



Letter of Brother Superior

8th December 1983

CASA GENERALIZIA
dei Fratelli delle Scuole Cristiane
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Brother,

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!". This greeting of the Apostle which sums up the whole message of hope and Christian optimism, seems to me to be a most appropriate beginning for my letter as it was for St. Paul's. Peace! Shalom! — the word is often on the lips of millions of men living in fear and, in many cases, tormented by actual war. "Peace is born of a new heart" is the motto adopted for Peace Day — New Year's day, 1984 — in a crystal-clear reference to the conditions of genuine reconciliation that were considered at the recent Synod.

Peace is an extremely fragile thing. Indeed, in its total and deep meaning, it cannot be achieved without the grace of God. Peace to you, Brother, and the grace which guarantees peace, "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!" It is his coming, the source and proclamation of peace on earth, which is the cause of joy during these final days of the old year as well as our vision of hope for the new year.

I would like this letter to be a greeting and a message of peace. It is our annual family meeting-point for a simple and frank exchange of principles, news, observations and events which affect the very essence of our common life.

The very brief account of these happenings, selected from our common history, makes no pretension to be a detailed report, still less a thorough discussion of the facts referred to. Rather it is offered as a factual summary of such events as they have shown a certain development or tendency in our journey together or which reflect situations that are worthy of particular attention and study. The brevity we are obliged to observe in presenting these reports should never be attributed to insufficient knowledge or superficial treatment of the information, and still less to a disregard for the various elements that make the reality more complicated than it seems. For those who are more directly involved in such situations, especially the principal participants therein, there are other means at our disposal, other more ample possibilities of communication, whereby to pursue our search for the most appropriate solutions to the problems raised... Here we are obliged to be brief in order to keep our account within reasonable limits.

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Let us, therefore, take a retrospective glance at the second half of the year which is now rapidly approaching its close.

1. I would mention in the first place an undertaking which is still in its initial phase but which is gradually gathering momentum. I refer to **the preparations for the General Chapter.**

The notes written on the present texts of our Rules in response to the "widespread and free consultation of the religious," called for by "Ecclesiae Sanctae" and requested by us in Cir-

cular 416, have arrived with remarkable punctuality from all over the world. They came from 65 districts and delegations: they are unequal in value and the opinions reflected in them show great diversity, as is to be expected in a consultation open to all the sectors of the Institute.

Such diversity sometimes raises problems in arriving at a precise consensus of opinions. But, certainly, there is richness in such diversity and a reflection of a reality which concerns us all and which must be studied and given direction.

The working party set up in Rome in accordance with the proposed plan (Cf. my letter of 15th May, p. 11) has already classified all the material received and is now ready to formulate some conclusions and to incorporate some provisional lines of approach. However, the principal task will be that of the International Commission working, as from Summer 1984, with the notes at hand and from a much more complete and elaborate synthesis (Third stage of the plan outlined in Circular 416).

In the forthcoming months we shall be able to give you the names of the Brothers who are to form the Preparatory Commission of the Chapter and the Commission responsible for the drafting of the Rule to be presented and examined by the Chapter.

2. On 10th June I extended an invitation and an appeal to the districts whose financial situation would allow it, to make a spontaneous and generous contribution towards the extraordinary budget estimated for the renovation of some of the services and for major repairs to be done in

the Mother House. The undertaking of this work was deemed necessary in consideration of the wear and tear borne by the vast building during almost 50 years. Time had taken its toll and the damage had to be seen to. Likewise there was a need to improve the efficiency as well as the economical running of certain installations, such as the central heating at C.I.L. and the electrical wiring, etc. It was a question of doing once and for all that which, if staggered throughout a number of years, would have meant increased costs and unnecessary disturbance and inconvenience.

I would like to make it known to the entire Institute that the proposal received an exemplary response: thanks to the amounts received or promised, either in gifts or in very favourable loans, we have been able to begin the work already and we hope to finish it within the foreseen limit of one year. From other sources, there was no lack of advice or suggestions of an extra-financial nature which we consider valid and well-meant and for which we are grateful. Our brotherhood at world level has, in this matter, expressed itself in a new way and has reaffirmed the strength of its bonds.

3. To come to visits and events outside the Generalate, I would like to make particular mention of visits carried out during the months under review: the journey I made with Brother Pedro Ruedell to the districts of the southern cone of Latin America (Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, Peru, Bolivia and Brazil) during the months of July and August; and the visit to the districts and delegations of the Middle East (Greece, Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt) made by

Brother Vicar General in the company of Brothers Pedro Ruedell and Vincent Rabemahafaly.

