congratulating Brother Vicar General who was the prime mover and organizer of this excellent initiative.

On the basis of what was observed during the more important visits to various districts that were made by myself or a group of Councillors, I am able to give you some idea of what is happening in one sector or another of the Institute. During the last few months we have seen what life is like in the following countries:

1. - The Southern Part of Latin America: Brother John Johnston and the Councillors Brothers Pedro Ruedell and Vincent Rabemahafaly visited this area from August to October.

Here they were impressed by the improvements in recruiting and formation. It is encouraging to see the increase in vocational work and its results in various districts. As 1980 draws to a close, there are 61 novices in Latin America, the same number as I mentioned in my letter of December 1979. Things look hopeful, therefore, for the New Year.

The initial formation program is becoming more practical and thorough. The efforts and hopes once centered on the juniorate are gradually and pru-

dently being transferred to the postulancy or the training given immediately prior to the novitiate. Also worthy of note is the fidelity of these districts in sending a large number of Brothers to follow the renewal experiences of C.I.L. or the Regional Lasallian Centers. We call attention to the wise policy initiated in Paraguay where the promotion of vocations was begun as soon as we entered the country. The result is that after only eleven years there are twelve native novices or young Brothers.

As regards the apostolic work in these districts, mention should be made of the establishment and animation of many exemplary educational communities, to which reference has been made on previous occasions. Members of these educational communities are enthusiastically working together to learn Lasallian principles and to apply them in practice. As a result our centers show the special characteristics and the educational spirit that is specifically Lasallian. In spite of the small number of Brothers on these teams, the lay staff is inspired by our principles and direction, which is of great benefit to the school. In Argentina, for example, many teachers of both sexes follow courses or attend all day sessions that deal with the pedagogy and the spirituality of De La Salle. As a result, these institutions do not simply bear the name of the Saint, they try to be schools which honor the Founder by embodying what he taught and what he signifies for Christian education.

Finally, along with the three visitors I would say that there is evident progress in understanding the priority requirement of preferential service of the poor. There have been numerous initiatives in this area. Of course, as the Brothers realize there

is still more progress that can be made. The politico-military situation in some parts of South America precludes direct and efficient action for true justice and real peace. But what does worry us is seeing that in certain places and under certain circumstances, some communities are lagging behind and not following the enlightened and decisive directives of the local hierarchy.

2. - I personally visited the Brothers in **Eritrea** during the first fortnight of September. I was not able to do so during my African tour at the beginning of the year. (Cf. letter 15 May 1980, pp. 16-24), and, the Brothers were most insistent that I come. Having obtained the necessary visas to enter this country which is in a continual state of emergency, I was able to satisfy our mutual desire and spend a week with the group.

It is an interesting group of young Brothers, 36 in all, whose average age is 27, offering great hopes for the future. There is a constant influx of generous vocations to the different institutes working in the country. The Catholic population, living in austerity and suffering, keeps the faith amidst great difficulties and the Brothers have shared amply in the privations and the hard times caused by a war which is still being carried on in a guerrilla fashion. Their morale is high even though a number of political and social factors create doubts about the future. There is not even any guarantee of freedom to carry on our ministry. The young Eritrean Brothers have learned much during the forced isolation of the last few years which led them to reflect on and to analyze their situation. As few others do, they appreciate the absolute

necessity for sound and organized formation. They are, therefore, extremely grateful to the Brothers who went to Asmara last summer to give courses on the Founder and the Institute. Their most urgent need is for English speaking Brothers to help them on a long-terms basis in their initial and continued formation. This is an actual and pressing application of what I said in my last letter about the attentiveness and preferential service we owe our Brothers in the developing world. We rely on those who are more sensitive to such an invitation and who are trying to help solve the problems of those Brothers as soon as possible, not only in Eritrea, but wherever the same problems exist.

3. - I would not want to omit mentioning a meeting I attended just before flying to Eritrea, both because of the number of Brothers involved and its stimulating nature. More than 500 Brothers of the **French Region** with representatives from other countries met in Beauvais at the end of August. The exchange of ideas and the discussion of their actual apostolic experiences, among so many Brothers spontaneously grouped according to their interests and the work they are doing, offered those who were there a great wealth of information regarding various initiatives, a new impulse, renewed faith in the actuality and resources of our mission today and an abundance of ideas to strengthen our own activities for serving the world. Such assemblies are a good idea. They do not have the characteristics of statutory chapters and do not determine definite policies for the districts, but they are an efficacious means of encouraging real fraternal spirit

and of renewing our apostolic activities by helping to update them.

4. - Together with Brothers Patrice and Benildo, I was able to visit and meet the Brothers of three other districts.

4.1. The District of **Ireland** is this year celebrating its centenary and it was this that led me to visit these Brothers recently.

