



# Letter of Brother Superior

25th December 1984

CASA GENERALIZIA  
dei Fratelli delle Scuole Cristiane  
Via Aurelia, 476 - C.P. 9099  
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Rome, 25th December 1984

Dear Brother,

Once again, as the New Year approaches, I am writing to you on the day we celebrate our Saviour's birth. From my heart I offer you sincere greetings, wishing you grace, peace and happiness. May 1985 be a year of grace and generosity for our lives and mission. May it keep us united in our consecration to the service of God in our brothers, especially the young and the poor, who are particularly entrusted to our care.

### **1985: year of youth**

We are being reminded of this at the moment by the international agencies and the organizations for culture and education. Pope John Paul II has already announced his intention to gather young people together during Holy Week. The Pope has also chosen to address his message for World Peace Day (1st January) to young people calling it, "Peace and Youth Go Forward Together." For its part, the European Union of Conferences of Major Superiors is planning to hold a meeting in Rome, during the month of November, which will examine the involvement of religious with the young.

Here I can only mention these few initiatives as typical examples. This letter is not the place to suggest concrete plans to you; these must be worked out locally or nationally. But I must

not fail to remind you of the challenge which this Year of Youth offers to us. It would be inconceivable that we who have consecrated all our lives to the young should not get involved.

### **The year which is ending...**

For me this has been a year crowded with visits to the different Regions of the Institute. I had given myself the task of making personal contact with many Districts, and I expect to complete this round of visits to the whole Institute some time before our General Chapter begins. In this way, travelling to the Regions of Africa, Spain, Latin America, Canada, the United States and the Middle East, we have been able to meet almost all the 4,600 Brothers based there. With them we have been able to get a better grasp of our problems and to discuss these briefly in general terms, so as to keep up-to-date.

We have also tried to make it easier for the Brothers to understand our Institute documents and our decisions, and to encourage all the Brothers to share responsibility and to participate more actively in the preparation for our next General Chapter.

This large and demanding series of visits will be practically completed in the first months of 1985, as we travel to the Districts of Asia, Australia and Oceania. A clearer up-to-date evaluation of our activities and our vitality as an Institute will no doubt be the fruit of these meetings. As we learn more about our successes and our difficulties, which are sometimes very grave, we feel more profoundly united as Brothers — and this is more important than ever. It will offer a

clearer sense of direction to the immediate preparation for our General Chapter, and help to get this under way.

### **Chapter preparation**

It is obvious that this will be the major preoccupation of the coming year and our priority at the Centre of the Institute, as it has been during 1984, along the pattern outlined in our letter of 15th May, 1983, and in Circulars 416 and 419.

The two precapitular commissions started their work when they met for the first time in Rome on 24th September. The preparatory commission has already offered the first general outline of its plan of action, with some suggestions for the practical organisation of the Chapter. The commission writing the new text of the Rule (cf. Circular 412) is working full time and very competently to prepare this text. We hope, as we have already indicated, to be able to send it to the elected members of the Chapter next October, with a view to its discussion and approval during the Chapter.

### **Three exceptional events**

We have visited so many Districts and Delegations during 1984 that it is impossible to give a detailed account of them all. I prefer to limit myself here to three events which seem to me occupy a particularly important place in the panorama which I usually try to sketch in my letters to you.

1. The first is the **Eighth Lasallian World Congress** which was celebrated in Mexico at the beginning of August.

The story of what happened there is now well-known, since it has been related in a good number of our Institute publications and shared widely by those who took part in the Congress. I want to emphasise the exceptional participation of the young people who were present, the excellent groupwork which preceded and prepared the Congress (especially in Latin America), the wonderful incentive given by the Congress to continue the work of reflection on the themes debated there in further meetings in different regions and countries. Some of these have already taken place; echoes have reached me of the excellent spirit which reigned there and of the Christian and social commitments undertaken as a result of these meetings.

In my final address, I analyzed and emphasized the constant progress which has been noted in the course of the last four World Congresses. It concerns the movement within our Lasallian associations from a totally nostalgic mentality, eyes fixed firmly on the past, to a more dynamic approach which is ready to accept the challenge of the modern world and to face up to the future. The evidence for this progress was the enthusiastic large-scale participation of young people in the preparation for the Congress, to which I have already referred.