With the first of these two journeys, I began what is in fact a second tour of the Institute, more limited than the first as to time and the external contacts to be made. I hope, by this, to form a clearer view of the present situation and to evaluate "in situ" the progress of certain important undertakings.

What outstanding impressions can I share with you from this on-the-spot survey of the above-mentioned Latin American countries?

- First, there is the attention given there to the fostering of vocations, a work now carried out with more faith and enthusiasm and, in general, with better results. I could mention, and only as an illustration, Bolivia where we found a group of 14 novices, a number far superior to the intake for all the preceding years: or São Paulo where 5 postulants, 3 novices and 5 scholastics are evidence of the steady recovery of a district that had experienced not many years ago a very serious vocational crisis and an almost total lack of candidates.

- Second, I would instance the opening-up of the Brothers' ministry towards diversified apostolates, without prejudice to the preferential attention given to school work, which itself is being brought into line with the new and pressing needs of educational developments.

In this respect, special mention should be made of the ceremony which we attended of the blessing of a new and more powerful aerial for "Radio San Gabriel", the broadcasting station of the Church and of the Aymara Indians in La Paz.

This was an excellent occasion for considering retrospectively the growth of an exemplary educational service to millions of indigenous peasants, and for signing an official agreement which entails a greater responsibility on our part for this social and evangelizing enterprise. It was interesting to notice, on this same occasion, the particular esteem shown for the positive influence of a minimal Lasallian presence in the Catholic University of La Paz. Possibilities are being considered for a more decisive commitment there of our Brothers in order to guarantee for this centre of advanced studies, the best educational policy to ensure a sound academic training for its able and eager young people.

Another example we can mention is the missionary and promotional work of our Brothers in the vast, poverty-stricken area of the Amazon. Various projects have been undertaken as at Abaetetuba, Turiaçu, Altamira, Manaus, to respond to the many pressing needs and these form part of an overall plan of evangelization and of moral and material advancement for those people. With generous dedication, different groups of Brothers from southern Brazil are striving to give greater authenticity and efficiency to their work, seeking always to resolve the tensions that emerge when it comes to evaluating, from different perspectives, the various plans of action — such tensions being seen as a sign of vitality and of keen interest in their endeavours. Their task is one of involvement in a world lacking in everything; it is a task which implies better and more inspiring guidance for the different school systems, care for youth who, while well supplied with material means, suffer from a total lack of moral formation... This is certainly an interesting missionary effort in a

new world where extreme poverty and grave problems abound.

• Again we noted an impressive development in the involvement and "animation" of the Lasallian associations, especially in Argentina. The experience we enjoyed with the Brothers and the associates of the various groups in Buenos Aires, on the occasion of the First Lasallian National Congress, was truly memorable. We were able to see for ourselves the high levels of commitment and Lasallian spirit attained by individual persons, groups of adults and young people, teachers, alumni, parents and friends when they thus meet with Brothers who are deeply influenced by De La Salle's inspiration and who are keen to pass this inspiration on to others.

All these are only isolated examples, but they are significant of deeper and wider realities. The personnel of these districts consists mostly of young Brothers, the average age being much lower than that of older districts. They are faced with immense tasks in which the Church is called upon to provide a decisive and tactful leadership. They offer us comforting signs of hope, although shades of concern are not lacking in the picture. The results obtained in the pastoral care of vocations are encouraging although they still fall short of those of other religious families and diocesan seminaries, in spite of the fact that we have the advantage of working more closely with young people who are more readily disposed to respond to God's call. The disproportion between the number of Brothers and the requirements of personnel for our institutions and our apostolic and social projects is very often dangerously high, even though we can always rely on the

excellent co-operation of many lay teachers. The formation structures very frequently do not have either the staff or the facilities and means to respond adequately to this fundamental commitment .

We were able to examine at our leisure these and other elements of the situation with those responsible for the districts. We shall have another privileged occasion to do so during the meeting of the General Council with the Regional Conference of Visitors for Latin America, in Guadalajara (Mexico), at the beginning of August.

4. With their visit to the Middle East, to the communities, that is, working in Greece, Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, Brother Vicar and the Councillors, Brothers Pedro and Vincent, had an opportunity to appreciate better the apostolate of our Brothers in the service of the Christian minorities in the above mentioned countries. They observed also their positive contribution to a better understanding among the followers of the different denominations or religions.

In **Greece** there are only 45,000 Catholics in a population of 9,000,000. Twenty Brothers are helping there to foster better ecumenical relations in four towns: Piraeus, Thessalonica, Syros and Rhodes . Their involvement in initiatives on behalf of Christian youth is greater today. Almost all the Brothers are Greeks but in recent years they are finding it difficult to attract the needed vocations. However, there is no diminution in their commitment to vocational work. We sincerely congratulate them and cordially wish them every success.