We were able to join the Irish Lasallians in some of their more significant jubilee celebrations. Of a more official character was the Mass celebrated, significantly, in the parish of Ballyfermot, a Dublin suburb with a mixed population which is as poor in the goods of this world as it is rich in problems of every kind, social, economic and moral. In an atmosphere of fervour and enthusiasm, the President of the Republic and numerous representatives of the school and communities clearly showed the people's loyalty to De La Salle in a Mass whose essential features were enhanced by the inspiration of the musical compositions. Let us thank God for the great good our Brothers have done for Irish youth during these 100 years.

Most of our time was, of course, spent in visiting the communities. In the many important scholastic institutions managed and animated by the Brothers, we were able to appreciate both the quality of the professional and apostolic work and the profound loyalty of the teachers and religious associated with them in their work, as well as the affection of their pupils. In Ireland there is a great diversity in the types of schools, from the centers for corrective training like **St. Patrick's Training School** in Belfast, to the centers for cultural

development and family care like that of the La Salle Association in Waterford, and the schools with extensive social influence in more homogeneous areas. The proverbial wealth of vocations is suffering a slight setback which we believe to be but temporary. All that is needed, as we told the Brothers, is a thorough renewal in vocation work, better integration of the magnificent lay staff found in our institutions and more creativity in finding and realizing new ways of guiding youth: that Irish youth which still has excellent qualities and is profoundly religious.

We of course profited by the occasion to congratulate the Irish Brothers and thank them for their extraordinary contribution to the missionary development of the Institute. Even here, though, we all agreed on the need to adapt new means of training missionaries and of finding missionary responses to the different situations presented today by the developing world.

4.2. The districts of **Centre-Est** and **Bretagne**, France, occupied our time from October 31 to November 7 and from November 7 to November 13 respectively. Both districts have substantial numbers of Brothers, but in both there is a high average age which is the greatest cause for anxiety. Happily, new hope is dawning after the long years of a vocational crisis and apparent resignation to the failure to find new recruits for our Institute. We were agreeably surprised by a group of young men from the region of Lyons, who are keeping alive the impressions formed at the great international meetings in Paris and Parmenie last summer. They organize their activities according to the La Salle

directives in favour of the poor and young people. In an interview with a representative group, they insisted that the Brothers should be their spiritual guides, show them more clearly the figure of the Founder and his message, and teach them to pray and to work disinterestedly in projects for evangelization and human development. And we saw how these new movements and relationships, renewed in form and objectives, are increasing the hope generated by the modest numbers of novices and postulants who are now establishing and guaranteeing the future of the national French novitiate.

We met the various educative communities in Bretagne in which laymen, under the inspiration of La Salle and realizing their educational vocation, prepare and perfect the management of those imposing centres of technical training we admired there. They are trying to assure the continuity of the same spirit in those places where the advancing age of the Brothers calls for alternative solutions. Perhaps it is these devoted Lasallian teachers who see more clearly, and who, with great insight, proclaim how difficult it is to replace the members of a religious community. Rarely have I heard such forceful and convincing arguments regarding the privilege of personal availability which we enjoy through our religious consecration, especially our consecrated celibacy, for total commitment to the animation and management of a Catholic school, as I heard from one of these lay directors during my visit to Bretagne...

And thus the same obsessive preoccupation is everywhere manifest. What is the best way of providing the needed replacements for continuing

a work which is continually admired and sought after and which, for this, among other reasons, meets with so many obstacles, as also so much opposition and misunderstanding. When all is said and done, it is but the repetition of the Saint's experience when he was founding his schools. The problem of the shortage of laborers continues to grow unceasingly.

I shall consider the matter calmly and objectively in this Christmas letter, without undue optimism, nor black pessimism, and try to state what I, personally, feel about this important matter.

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This year of the Tercentenary sees us in tense expectation as regards our common problems and our prospects for the future. The whole Institute is interested in ways of renewing our life, rejuvenating our minds and guaranteeing a real *re-incarnation* of De La Salle's message today and in the immediate future.

When we think of our problems and resources, we repeatedly come up against a factor giving rise to special pre-occupation, the lack of new vocations and the continual diminution in personal. From the statistics we see a continual decrease since 1966. And now, when we are commemorating our Tercentenary, we find ourselves down to about 10,000 Brothers. If we cannot check this decline in numbers, we shall see ourselves continuing to decrease in the coming years as a result of general aging, a consequence of the facts already written about in our recent annals.

It is likewise certain, and we have repeated it

often, that there is in general the beginnings of recovery. An observation, confirmed by numerous and divers witnesses, assures us that youth today shows greater interest than in the past in spiritual matters and in the religious life as a possible definite personal choice.

These two facts are compatible and exist together, even though they appear to contradict one another. The above mentioned initial recovery cannot lead us, however, to expect a miracle of immediate change as regards our numbers. Time is needed and a generous and constant tenacity on the part of all for this to happen.

Both phenomenon together call for prompt, decisive and responsible action on our part to put before these young men who are, at least physically, close to us, a project capable of leading them to make up their minds to join us in our apostolate. The cultivation of sterile skepticism in the face of the present situation merely because our statistics do not show an immediate increase, is not being realistic. It is a convenient resignation, even, I would say, a dangerously suicidal tendency.