We don't wish to play down in any way the precious collaboration of older people, with all their wisdom and experience. It is urgent and most important that an active dialogue be established between younger and older generations, so as to ensure constant renewal and a more dynamic and realistic approach in these associations, one that will open up new possibilities for action. A

Congress has no right to exist for its own sake: it must be an extraordinary opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas which might stimulate and inspire those taking part. It presupposes movement and life. It exists to create and develop energy.

Each World Congress has become a landmark pointing towards new possibilities for action in associations which are called Lasallian and which want to grasp the significance of this name and to live up to it. Today the Lasallian Movement among lay people is expanding all the time; it promises to offer more depth and scope to our action to open up the Gospel in the vast and varied field of our apostolic mission. Teachers, parents, former students, senior pupils, growing in number all the time, are telling us every day with more and more conviction that in all the pressures and decisions they face, the inspiration and strength of the Lasallian message extends beyond the strict limits of the Institute. They are looking to us for support, light and encouragement to do something great for the Gospel and for society, something that will grow. The Congress in Mexico was the privileged opportunity to experience this faith and hope, and to proclaim it before the world.

## **2. The canonization of Brother Miguel**

The 21st October, 1984, is now a glorious part of our history. Our familiar horizon is lit up by a star, a new star of exceptional brightness, which incarnates and exalts the values of our vocation. As a new saint, a living witness and a powerful intercessor, St Miguel Febres Cordero has made our vocation as catechists and conse-

crated educators of the poor shine out within the whole Christian world.

The series of analytical studies presenting the spirituality of our new saint has been enriched by the homily delivered by Pope John Paul II in St Peter's, and by numerous biographies published in the different languages spoken within the Institute. We are invited to deepen our knowledge of St Miguel's example and message, so that these will become a source of inspiration, strength and courage in the never completed task of renewing our identity as Brothers. May Brother Miguel help us and inspire us to make an effort to prepare to work at the discussion and discernment which we have proposed as a lead-up to our General Chapter.

### **3. An important regional assembly of Brothers**

The Brothers of North America held a big regional convocation last August at St Mary's College, Moraga, California. Its repercussions will certainly go far beyond regional boundaries, for such a large number of participants — 600 Brothers — has never before met for such a gathering. But what impressed me most was certainly the excellent preparation brought to the convocation, as well as the number and timeliness of the subjects treated. These were well chosen and skillfully developed by a group of distinguished speakers. I must also mention the lively spirit of brotherhood, openness and creativity which dominated the whole programme.

It is true that this gathering, exceptional in terms of its organisation and attendance, had a precedent at Beauvais when, on the occasion of the Tercentenary of the Institute, five hundred

Brothers from the Region of France took part in a similar assembly. The Beauvais gathering is well remembered by all those who came from far and near to take part in it, as I did myself.

Such outstanding meetings, perfectly organized, demand an enormous gift of generosity, human effort and material support. Only a great love for the Institute and for the Brothers, coupled with an enterprising spirit, could awaken and sustain the energy required to make a success of such an event. I am certain that to inspire new initiatives and discover possibilities still unknown, these assemblies and congresses have no match: they inspire us to revise our methods and to enrich our ideas and the criteria we apply to our mission and to the problems we face.

Congratulations, then, and our sincere thanks to those who planned and carried out this project, and to all those who contributed to its overall success. May it have many imitators!

### **The last session of Cil before the General Chapter**

This will take place during the early months of 1985. The activities and content of the programme will be centred around the theme of **prayer**. It will be a privileged opportunity to deepen once again one of the most vital elements of our personal and community lives. "We must reaffirm," said Pope John Paul II in his homily on 24th November, 1984, "that everyone consecrated in the priesthood or in religious life, and indeed every believer, must consider prayer as the essential and irreplaceable work proper to his vocation, the **opus divinum** which precedes every commitment."

To this "summit of our lives and our activity" (John Paul II) I have thought of dedicating the simple reflections which usually accompany my Christmas wishes to our Lasallian family. This is certainly not the place to offer you a treatise on the theme of prayer, which is already so richly covered in worthwhile books. Perhaps, though, it might be worth our asking whether the existence of all this literature succeeds in awakening within us a need to study it?