In **Turkey** only 0.04% of the population is Christian. Twelve Brothers from two communities run three schools. They have to take the students sent by the Government, hence there are very few Christians among them. However, our institutions are visible signs of the presence and care of the Church in the work of human advancement and in the fostering of genuine moral values. The disinterested effort of the Brothers is bringing about a better rapport between Christians and Muslims, and some Brothers add to their school activities the pastoral care of the small Christian community. Our General Councillors were able to perceive more clearly still the importance of this devoted and unassuming presence of our Brothers at the very heart of Turkish culture.

The most outstanding impression of the visit to the communities of the Holy Land is that of the rich variety of educational apostolates run by a limited number of Brothers (31): a re-educational school in Nazareth; a high school for Muslims, Catholics and Jews in Jaffa; schools of different levels for Muslims and Catholics in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, as well as in Amman (Jordan); and the Bethlehem University for Palestinians, Christians and Muslims. One can easily understand the amount of tension the Brothers have to cope with working in an area torn apart by wars and conflicts of races and religions. In spite of everything our Brothers continue with their effort and influence, bringing peace and hope to these populations very much in need of both.

Lebanon receives full coverage in the newspapers, with their tragic stories of war and destruction. Our Councillors were able to ex-

perience on the spot the deafening roar of bombings and explosions during their visit. They were able to realise a little better the dangers and tensions in which the 40 Brothers there are living. Inspired by the Gospel values, these Brothers carry on their educational work in 8 colleges and schools. Theirs is perhaps one of the most effective ways of bringing about a friendlier co-existence and of amending the fatal errors of the many years of fighting, revenge and mutual distrust that have so greatly deepened the abyss of division among the Lebanese. We hope and pray that the numerous young people who attend the schools of the Brothers and of their many and enthusiastic collaborators will perceive better the urgency of our work and will come in greater numbers to our novitiate, ensuring thus the survival of a work which, because of its increasing demands, exceeds the possibilities of the present limited number of Brothers.

In **Egypt** 30 Brothers are committed to the education of Muslims, Orthodox and Catholics in 6 high schools and primary schools. They are making an impressive effort to match their apostolate to the current pressing needs of the country in accordance with the Institute guidelines and the suggestions of those locally responsible for the social and evangelizing work of the Church. They have increased their initiatives for the service of the poor sectors and are considering new undertakings on similar lines. Only a few weeks ago an Egyptian novice made his first profession. Many years had gone by since we had been able to secure a local vocation. A glimmer of hope shines on the path of a vocational work pursued with love and intelligence.

At the end of their visit, the Brothers Councillors returned to Rome, more convinced than ever of the vital importance of our presence in the Mediterranean area. Our work there consists essentially in helping the Christian minorities in need of encouragement and support, in fomenting a friendlier rapport between Christians and followers of other creeds, in ensuring concord and peace and in doing everything possible to make this feasible... We believe that this is the obvious way to reveal the love of Christ and of his Church, a love disinterested and open to all, a living reality, fruitful in all kinds of good works.

While a well devised pastoral policy is being implemented among the young people of these countries and wider possibilities are opening up, and interest in the Lasallian vocation is growing, there still remains the urgent need for Brothers with missionary formation and sensitivity to volunteer their services in these areas that really need them. I am grateful to those who on several occasions have offered themselves as volunteers for such a mission and I trustfully hope that their example will be followed by many more. A missionary commitment in the Middle East must still be viewed as one of the evangelizing priorities of the Institute today.

5. Immediately after my visit to the Latin American districts, I travelled to Dapaong, Togo, to join the Brothers who had been convoked to the **Missionary Symposium** as previously announced in my letter of December 1981 (p. 58) and which had been prepared and organized by SECOLI. The objective aimed at was the study of our missionary co-operation, particularly in Africa. The participants assigned to this work had been ap-

pointed to represent the African districts and the regional missionary secretariates.

The meeting was held from 15th to 20th August. The political disturbances of the preceding week in Upper Volta had caused the temporary closure of the Uagadugu airport where the delegates were to meet on their way to Dapaong (North of Togo).

In spite of this setback which upset our plans, making it difficult to establish contact with the dispersed groups, we managed to start the meeting with very little delay. All the complications and uncertainties about dates and flights can be regarded as a sign of the precarious conditions which our zealous missionaries have to face, with so many unexpected emergencies that determine our work in many regions today.