It is a good thing to ask ourselves about the future of the Institute. For example, some documents issued in preparation for the important inter-capitular meeting to be held in May do just this. But we must not waste time in further discussion, nor worry over dismal forecasts. Rather we have to understand and proclaim once again that the future is forged in the present, and it is the present that God has entrusted to us. The lessons of the past will help us to understand better our responsibilities for the future.

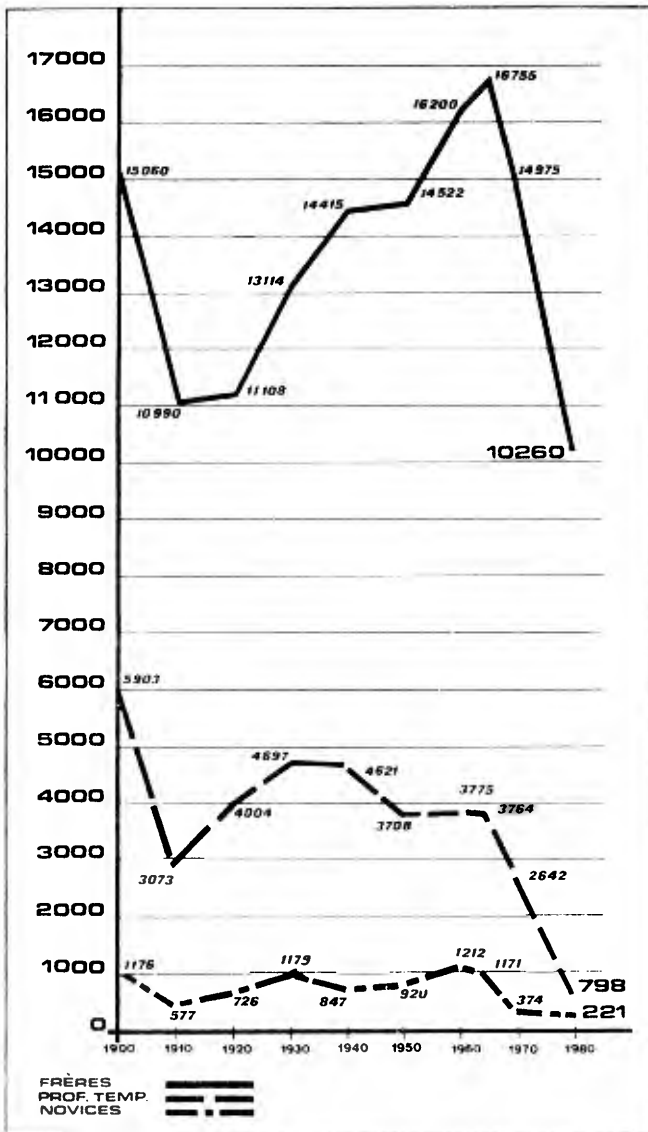
There is no doubt about the continuing need

of our mission. It is repeatedly confirmed by the numerous invitations and pressing demands for us to take charge of projects for education, assistance and evangelization in a wide variety of countries and cultures. There are so many that it is quite beyond our possibilities to respond to even a small number. It is not our identity which is called in question, but its understanding and renewal in a realistic way in view of present needs.

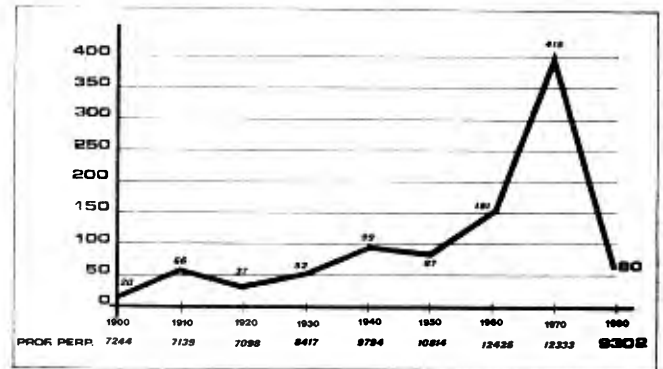
It is no use hiding the facts of our present situation. It is more important to compare our situation with the *truth* flowing from the example and intentions of our Founder. Starting from this, let us take a sincere look at both objectives, beginning with a short examination of the facts.

We start from a context of the general phenomenon in the Church during the last few years and admit that the numerical decrease corresponds to two negative factors. On the one hand there is the marked decrease in perseverance and, on the other, the drastic reduction in the number of candidates to the different Religious Institutes.