The lines which follow will be some thoughts or reflections, rather quickly jotted down in between journeys, visits and meetings. Nevertheless I hope they will not fail to speak about what concerns us all as Brothers, and to lead us to confront our lives with the teachings of some masters of the spiritual life. I want to stimulate us to bring our lives into line with the demands of our vocation and mission, our consecration and ministry. We are asked to live up to the message we proclaim, to become more convincing witnesses. Otherwise how can we claim to awaken in the young a love for our lives as Brothers and a desire to share our vocation, so that the work of John Baptist De La Salle will live on in the world of today?

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In order to revise and put some shape into the values which inspire our life, we need to examine constantly and methodically the different elements which motivate us. Certain situations offer a special invitation to do this.

We have just celebrated the splendid canonization of Brother Miguel. The memory of these moving celebrations shared together must not be watered down into a mere fact of history. It offers

lessons for life and opens up new ways which throw light on our personal experience and commitment. The hero offered for our study and our imitation reveals the most important Lasallian values of our vocation, which was also his. In these values he found and lived the inspiration for which we are looking today.

In our Institute, we are living through a process of evaluation and discernment. This will be the fundamental task of the General Chapter, for which we are getting ready. Our effort to improve the way we live our vocation today, our repeated experience of failing to live up to our ideals and the consequent frustration this brings, must drive us to face up to our responsibilities honestly and sincerely and to look to the causes of our disappointment which brings such pain.

Instead of losing heart when things do not work out as we wish or as we had intended, let us ask calmly and carefully what is fundamentally wrong or missing in our life.

Using this constructive and demanding approach, we can begin to examine what remains a permanent problem or one never perfectly resolved, seeing it as the aim or objective of further effort: I am referring to **our life of personal and community prayer**, which is the key to success or failure in the matters that most concern us.

### A serious problem

Is this how **you** see it? To find out whether it really is a serious problem I sent a very simple questionnaire to the Brothers Visitors and to the Brothers responsible for Delegations three months ago.

Fifty per cent of the sixty-five replies I received reflected the gravity of the situation, sometimes pointing to the reasons and the situations which justified their conclusion. But let me add that among the other responses, which seemed to be more optimistic, the approximate figures offered as an estimate of fidelity to prayer caused the initial positive impression to crumble. Yes, the problem **is** serious, and it is particularly worrying that some people are not sufficiently aware of its importance and are not looking for adequate solutions. A typical comment offered by one correspondent admits, "There is plenty of goodwill, but a great lack of facility and inspiration."

Let's add, right at the beginning, that the most commonly repeated answers offered in the course of this inquiry show that the Brothers are aware that there is much to be done and that they are looking to us for some help. Ninety-one per cent of the replies recognise some progress in fidelity and vitality as far as the prayer-life of our communities is concerned. In this respect, as in others, we seem to be sharing in the life and passion of the Church in every age and in every culture.

In March 1980, in the final document published after the plenary assembly devoted to the study of "the contemplative dimension of Religious Life," the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes (SCRIS) spoke of "a renewed interest, following a certain period when prayer and recollection have been devalued, though the difficulties have still not disappeared." (1)

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(1) SCRIS Information, *Religious and human develop-*

Yes, Brother, there is a serious problem here! And it is the fundamental problem in all human life of how we relate to the God we find in our lives, existentially, and not merely in dogmas or in theories.

### **We are called to take God seriously**

"God is not a supernumerary, an unimportant figure in my conscience. Neither is God a puppet in my life. Or if he is, it is time I took God more seriously." (2)

What place does he really occupy in our preoccupations, in our awareness? This is the key question which gives shape and meaning to our existence; it underlies all those activities which absorb and exhaust our energy. In one's personal plans, as in the "community project," it is not always clear that God is the centre around which our lives are built, that the work in which we are engaged is really **God's** work and that on Him depend the success and the true meaning of everything we undertake. To move from the principles we proclaim to the reality we feel and experience is a long journey from a faith which is hardly alive or active to a true life of faith which, in Lasallian spirituality, is "that which is of the utmost importance and to which the greatest attention should be given in an Institute..." (3)

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*ment: The contemplative dimension of Religious Life.* (Vatican City, 1980), p. 45.

(2) Bishop B.C. Butler, *Prayer: An Adventure in Living*, C.T.S., London, 1983, p. 17.

(3) *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, 1718, c. 2.1.