Each district has received a brief report of the themes dealt with and of the conclusions adopted. As I have announced in the letter already quoted, we shall have an opportunity for organizing another meeting in Asia at the beginning of 1985. The purpose in mind is to evaluate more precisely still our missionary service and to prepare some basic guidelines in view of the General Chapter. We refer to orientations and criteria which would bring together the experiences accumulated and the most valuable conclusions derived from our present reflection on our missionary work.

6. Worthy of mention, I think, is the Congress, or better, the Congresses of Young Lasallians in Malta and Caracas. I was able to attend the closure of the Malta Congress which was held

from 16th to 23rd August with an attendance of 120 young men from 13 different countries. 125 young Lasallians from 6 Latin American countries met at the Congress of Caracas which took place from 19th to 23rd September. These meetings are becoming an excellent means of expressing and sharing concerns and deep interests among many of our former students and friends of La Salle, enabling them to understand better who De La Salle is and what he stands for, and providing them with a grasp of the constitutive elements of his characteristic spirituality. They are certainly in search of a deeper meaning and motivation to inspire and support their Christian commitment, making it more fraternal and more humane.

What better and more interesting concern than that of numbers of young men, in full growth and development, sharing with us their plans and projects and relying on our guidance and advice. It would be very sad and impoverishing were we to ignore in practice the issues involved. The problem of the fostering of vocations remains intimately connected with the attention we give to these movements. Let us hope that the VIII Lasallian World Congress, to be held in July 1984, in Mexico, will help to give new light and new enthusiasm to young people and adults who think along the lines of De La Salle and who appreciate his message seen as a means of inspiring and living our Faith, our Service and our Brotherhood, understood as typical Lasallian values. The good reports we are receiving about the preparations of the Congress justify our hope.

1984 presents us with its enigmas and requires some planning... I would like to underline

only a few which I select from our general agenda.

During the forthcoming months we shall have in Rome a heavy schedule of meetings of the General Council with the Brothers in charge of the different regions: Asia-Australia, Ireland-England and Italy in March; Spain, the United States-Toronto and the Mediterranean region in May; Latin America in August. This last meeting will be held in Mexico after the Lasallian World Congress.

The World Congress which I have already briefly referred to in the series of initiatives of our lay movements will be given special prominence in our inter-regional calendar.

Our publications: "Bulletin", "Lasalliana" and "Documents and Witness" will continue to provide us all with the fundamental reflections and most significant achievements regarding our religious life today as well as with the preparation of the General Chapter.

While referring to publications which develop and further the knowledge of the Founder and of his spiritual legacy, I would like to avail myself of the opportunity to pay a sincere tribute of public gratitude and admiration, in the name of the entire Institute, to Brother León María Aroz. His research work and untiring pursuit of documents regarding the Founder and the foundation of the Institute have been extraordinary; his work has made possible a priceless collection of material which has fed and continues to feed our most serious and reliable Lasallian publications. I am alluding particularly to many numbers of the "Cahiers Lasalliens" which are more and more

appreciated for their documental value and their practical usefulness. Now that he is retiring from his meritorious work to enjoy a well deserved rest, I am pleased to express to him, in the name of all, our reiterated "Thank you".

Brother León Aroz: We are deeply proud of, and full of admiration for, the exemplary service you have given to the Institute. Thanks to your wonderful effort and your conscientious sense of duty we have been able to grow in the knowledge of our beginnings and of our spirituality which is proving so helpful towards the renewal of our religious life and towards a better definition of our identity.

An extraordinary event

Among the events of these last months, there is one, I think, of particular importance and which calls for serious reflection and careful consideration. I refer to the "Synod on Penance and Reconciliation in the mission of the Church". This was an ecclesial event, but an Institute event also since Church and Institute are, in fact, closely united realities according to our scale of values.

When Saint John Baptist de La Salle speaks of the mission he proposes to his disciples, he describes it in terms at once restrained and vigorous; for instance he tells us in his 199th Meditation (2): "Jesus Christ said, I must announce the good news of the reign of God... because this is why I have been sent... You must say the same thing, that is why Jesus Christ has sent you, and why the Church, whose ministers you are, commissions you". (MTR, 7, 2°)

In Lasallian language, we are "ministers of the Church"; as such, we should consider it incumbent upon us to take a **vital** interest in an event of such importance as a Synod, allowing it to influence very strongly our work of evangelization, since we are "announcers of the Good News". In spite of this, there is the real danger, due to negligence more or less conscious, of regarding this assembly as just another news item. Let us rather ask ourselves in all seriousness: "What real effect has the 1983 Synod had on me, on my personal life and on my plans for the work of evangelization?"