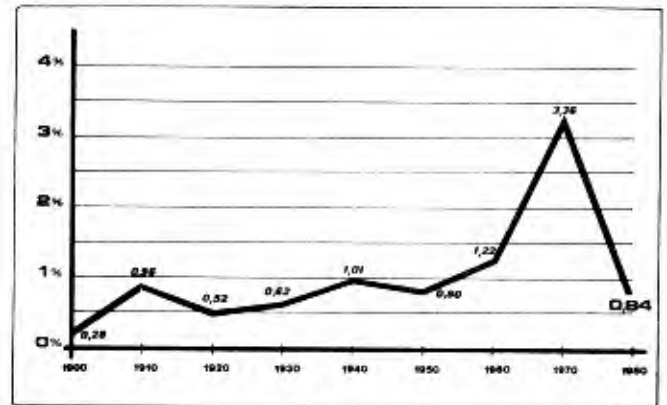
As far as our religious family is concerned, the figures are impressive. In 1965 we were 16,824 Brothers and this was our peak. At the end of 1980 we are a little more than 10,000. In the graph of our continual decrease (see graph n° 1) we note that there were four critical years, from 1969 to 1972. The actual decreases in numbers were 782, 742, 660 and 704 respectively. As a percentage of the total number of Brothers, the decreases were 4.96%, 4.95%, 4.63% and 5.18%. They were difficult years which, in one way or another, corresponded to or followed the cultural revolution in which 1968 was a significant date.



Graph No. 1: Changes in the total number of Brothers, in the number of Brothers with temporary commitment and in the number of novices in the years indicated (1900-1980).



Graph No. 2: 1900-1980, the number of dispensations from Perpetual Vows granted in the years indicated.



Graph No. 3: 1900-1980, the percentage of Brothers receiving dispensation from final vows in relation to the number of Brothers with perpetual vows in the years indicated.

Now let us separate the two factors mentioned above, perseverance and new vocations. Statistics show that the rate of perseverance has now achieved a high degree of stability. During the four critical years to which I referred, the requests for dispensation from perpetual vows were 3.06%, 3.19%, 2.89% and 2.95%. While from 1976 to 1979, the percentages are 1.66%, 1.64%, 1.15% and 1.06%. For 1980 the percentage is only 0.82%, the lowest since 1955 (see graphs n° 2 and 3).

Thus it is clear that the continuing crisis in our statistics stems entirely from the lack of new candidates and in the fluctuating perseverance of those Brothers not yet incorporated into the Institute with perpetual vows.

Hence, as regards our numbers, considered on an Institute-wide basis under conditions as they now exist, the important thing is to determine why this situation exists and what we can do about it.

First of all we realize that there are general circumstances which have caused our losses. They must be seen as external and beyond our control. If we consider them carefully, we shall see the phenomenon in its correct perspective. I will mention a few of them.

a) Generally speaking the accumulation of sudden changes, which have disorientated many people and posed numerous questions to which there are no easy answers, has revealed the fallacies of so many hypotheses, theories and policies which, for a long time, were regarded, uncritically, as good.

This engendered what we might call a global crisis which made itself felt, and still affects our estimation of standards and our recognition of priorities.

A wide range of numerous and worthwhile options has been opened, while the religious standards on which such options as our own are based have suffered a decisive decline in esteem, especially among the young.

Purely technical professions offering good salaries and human prestige became very attractive during the euphoric developments of the 60's and 70's, often at the expense of transcendental and eternal values. Moreover, our vocational *offering* could not continue to be realized and accepted quite so simply and directly as in past ages when the rhythm of life was more deliberate and traditional customs and attitudes were accepted by all (1).

b) Secularism is another cause of the increasing changes in standards and principles. It has caused many Brothers to lose their first enthusiasm for concrete religious projects. The simple charm and spontaneous attraction of the call of undertakings and adventures for the Kingdom of God lose their strength. In our times, for example, the young, even those already committed to the religious life, have reacted to the call of the missions by saying they were more interested in work for purely human

(1) Mons. Carlo M. Martini, Archbishop of Milan and ex-rector of the Gregorian in Rome said a few days ago: *The historian who describes the history of the Italian Church since 1965 should note that there have been notable and almost un hoped for changes. Evidently, as in all times of change, those who have faced such changes with a mature mind and the wish to investigate the fundamental values have profited by such an evolution. Others who were unprepared and who, traditionally or systematically, stuck to previous values found themselves in difficulties.*

development and for a specified time, rather than in a lifetime devoted to evangelization.

c) The family, overcome by the waves of new materialistic and utilitarian views, has also suffered confusion and crisis. The recent Synod paid special attention to analysing and studying this situation. Everybody realizes the effect the caliber of family life can have on recruitment to the religious life, particularly as regards the life and the mission of the Brother. At the same time, the fact that families now have fewer and even a minimum number of children does not encourage a large number of vocations to the religious life.

These and other circumstances of our times have complicated the problem of vocations. The whole Church shares our preoccupations about the reduced number of seminarists and novices. Such preoccupation has led to insistence on awakening and mobilizing the conscience of the Christian peoples. Pope John Paul II returns again and again to the subject, not in panic which would hardly correspond to his intrepid character or his faith, but gravely and with urgent invitations. From among his many speeches, I would merely recommend that you read and meditate on his "speech to those who are called" in Porto Aegre, on 5 July 1980; or, his ardent and persuasive proposal to young Germans in Munich on 19 November 1980.