Few pages are so vehement and make such a profound impression as those of John Baptist De La Salle's Meditation 77, when our Founder applies to "many who live in community... these words addressed by our Lord to those who bought and sold in the Temple: 'My house is a house of prayer; and you have made it into a den of thieves.' For, whereas they ought to have entered only for the purpose of applying themselves to prayer and the other exercises of piety, they neglect these holy practices..." (2nd point.)

It is an idea that the Holy Founder never stops repeating, like an obsession in his **Meditations** and other writings: "You who have given yourself to God and who should consequently consecrate to him the whole of your life, should also do everything in a spirit of religion." (4)

Saint John Baptist De La Salle wants for us and recommends to us that which made St Theresa of Jesus so happy: "As she found all in God, so also she saw God in all things." (5)

Think of the typically Lasallian "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God!" To live in God's presence is for our Founder the support and central pillar of his work; and it has this place in the spirituality of his disciples.

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The **Meditations** for the days which lead up to the Ascension form a substantial short treatise, personal and sound, of what mental prayer means

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(4) *Meditations* of St John Baptist De La Salle, No. 58, 1.  
(5) *Meditations*, No. 177, 3.

for the Brother. The **Meditations for the Time of Retreat** remind us of the state of total dependence in which we are as far as God is concerned, if we are to produce any profound and lasting good in our students. It is worth the trouble of reading again those pages on this theme, and meditating on them, in **Announcing the Gospel to the Poor**. Richly charged with meaning, they are presented in the original French edition under the title of "Making oneself worthy to be God's minister by living God's life." (6)

We shall come to appreciate more that we cannot be truly Lasallian, or disciples of De La Salle, unless we take much more seriously the life of personal dialogue with God, the experience of God generously shared.

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### **A good way of keeping up-to-date**

We could not really claim to understand our times, to read "the signs of the times", if we remained content to lock up in past history or in a foreign culture what the repeated advice and example of John Baptist De La Salle urge us to practise in our daily lives.

I quoted the Sacred Congregation's sentence recognizing that the crisis which has ensnared religious life seems to be passing. The convocation and happy outcome of the **Symposium**

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(6) M. Sauvage, M. Campos, *Annoncer L'Evangile aux Pauvres*, Beauchesne, Paris, 1977, pp. 149-241. (Unfortunately these pages are not included in the abridged American translation of this book.)



**on Prayer** during the celebration of our Institute's Tercentenary wanted to be a landmark, showing that De La Salle's message on the faith-dimension, the contemplative dimension of our life as Brothers, still applies to our times. And the **Credo** which the fourteen Brothers who took part in the Symposium prepared together is a weighty statement of what many of us feel about the aptness of that message for us today, of how we must try to live it. I invite you, Brother, to read it again, to meditate on it once more (or in some cases maybe for the first time?) and to savour how in their statements — so well presented by our Generalate Publications — these Brothers have shared with us all their experience of prayer. (7)

In every historical process, there is movement forward and back, high points and low points, marked contrasts. Louf speaks about a paradox: "Here then is the paradox of a crisis which could yet prove to be a fruitful one. Although the practice of prayer in its various forms may be in decline, never was the hunger for prayer greater than it is now, more especially among the young." (8)

Indeed we can see this very clearly in young people with whom we are in touch, and above all among the growing number of those who meet to listen to and to live the message of De La Salle. **Prayer is a Hunger**, as the title of a quite recent work reminds us. At one point the author writes, "Prayer tomorrow begins today or there will be

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(7) *Mental Prayer*, Tercentenary Symposium, Rome, 1981.

(8) Andre Louf, *Teach us To Pray*, D.L.T., London, 1974, p. 13.

no prayer tomorrow. The penalty of not praying is the loss of one's capacity to pray! The promise of tomorrow is the hunger of today... Prayer no longer lies on the edge of life. It moves into the core of the person's life and meaning. Without prayer, there is no way, no truth, no life." (9)

Man is conditioned and, up to a point, moulded by his cultural environment. Like a ship in the midst of a storm, each of us suffers the incessant tossing of the waves: our behaviour, our way of thinking, our vision of reality are influenced by the society in which we live.

And today, in spite of appearances, we risk moving through life alienated by a thousand things which prevent us from becoming aware of our own identity. It is surprising that modern man who has been able to dominate the universe feels an inner emptiness. Bombarded continually by outside forces, he is pressured to conform his life to social models, and in this way he runs the risk of becoming a robot.