Importance shown in its preparation

The preparation of the Synod was in itself a privileged occasion to deepen and clarify concepts regarding the main theme proposed to us. With the awakening of the Church awareness and the converging efforts of many experts on a single problem, we were offered, even before the Synod started, a considerable collection of doctrinal data, apart from new insights which were later presented to us as conclusions. How much have we gained from this richness and what effective, if unassuming, contribution have we personally made to these studies?

An initial reaction when the general theme of the VI Synod was announced could have been to consider it foreign to our fundamental and practical concerns. The Synod was going to deal with confession!... a topic which concerned us only incidentally. But such a dismissive evaluation hardly corresponds to the amplitude and richness of the proposed theme. In due course, the discussion and study of the working document revealed

the depth of its various implications. During the actual synodal sessions, it emerged very clearly that penance and reconciliation, peace, justice and true brotherhood, sincere reconciliation with God and our neighbour... all constitute essential and very relevant elements of the Church's mission and imply grave and urgent duties of deep concern to us in the world of violence we live in. The final message of the Synod, necessarily concise in its expression, echoes the anguished cries that rise from the hearts of men today.

Within the Church, a renewed awareness of its mission

The reflections and lessons of the VI Synod throw a new light on the mission of the Church: that of urgently inviting all men to believe in the Good News and to use their power and resources to forge a truly fraternal society. It is up to the Church to foster unity and reconciliation and to strive efficaciously in overcoming divisions and violence through justice, forgiveness and mercy.

The Synod achieved and manifested a firm unanimity in professing and proclaiming these fundamental principles. It secured and reaffirmed an internal unity, a necessary premise for achieving reconciliation among men: only a reconciled Church will be accepted as a reconciling agent in the world.

A mission of particular concern to us

The questions raised by the Synod had special significance for us religious. They postulated a more valid witness of communion and reconciliation in the life and activities of our communities.

Insofar as we profess a special consecration to God and his service, we are intimately involved in what was said, for instance, by the Swiss Conference of Bishops to the Christian communities: Such communities have a right to be believed only insofar as they are open to reconciliation; as long as they endeavour to accept and understand better their neighbour, to strive for a peace deeply rooted in true justice, to be willing to forgive wholeheartedly and repeatedly, and sincerely to seek reconciliation with God. It is in this search for basic reconciliation that the sacrament of penance, better understood and more frequently received, has a part to play.

As educators, we are persistently called upon to inculcate the ideals of peace and co-existence, to prepare a generation of men among whom the values of peace, forgiveness and justice guarantee a more genuine spirit of fraternity. The message of Peace Day (1st January 1984) calls for a change in certain inappropriate attitudes in our teaching and in our school policies. Our history lessons, for instance, should not be centred, constantly and inconsiderately, on wars. The dynamics of emulation operative in our schools should tend towards collaboration rather than to competition. It is sad and disturbing to see the many magazine illustrations of young people systematically being trained for war..., and to read so much information about people whose youth has never known peace.

The Synod, therefore, had a concrete reference to our specific mission within the Church, and assigned to us a participation in the ministry of reconciliation. It is worthwhile pausing for a moment to consider some of its implications.

1. *We beseech you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5.20).*

Let us try and consider more carefully our relationship with God: not with a casuistic and legal mentality, but with filial love, which is concerned with correcting whatever draws us away from Him or places us in a dubious situation in His regard.

Sin and penance are themes which La Salle repeats insistently in his meditations. When he uses the word "reconciliation", it is with reference to reconciliation with the Lord, and in Pauline terms.

The Synod has considered sin with the attention required by the central theme of its deliberations and with that required by the present crisis of the "sense of sin" in the world. As an entity and something with objective reality, sin is easily ignored; but, on the other hand, as Cardinal Etchegaray put it, there exists a feeling of guilt — "widespread and pathological" — capable of plunging man into evil in his struggle to free himself from self-condemnation. The distinction between personal and structural sins has been clarified, and our attention has been called to the responsibility we assume on finding ourselves caught up in unjust structures of sin. This situation does not diminish in any way our final individual responsibility because, as Cardinal Höffner says, "it is man who sins, not the structures".

It is obvious that we have to revise and update our moral concepts and ensure for ourselves a healthy and enlightened conscience, such as will guide and check any tendency to go astray. The judgment of one member of the language

group who labelled moral theology the "poor relation" of the Council renewal — could be of interest to us also... We should never forget that our vocation as catechists requires us to be expert guides who "must oppose anything displeasing to God in the children" so that "if we observe in them something that offends God, we must immediately do all that we are able to remedy the problem". This is because "the purpose of the coming of the Son of God into this world was to destroy sin. This must also be the main purpose of the establishment of the Christian Schools". (MTR, 10th Med.)