The harvest is indeed great, but the laborers few. It is as great as man's destiny... It is great for the strength of his vocation. It means that you are called by God. Only God can call man. And the divine invitation is continually being made, in Christ and through Christ, to each one of you. Jesus

needs young people who, from among your ranks, will answer his call and live with Him in poverty and chastity to be signs of God's reality among your brothers and sisters... He needs priests and religious men and women who leave everything to follow Him and serve humanity. Dear young people, remain open to Christ's call.

On a practical level, here in Rome preparations are underway for an international congress, scheduled for next May, to which representatives of the Conferences of Bishops as also some Superior Generals have been invited. The subject of the congress will be the problem of vocational work in the local Churches. It is an expression of the profound preoccupation and great desire for concerted action at a time of crisis affecting the whole Church.

If we cannot remain ignorant of the general aspects of our problem, it is, however, more important to study the internal causes, those nearer home. Only thus can we intensify our attention and our united efforts to seek out suitable remedies and put them into effect. I will mention at least a few of these causes which seem to call for attention and special care.

1. - The Founder himself knew what crisis was and even faced the possibility of the complete ruin of his work. He enumerates a number of vital elements, supports he calls them, for our life and specific vocation. Some of them are interior, and, I think, can best be summed up in *the life of prayer or the life of faith*. The others are exterior and are the means by which *community life* is expressed and maintained by sincere and profoundly evangelical relationships.

The Spirit of Faith is a living experience of God, who is close to us and acting in our personal existence and that of the community. The Saint treats it as a matter of life or death for the individual. (*Those who do not possess it... should be looked upon as dead members*) and for the community. (Remember the very forceful language he employs regarding this topic in the 77th Meditation.)

There are certain presumptuous people who try to justify their neglect of prayer by saying they replace it by other activities, which are praiseworthy of course, but which can never really replace it. They have completely turned their backs on the charismatic intuition and experimental realism of the Founder and have caused us untold harm. The irresponsible reduction in the time dedicated to prayer in community life has made it more difficult for the individual to devote himself to this indispensable exercise, to this *holy exercise, the first and principal of the daily exercises* (Rule 1726, 4, 1).

This harmful tendency, which is contrary to the prescriptions of the present Rule, chapter 3,d, weakens the spiritual atmosphere of the community for one thing, and, for another, deprives the testimony we give to the young of its spiritual and evangelical significance. This is what the best disposed among them want to see when, under the guidance of the Spirit, they choose a vocation.

A serious lack of this support leads to a deterioration of the other exterior supports, more specifically that of a significantly evangelical community life.

In many communities, the true meaning of community life characterized by sharing of goods, resources and projects has been replaced by an

unhealthy individualism. The appropriation of material things has rendered our public profession of poverty absurd and contradictory. By their egoistical stance, some Brothers have suffocated fraternal charity and the testimony of Christian love which we owe the world. How much *support* and help is there now in redition as a channel of special relationship between the Director and the other Brothers? What is the quality of mutual relations encouraged and maintained by every possible means, (a modern version of *the manner of spending recreation well*).

The young people of today have repeatedly said that the real attraction of the religious state and what most appeals to them is the dynamic life of an evangelical community rather than the actual work they do, always supposing that such work is a practical Christian service to mankind which contributes to solving human problems.

The first thing we must do to bring about an increase in vocations is to return to these fundamental means recommended by the Holy Founder for maintaining the profound vitality and strength of the Institute and each of its members.

2. - In this short list of the causes of our vocation crisis, I would also like to include certain harmful attitudes which are fairly general. If we appreciate the harm they have done and continue to do we should have every reason to rid ourselves of them.

In the first place, presumption, understood as a moral disposition, that shows itself in many ways.

— Presumption in certain aspects of openness to the world. For misguided reasons precautions

are neglected. The percentage of reasons given when requesting dispensation from vows that is the result of this attitude, is an eloquent testimony to the ravages it has caused (1).

— Presumption on the part of those who multiply individual project or follow extremely specialized group initiatives without the guarantee and support of community discernment, or the approval and the guidance of those in authority, or of the help that can be provided by community assessment of their work.

The presumption of those who believe themselves authorized and capable of inventing or teaching new forms or highly original kinds of religious life and apostolic experience — which are unworthy of the name. These individuals lack the indispensable requirements which would prepare them to do this work, which would accompany them while they do it, and which would lead them daily to evaluate what they are doing.

— The presumption of those who stick to their own personal views and to their exclusive ways of understanding fidelity by stubbornly refusing to take part in community reflections and community dialogue, which is the place par excellence *where the Holy Spirit resides and acts* according to an old Benedictine saying which is incorporated in our own terms in the Declaration (7,2).