He is told what to think; he is given little idols to venerate, products to be completed, ideals to be forged. At a given moment, he finds that he is empty inside and yet he is afraid to descend into his own inner being. However, many young people are rebelling against this social dictatorship; they will no longer accept the banality and superficiality of modern life. They are searching for meaning, searching to communicate with someone who might give a meaning to their lives, one far removed from the

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(9) Edward Farrell, *Prayer is a Hunger*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1974, p. 7.

idols of technological society and the dictates of the "new mandarins."

Brother, today we can speak of a **hunger for prayer** not felt in the same way in past decades. Perhaps it is a **hunger for meaning**, in reaction to the great psychosis of our times, when we live in a society always in progress, but richer in means than in clear ideas about where this progress might be leading.

"Every person is a thirst for meaning, for ultimate value, for truth. Every person is a readiness to love, to follow, to give oneself to that which fills and completes the movement of one's being. 'My soul is thirsting for God, the God of my life... Deep is calling to deep... Send out your light and your truth. Let these be my guide!' (Psalm 42) The spirit of man intuitively reaches to its source, its ground of being. Man knows that his secret can be uncovered only through **His** secret. 'Such knowledge is too deep for me, beyond my understanding, a height to which my mind cannot attain' (Psalm 139).

"God finally speaks his ultimate and inexhaustible Word, 'Jesus Christ, the revelation of a mystery kept secret for endless ages' (Romans 16, 25). Paul prays constantly that 'the Father of glory may give you a spirit of wisdom and **perception** of what is revealed, to bring you to a full knowledge of him...so that you can see what hope his call holds for you' (Col. 1, 26-28; Eph. 1, 17, 18).

"In the words of Vatican II, 'There is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words in which they have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and

study made by believers who treasure these things in their heart, through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience' (**De Verbum**, 8)". (10)

Brother, in a world searching for meaning, the meaning of its existence, we who have found the "hidden treasure" are called to cry out, "in season and out of season," the Good News of Jesus Christ. Often, like the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost, we have to admit that we have neither silver nor gold, but, like Peter, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, we can always invite people to **walk** (Acts 3,6). "The modern world becomes Christian again when groups of people come together in the thought that 'where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them' (Matthew 18, 20)". (11)

There is a **hunger for strength and consistency** which searches "the steadfastness of the rock" in the God who can do anything, who can make use even of our weakness, and who helps us when we turn to him in our inadequacy and vulnerability at this difficult time when leaving religious life is no longer an isolated phenomenon and when fidelity "is no longer a virtue of our times." (12) It is a hunger which is impressed by the capacity to work and to suffer which we recognise in the saints, and at the same time it is perplexed by these same qualities.

Cardinal Wojtyla, today Pope John Paul II,

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(10) Farrell, *op. cit.*, pp. 36 to 40.

(11) Cardinal Basil Hume, *To Be a Pilgrim*, London, 1983. Quotation on p. 45 of the Spanish edition, Salamanca, 1984.

(12) Pope Paul VI, General Audience, 11-10-1972.

praised the sublime example of St Maximilian Kolbe, saying: "When he accompanied the little flock of nine condemned to death, he was exercising his priesthood. He wasn't only saving the life of the tenth man condemned to death originally. He wanted to help the other nine to die. From the moment the door closed on those unfortunate men, he took them into his own care, and not only these but also the others who were dying of hunger in the neighbouring bunkers and whose screams struck fear into all who came near them. The fact is that from the minute that Father Kolbe had joined them, those unfortunate men felt protected and helped, and the cells where they were waiting to die resounded with prayers and hymns." (13)

The miracles of Pentecost continue to happen today...

There is **a hunger for true dialogue with God** who transcends all our limitations, all our betrayed hopes, all those discussions which fail to solve the really big problems. Vocation is in essence a mysterious dialogue with a person who is none other than God himself. "God is the 'You' who meets the permanent and real 'Me' in man," is Moltmann's way of expressing this. "If I really look at things, the 'I' starts to know and to act. If I really look at the Other Person, the 'You', I cease to be an isolated acting subject: the 'I' becomes a dialogue. I listen and speak, I start to exist outside myself and, as I come face to face with the Other, I change." (14)

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(13) Jean Lafrance, *Perseverants dans la Prière*, Paris, p. 144.