2. *The sacrament of reconciliation*

The concern shown in the Synod regarding the sacrament of reconciliation was due to the well-known and lamentable crisis generally observable in the declining reception of this sacrament. During the debates it was repeatedly recalled — with praiseworthy sincerity — that priests go but rarely to confession; and seemingly this remark would apply to religious in general...

In this respect, how do we see ourselves as individuals and as a community? It is self-evident that the suppression of the meticulous prescriptions and specific regulations which governed the frequency and manner of confession in the past was not intended to reduce almost to non-existence the use of this sacrament. The new code is as restrained as it is meaningful when it states in canon 664 that "Religious should insist on conversion to God, daily examination of conscience and **frequent** reception of the sacrament of penance".

It is a matter of great interest to discover the root-cause of this generalised indifference: the phenomenon has not been attributed to laziness alone; and still less, to ill will. It has been suggested rather that we are faced with an obvious sign of a general depreciation in an understanding of the purpose of the sacrament today.

I think that most of us have followed carefully the discussions on individual (auricular) confession and on communitarian celebrations of the sacrament of penance: on the possibilities and advantages — or disadvantages — of the widespread use of general absolution. Could this be just another case where curiosity or the search for novelties, more or less “revolutionary”, may be diverting us from a personal reflection on the question or from making the effort needed to discard old and ingrained habits in our way of receiving this sacrament and to replace them with more dynamic forms, capable of revealing this sacrament as a new, more intimate, more loving encounter with the “God who is rich in mercy”. (1)?

The reflective reading of the excellent studies dedicated to the theme of the Synod, and above all, the careful consideration of the papal document which will give us its more precise and official teaching... will help us to transform our routine practice of confession into a “confessio fidei” (a confession of faith), a “confessio laudis” (a proclamation of the glory of God), a “confessio misericordiae” (a filial act of trust in the

(1) It was remarked that the encyclical bearing this title (John Paul II, 30-11-1980) was the most frequently quoted papal document at the Synod.

Father’s mercy), which the Synod recommends us. And our communitarian celebrations of the sacrament will become a frequent source of spiritual nourishment as well as an appropriate expression of that genuine spirit of faith, of reconciliation and of love which should always inspire the reception of sacramental forgiveness.

How can we conclude this brief reference to the sound teaching of the Synod regarding the sacrament of penance without mentioning a glorious Institute tradition which we should restore and reanimate in accordance with the present renewal? We have often praised the care and wisdom of our predecessors who inspired their students with reverence for this sacrament and trained them to make the best use of it. Enlightened by the guidelines and encouragement of the Synod in this sense, should we not now feel called to make a contribution towards revitalizing this sacramental practice and thereby surmounting the crisis which we deplore, especially now that we can rely on the help of a clear pastoral theology?

3. Instruments of peace and reconciliation among men

In his synthesis of the first part of the Synod’s work, Cardinal Martini, principal reporter of the assembly, showed the perfect unity of the synodal theme, excluding dichotomies which had been readily presupposed from the moment the theme was announced. The Synod paid attention “to the divisions that exist among men, to the purpose of reconciliation in the Church, to the importance of educating in the virtue of penance, to greater care in the celebration of the sacrament, etc.

“However, all these were but aspects of one and the same problem, regarding the mission of the Church which is to announce the Gospel of the forgiveness of sin, whether to men in general or to Christians who have fallen into sin”.

The great conflicts men are faced with, and the attempts to re-establish a seriously disturbed peace, easily and necessarily capture most of our attention. But there is always the risk of forgetting that these problems are deeply rooted in the heart of man, in the heart of each one of us. The Word of God calls us to repentance and to an inner conversion as a first contribution to the peace of the world: “Change your hearts,” says the prophet, “seek forgiveness and allow yourselves to be reconciled to God”.

So much for our comments. We shall then have to put some order into our own personal and inner life — this being a constant and necessary premise if we want to be genuine “instruments of God’s peace” among our fellow men.

3.1. Reconciliation of self as a condition for reconciling others

I have already quoted an excerpt of the Swiss bishops’ statement in which they reminded the Christian communities about “the need of accepting and understanding others if they are to win any credibility in their efforts towards reconciliation of the world at large.”