(1) "Lumen Vitae" announces the publication of another book by Father Tillard on the "Religious Apostolic Life". Its title "In the World but not of the World", seems in itself to bear upon a fundamental orientation which needs emphasizing.

3. - Another not very evangelical attitude which has hurt our image and, as a natural consequence, has deprived of us our moral influence and powers of persuasion is a bourgeois attitude, easily acquired and developed in a consumer society. In so far as we have allowed ourselves to be won over by its philosophy and lures, we have lost the incisive power as well as the attractiveness of the healthy assertive and prophetic disposition which the religious life should manifest to the world.

We can say that the areas in which presently there is a dearth of vocations are generally some of the more affluent regions of the world. And it is evident that, if the difference in life style and material facilities between us and the people of the world disappears, individuals will no longer clearly see any reason for giving up the world if it means living in the same way.

4. - If the ascending graph of our financial prosperity does not correspond to that of our generosity towards the developing world and the poor, the image of our disinterestedness and corporate renunciation would be seriously damaged. And without this characteristic, indispensable for any evangelical authenticity, we cannot expect young men who want to follow Christ in His poverty to join with us, nor shall we succeed in getting the poor, who are always more sensitive to and more open to the call of God, to join our communities.

Our fidelity to the poor and our approach to them in their actual living conditions have not corresponded sufficiently to the original purpose of the Institute, and the effect of its message has diminished as a consequence. One of the things on

which young candidates to our Institute, or those who are thinking of joining us, insist most now is a guarantee of being employed in a loyal and generous service to the poor, those on the margins of society and those who are oppressed by poverty or social injustice.

5. - Finally, but without attempting to list all the causes of our decline in numbers, I would refer to certain deficiencies in formation. This is a factor which conditions the human and religious qualities of those who, today and tomorrow, express the spirit and the mission of the Institute and who at the same time show our contemporaries what is its true meaning and objectives.

There is a certain amount of hesitancy and a lack of objectives and programmes joined with a kind of misunderstood parsimony or faulty choice of criteria in providing the means for further training. This has been damaging to our numerical increase and to the necessary maturity in our communities while causing a corresponding loss in our proselytising ability.

If from the very beginning of the formative process there has not been a clear and vigorous indication and a prudent progressive method of attaining the real objectives of our vocation and its exigencies, as seen by our Founder, and in the light of his experience and example, the very truth and efficacy of the process are compromised as are also the final results.

I do not want this brief enumeration and commentary on the factors in our numerical decline to give the impression of systematic and depressing

accusations. Nothing is further from my mind or intention when I refer to the cockle among so much good grain in our field today.

I have mentioned some of our failures which have prejudiced our recruiting. And now, starting with visible internal vitality, I will refer to the great amount of work being done, though never enough, of course, to reverse this trend. Crises are a phenomenon of life and growth. They are a help if we react in the right way. We must consider our own crisis in the same way.

Let us, therefore, examine some of our reactions to our experiences.

* * *

Most of our responses have been adequate. A large number of Brothers have reacted very well. Let us give a short account of the misconceived responses and then go on to the others, the majority, and the way they assure our hopes for the future.

— The brutal shock of the flood of change mentioned above, and the discovery of numerous deficiencies which it revealed, surprised and disenchanted an appreciable number of Brothers. Their faith failed with the failure of some supports, not always those of a purely religious nature, which had camouflaged the weakness of their confidence. *We were hoping...* they said in the words of the disciples of Emmaus. They had leaned heavily on apparently immovable pillars, and now these were tottering. So they waited in passive expectation, while refusing to cooperate in the necessary efforts.

— Some felt their security giving way and when their disquiet turned to anguish shouted: *Every*

man for himself, which was not very loyal and quite opposed to the fidelity they hand sworn.

— In others surprise and ill humour turned to accusations against people within and without. They were unable to accept an uncomfortable reality. They did not work with humility and love as the Apostle recommended *overcoming evil with good* (Rom. 12, 21). *They wished to see miracles in others* as the Founder says graphically in Meditation 73, 1. Their resentment degenerated into carefree isolation, correct in appearances, or into skepticism, bitter judgments, independent behaviour and destroying fatalism. *As I have already said...* they repeated, like a monotonous refrain which closed itself off from open dialogue and constructive cooperation with their Brothers.

— A negative attitude also, apparently less violent, characterized those who suggested impossible solutions. *If we were all what we should be... Il young people were like those of yesterday...* They would not cooperate in the various projects proposed to them because they refused to accept others as they are. Perhaps they uttered trite phrases, such as *the main thing is that the Church is alive... do not let us give way to overzealous proselytism*, in order to escape the effort at recruiting which the Church itself urged on us so that we would be able to continue the mission in the field which has always been assigned to us.

— Nor were the false prophets wanting, those who always come to the fore in moments of crisis, like a sad and concrete manifestation of the presumption I spoke of before. They had too much confi-

dence in their personal lights. They were contemptuous of the judgment of superiors and of communities which had been endorsed by chapters and legitimate authority.