The first step in this direction is to accept and understand ourselves as we really are — with our qualities and also with our own limitations and weaknesses. Not of course that there is any

question of a resigned and passive acceptance of ourselves which would dispense us from all effort to progress. We are speaking of reality and of humility, of what Saint Teresa meant when she wrote “To be humble is to walk in the truth,” not expecting miracles and refusing to admit reality as it really is. Perhaps also we could usefully recall the common sense and the gentle, if unaccustomed, irony of our Founder in his comments on the Gospel passage “You must see signs and miracles or you will not believe” (Med. 73).

Let us be quite clear about what we need to attain this necessary inner peace. We must aim at establishing a synthesis between our objectives and what we can actually achieve, an equilibrium in what we wish to accomplish so as to avoid the anxiety that can result from the tension between the requirements of a well - regulated community life and our multiple apostolic commitments. If we lack this inner equilibrium we shall be quite unable to make any effective contribution towards creating an ambience in our communities which should refresh and encourage us in God’s service and bespeak, in the words of our Rule (3, i), “a message of peace and love.”

3.2. Reconciling attitudes and criteria

Personal crises and tensions, misunderstood and therefore unresolved, disturb and frequently jeopardise the calm and harmony we should maintain in community life.

I think we could do well to apply to ourselves some of the insights I recently read in a paper written by Father Jetté, Superior General of the

Oblates of Mary Immaculate, and addressed to his religious: "During the years following the Council, a good number of religious were shaken in their personal life and deep convictions. The questioning and the many changes affected their practice of prayer, their striving for personal discipline, their relation to the world. In most cases, after the inevitable searching and groping, the proposed changes were found to be justified, even necessary for an appropriate renewal of religious life.

Unfortunately, however, because of a certain weariness and lack of dialogue, many religious have remained at a standstill. The first phase of renewal led them to abandon some of their former attitudes; today they feel too exhausted to embark on the second phase, that of integrating their life into a new outlook concerning mental prayer, the practice of obedience and sacramental confession. They need to make a first step; they need to be reconciled with their own selves and with the Church of today."

To reconcile attitudes and criteria, to accept others without denying one's own identity and without necessarily sacrificing genuinely basic loyalties... is a task that corresponds fully with the exigencies of this "ministry of peace and reconciliation" to which the Synod invites us. It is a witness we cannot refuse considering the claims of brotherly charity and the general good.

3.2.1. *A constant effort to reconcile the different generations*

An ever present problem is that of bridging the "generation gap" — the gap created by inevitable distances in space and time, and aggravated by the accelerating changes in milieux and methods of education and in customs. It is perfectly understandable that such distances or differences cause tensions. They are signs of life and growth as will be seen, please God, in our districts. To be able to overcome conflicts is a sign of maturity, of personal control of one's own problems, of the presence, in a word, of the Spirit who out of different cultures and peoples invites us to form one true family in Christ. The new generations who, from new cultural backgrounds, come to join us now and in the future should not be needlessly burdened with the weight of conflicts and tensions which troubled former communities, nor with exigences which do not correspond precisely with the Gospel demands or with the genuine inspiration of our Founder.

3.2.2. *Compatibility of divergent projects and plans*

A common inspiration, a vocation shared by many, should not be incompatible with diversified initiatives and pluralised procedures that arise from personal and legitimate ways of viewing problems and solutions or from different approaches to varied situations. Sometimes dilemmas are suggested which are both artificial and at variance with the thought of our Founder. One hears, for example, of the need "to opt either for the school or for the service of the poor." ...It would be more exact to speak of the incompatibility that does exist between **a certain type of**

school or education and that which La Salle really proposed or envisaged; or to speak of **certain enterprises among the poor** that do not properly respond to the specific characteristics of our collective option, which is to provide an education understood as an integral factor in the promotion of man. Such education as will assist the most needy to understand and exercise their rights and be able to defend them. (At the time of this letter going to the press, we are celebrating, as it happens, the 35th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man). Here we have an example of communitarian dialogue with an openness to ideas of others and a common search for the truth of our vocation, sole guarantee of our profound unity in the plurality of action, at diverse levels.

3.2.3. Conciliation of differing outlooks and mentalities among diverse cultures

The confrontations and injustices of the past have given way to intercultural dialogue which requires that top priority be given to inculturation or to the integration of all missionary assistance. It is a sign of richness and of a concern typical of our times when nations and cultures dominated for centuries and reduced to passive receptivity, discover that they have a lawful right and full capacity to administer and solve their own affairs. In the field of evangelisation more even than in other areas, dialogue on an equal footing is becoming more and more generalised and lays down its own requirements: the high percentage of coloured participants in the last Synod (32%) and the weight of their interventions were eloquent proofs of what dialogue really means today.