They set up their own chair to explain to all who would listen their own pet theories which included the state of health of the Institute. Eventually they abandoned the said Institute, often as not, leaving behind them confusion and discouragement.

— We have come across that more or less consciously hypocritical optimism of those who pretend systematic ignorance of reality and prefer to wait passively for things to straighten out or to go away of themselves. They sometimes wished the Institute a tranquil euthanasia, free from trauma and tension. They preferred to be blindfolded and not see what needed correcting or improving. ERICH FROMM'S words regarding such attitudes describes them perfectly. *Those who unconsciously despair, yet put on the mask of optimism are not necessarily wise. But those who have not given up hope can succeed only if they are hardheaded realists, shed all illusions and fully appreciate the difficulties. This sobriety marks the distinction between awake and dreaming "utopians"* (1).

* * *

And now, I leave the litany of mistaken reactions to give a short account of the true responses, the best of the many made by those who by their mutual

(1) ERICH FROMM, *To have or to be?*, Edit. Abacus, p. 170.

effort, in humility and love, zealously strive to rectify the deficiencies and give the finishing touches to their work that is being done to prepare for a better future.

Pained but not surprised, cautious but not anguished, they have maintained the correct equilibrium, equally far removed from pessimism as from optimism, both unreal in their extreme attitudes.

a) They have correctly understood that, if the life of faith and prayer is to continue to be a guarantee of the existence and vigour of the Institute and its members, as the Founder saw, they would have to set in motion all the necessary initiatives to overcome successfully the dangerous deficiencies in these areas. Let us turn our thoughts again to what the Symposium on Prayer I mentioned in the initial pages was meant to represent and to be. It is a fact that young people looking for an apostolic vocation are particularly anxious to find masters and places to facilitate this meeting and existential dialogue with God.

b) Many Brothers are decisively working at our renewal, for better quality and depth in community life, so that it becomes truly meaningful and attractive to those young men who want to consecrate their lives to the service of the Kingdom. They recognize the real position of the Brother Director in the Community, *who tries to be the one who serves... the bond of union... who gives the Brothers frequent opportunities to speak with him... and who helps them to discover the will of God for them* (Rules 7, c). They promote excellent interpersonal relations in a community which *sustains the generosity of all whenever they make the sacrifices necessary to*

reach agreement for the common good (Rules 3, e).

This is precisely what is being sought by those who feel God's call to a consecrated life. In their own way they are repeating what a large group of young people said to a superior general of a nearby congregation at the end of a happy experience of life and prayer in one of their communities. *Guarantee that we will always find communities like that and you will have us all in the novitiate.*

The generalization in all communities of the community plan and its better understanding and practice is an efficient aid in preparing this worthy and welcoming atmosphere for the young people we want to win over.

c) The pursuit of the study of our mission in the service of suffering humanity at the present time and the resulting better understanding of it is extremely useful in improving the *concrete offering* we make to young people today... The *come and see* of St. John, 1, 46, continues to be the key method for the effective promotion of vocations. But it means we must be able to offer an updated type of service to these young men seeking existential options. It must correspond to real and urgent needs, those of today's world, without, however, straying beyond the options of the Founder, to work for young people and the poor.

These are vast options with a wide scope, such as those mentioned at a recent ecclesial and universal event, such as the CELAM Conference at Puebla.

Also they are clear options, and as such they define the unmistakable character of our Institute, its objectives and its specific work. We cannot remain indifferent to the multiplicity of needs in

the world today when determining our priorities. But this must not disintegrate in a vain attempt at finding solutions to every possible human problem.

d) And many are becoming consciously convinced that, because of such hopeful efforts, we cannot fail to extend an express proposal and a sincere and candid offer to those ready to understand and appreciate it, a clear invitation which will lead them to make up their minds to join us.

Good vocations continue to come to those who generously and intelligently use the means of finding them.

What I read a month ago in a very interesting document from our Brothers in Vietnam is always true. They still are hopeful regarding vocations in spite of their difficult situation. *The problem of our recruiting is vital to the District. But young people are not recruited. They are attracted by a true life.* Quite right. Provided that we do not make the terms mutually exclusive. A true renewal and a dynamic life is a necessary condition for any pastoral work for vocations, but in no way can we be dispensed from using an intelligent, organized and sustained strategy. It is an effort which concerns us all and cannot be reserved to a few *recruiters* or *charismatics*. Many Districts already see it in this way, and the results amply repay this effort. This is the right road but one along which we still have a long way to go.

Do not let the problem of vocations become a nightmare, but let it be a challenge which induces us to act together and more authentically. The positive reactions mentioned are a clear indication of this.

The shortage of vocations is a crisis caused by some transitory and contemporary circumstances. I have tried to enumerate some of them. Our zeal will lead us to overcome them as soon as possible. Any delay in finding a solution will only aggravate the problem because of the increasing age gap. Leaving aside the lamentations of impotent despair, we repeat with John XXIII, *action today*.