Where we are concerned, given our over-all presence in all the continents, the question is likewise of particular urgency and relevancy. We have decidedly been sharing, and not without risks, the burdens of responsibility at all levels with Brothers from countries recently incorporated into the history of the Institute. Happily, the predictable difficulties of intercultural communities are being gradually overcome. However, it is sad in some cases to observe that the process has not been fully admitted and accepted by some who gave themselves so generously in the early days of their missionary endeavour which was so impressive in its efficiency.

This need of intercultural conciliation likewise raises delicate problems of mutual understanding and acceptance in nations of the developed West on account of ever-growing masses of immigrants that continue to settle in these countries in search of peace and work. Each one of us should cherish an increasing and deep concern for their needs, in accordance with the crusade of peace and reconciliation which is the subject of these brief considerations. Our Christian schools are worthy of the name insofar as they reveal this sensitivity, either when they are doing missionary work in the midst of foreign cultures or when children of these cultures come and ask for a place in our institutions.

3.2.4. Ecumenical peace achieved without false irenics

Without wishing to extend unduly the already lengthy list of situations in need of reconciliation, I would like to refer to the ecumenical challenge,

to the dialogue among different religions, as an invitation to concrete commitments in favour of peace.

We are aware of the present ecclesial vision of a new kind of relationship, which constitutes also an evangelical reconciliation and a renewed attempt at preparing the fulfilment of Christ's supreme wish: "May they be one..." In the course of these days when I am concluding this letter, the Pope is preparing to take a personal part in a religious service at the Lutheran church in Rome, on the occasion of the centenary of Martin Luther. Luther's historical rehabilitation has surprised many on account of views expressed in our Church history texts and deriving from insufficient knowledge or erroneous interpretation. This rectification in favour of justice and truth is another sign and example coming from the head of the Church; far from surprising us, it should help us to change our attitudes and to become involved more decisively, because better informed, in the ecumenical dialogue. We should become so involved without being carried away with false irenics, but seeking rather, with the Church, whatever can remove obstacles and misunderstandings accumulated through the centuries, and searching sincerely for the truth of the Christian message.

This is particularly important for those of our Brothers who are working in countries where the majority of the population belong to other denominations. They should always keep in mind that with well-planned educational means they can, and should, lead the younger generations towards a sincere ecumenical spirit more likely to overcome old prejudices and less likely to be attached to

interests and bonds that hinder the desired unity. There is so much we can do, in countries of different religions, to help those who believe in God and who seek him along different paths. Even if we are dealing with those who do not know the God revealed by Christ in the Gospel, we can arouse their own faith to respond to God's love. It is so sad to see religious belief transformed into a fanaticism which has been — and still is today — an incentive and fuel for many and bitter wars.

* * *

These simple reflections about the Synod theme have no other pretension than to invite you to study, to meditate and work together on, the message recalled by the Synod regarding the mission of the Church and its bearing on our own vocation today.

I would like to recommend to you in a very special way the papal document which will give us a more authentic interpretation of the Synod; St. John Baptist de La Salle wrote in his Meditation for the Chair of St. Peter at Antioch: "You must respect his (the Pope's) every word, and it should suffice that a declaration emanates from him to make you infinitely attentive." Our response should be correspondingly profound with reference to a theme which has received such special attention from the Church and has been so carefully dealt with by the Synod.

The rapid enumeration of so many objectives offered for our consideration and commitment in this general review should not lead to a divided response which would be both ineffective and unrealistic. I have attempted not so much to

enumerate possible commitments as to highlight the richness of certain aspects which if superficially considered, would seem less thought-provoking. The core of the Synodal message is a call to a renewal in the sacrament of penance and in the spirit of penance, both influenced by a generalised crisis, a renewal in the spirit of reconciliation, of peace, of love and mutual acceptance which the Churches wishes to promote and maintain among men, in fulfilment of its mission. This is a huge and challenging task to which La Salle would have us respond as "ministers of the Church sent by Christ to announce the Good News."

As I sign and date this letter on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, I associate myself with the prayer John Paul II has just made before the monument at the Piazza di Spagna: "Intercede, Mary, and speak in motherly and persuasive tones to those who decide the fate of nations... Prevail upon warring men to heed the cry for peace arising from the tortured and defenceless multitudes. Reawaken in the hearts of each and every one the spirit of human solidarity..."

So be it and may we contribute thereto during this new year which dawns on Peace Day. Let us, throughout 1984, be efficient agents of reconciliation in ourselves, in our communities, in our neighbourhood and in the world at large.

Such is my desire and such is my appeal to you as I conclude with a renewed assurance of my wish to be of service to you.

Fraternally in De La Salle,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "José Pablo". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.