Let every Brother, every community put his shoulder to the wheel wherever they may be. There is no country, no culture, where vocations do not germinate, where the call of God is not heard. I have heard experienced Brothers who knew the local situation well say that there never will be any worthwhile vocations here and the Institute can never take root where we are working to help the local people. And now, in those very places, there is an appreciable harvest of vocations, more than in the countries from which those prophets came.

There must always be an animating team to coordinate, sustain and direct the work of all.

Do not let us be held back by forecasts based on sociological data, attributing to them an infallibility which past history does not bear out.

May the *Mother of hope and grace, full of holy joy*, as the hymn says, enlighten and sustain our efforts. We confide our preoccupations and our hopes to her, our Mother, on whose feast this letter is being published.

As of this moment, I also place under her protection the important assembly of those responsible for the regions and districts which will be held next May. It will be a fruitful occasion for

examining many of the points dealt with in this letter.

In Her and in St. John Baptist de La Salle,
I remain your humble servant and Brother.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "H. José Pablo". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish underneath the name.

PRAYER IN THE LIFE OF THE BROTHER TODAY

International Symposium on Prayer
(Rome, 9 to 15.11.1980)

*Among the different documents produced
by this Symposium, here you have the
"Profession of faith" written by its members.*

OUR CREDO

We are fourteen Brothers from many countries of the world, gathered together at the invitation of the General Council in this Tercentenary Year to reflect upon the prayer experience of ourselves and of our Brothers as it exists today in our many countries. Each of us had been asked to write a fairly comprehensive paper on "Prayer in the life of the Brother Today", and these papers have been the basis of a week's long intensive reflection, prayer and discussion among ourselves. In particular, we focused upon prayer and our Lasallian Spirituality, and especially our mental prayer.

Now, at the end of our week we are attempting to share with you some of our insights and beliefs despite the difficulties in transmitting the wealth

of our exchanges and experiences. In addition to our longer papers, we would like to express ourselves in the form of a CREDO that combines, hopefully, the essence of our reflections, discussions, and beliefs. Therefore,

WE BELIEVE that prayer is a gift and an art. As gift, it is the constant initiative of God. As an art, it requires our personal effort to receive and respond to this call of God and to reach a continual prayer.

WE BELIEVE that we can reconcile the tension between our work and our prayer by not only reevaluating the amount of time spent in prayer and ministry, but also by reexamining the quality of our presence to God and the people we serve.

WE BELIEVE that we are challenged to dialogue with the secular world in which we live in a spirit of faith, and thus discover God's redeeming love and His will for us in building the Kingdom.

WE BELIEVE that our personal and community prayer is enriched by sharing prayer with other groups also seeking God.

WE BELIEVE that in prayer we become aware of our poverty before God and this awareness opens us to share our ministry and prayer with the poor.

WE BELIEVE that when a community creates a climate of fraternity, provides a suitable place for prayer, and encourages creative participation in prayer, then it truly becomes a primary support for our prayer life.

WE BELIEVE that the responsibility for meeting God in prayer comes ultimately from

within, a kind of "existential imperative", that develops as we respond to God's call and, as "permanent novices", we move through the different stages of human growth.

WE BELIEVE that "not making any difference between the duties of our state and those of our sanctification" still remains a fundamental principle of our life as De La Salle Brothers.

WE BELIEVE that our ministry commits us to a direct and permanent relationship with God for whom we are working, and who gives meaning to our apostolate.

WE BELIEVE that our whole life is called to be a personal and loving relationship with God who is ever present and who loves us always: and this belief nourishes our spirit of faith and our spirit of prayer.

WE BELIEVE that the Word of God illuminates our entire life, and gives us strength of conversion and commitment in the history of salvation.

WE BELIEVE that community prayer is indispensable for the community to be Christian and Lasallian.

WE BELIEVE, with our Founder, that the mystery of the Trinity is the source of our prayer, of our brotherhood and of our ministry.

WE BELIEVE that, today, there are trends of religious renewal that are graces, especially where prayer is concerned (its manner of approach and expression) and that it is important not to ignore them.

WE BELIEVE that the spiritual journey of

John Baptist De La Salle was illumined by the love of God and His progressive callings, and that we must discover the same light by praying our life.

WE BELIEVE that the meaning of our consecrated celibacy is strengthened by prayer. It moves us towards God and others, and reinforces our efforts towards building community and universal brotherhood.

WE BELIEVE that prayer makes us aware of the truth in ourselves, that is, integrating our giftedness and sinfulness. We come to this process of truth with Christ at the center of our being, thus making us available and open to others.

WE BELIEVE that in prayer we are freed to work with Christ for the liberation of others.

WE BELIEVE that the Mother of God is, for us, a living School of prayer because of her contemplation of, and active participation in, the Mystery of Salvation.