(14) Jurgen Moltmann, *El hombre. Antropología cris-*

Think of what happened to the boy Samuel! When we are beset with the struggles and conflicts of life, we need someone worthwhile to talk with — we need a friend. And that is exactly what St Thérèse said about personal prayer, that "it is nothing more than friends talking."

People who are gifted with sound judgment, coupled with great generosity, believe that political commitment is necessary and urgent, if man is to be saved; day by day they see more clearly the danger of overthrowing one dictator only to fall under the power of another. "So many Christians are already tired of seeing colleagues 'burned out' in the struggle, not only because they are flawed by revolutionary enthusiasm, but because they are missing the spirit, the Spirit which in Christ turns us into more than brilliant revolutionaries, into persons who are free and capable of setting others free, of helping them live in freedom as liberated people...We are talking here on the level of personal experience and interpersonal relationships: relationships with 'someone' rather than with 'something.' People often ask how we distinguish a specifically Christian contribution from other programmes of social and political action. For if we reduce Christianity to a programme of revolutionary action, what's left of it? There is an urgent need for us to get back to **prayer**, not because we are tired out by the struggle but because we want to struggle in a different way: one which springs from the Gospel and the Spirit of Jesus." (15)

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*tiana en los conflictos del presente*, (Spanish edition, Salamanca, 1973), pp. 115-116.

(15) J.M. Castillo, *La alternativa Cristiana*, Salamanca, 1981. pp. 219-224.

Only a very awkward and limited Christian way of thinking insists that it's *our* job to correct our distorted vision, tactical errors and wasted effort; we must put more stress on *God's* part in the process, for He is the one who can really make what we would like to happen **actually** happen. Father Arrupe was called to offer a balanced picture of a man who could fight but who was also a spiritual man. His picture may help us. "There has been," he wrote, "a lack of proportion between the generosity of effort in the Society in recent years and the slow rate of progress in the expected interior renewal and adaptation in certain areas of need. I wonder if this may not be due to the effect that involvement in new and intense experiences has had on our theological and spiritual attempt to discover and reproduce in ourselves the spirit and content of our Founder's journey in faith." (16)

As I reminded the Brothers taking part in the Convocation in California last summer, "When the smoke-screen of our statements and words, of our propositions and meetings fades away, what is left? What is the reason for our hectic activity, for our workaholism? The answer to these disquieting questions may throw some light on our lack of interior prayer-life... It may be that Christ is the great Absence. It may be that instead of following Him, Infinite Love, we are striving to fill our own hearts with passing projects. And yet the Brother evangelizes not merely by doing things, but rather by bearing witness to his religious consecration. His work is his own life,

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(16) Lafrance, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

and his life is meaningful to the extent that Christ has become the centre of his existence.

"It is not enough to accept Christ in theory. We must show that we have accepted him individually and as communities. We must find him again, place him at the centre of our existence. This is only possible through a life of prayer. If we abandon prayer, if a life of prayer does not support our communities, our commitment will be worthless. However distinguished our teaching and our academic success, we shall not be announcing the Good News. It is really urgent that we rediscover one of the elements which define our identity: **prayer.**"

As the General Chapter draws near, it is logical that the Institute should undertake a process of revitalization to try to revive the initial thrust which inspired St John Baptist De La Salle and his disciples at the very beginning. This will not happen unless Christ animates our efforts. The only worthwhile **aggiornamento** is a return to the Gospel in which there is no room for compromise with the world. Let's not forget that "bringing things up-to-date to satisfy present needs will not be effective unless spiritual renewal makes it come alive," and that "for a person to renew himself spiritually, he must first be aware that it is the Holy Spirit who brings about the renovation of men and of institutions." (17)

Let's make no mistake! Accustomed as we are to attaining our objectives in the academic world, perhaps we are inclined to think that hearts can be renewed by the use of techniques and

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(17) *Declaration*, 1967, 3, 2.

sophisticated procedures. We should not forget the Lord's warning: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing" (John 15, 5.) The biblical image is clear and expressive; it causes us to question the vague feeling of self-sufficiency which takes over so many of our apostolic plans. Why should we be surprised, then, when in spite of all our efforts the results are often so poor and so limited?

Whenever we speak of "revitalization" — and we must speak of it often as we get ready for a Chapter! — we become aware again of the need to have a real hunger for prayer, of the need to apply ourselves with more conviction to improve the quality of our dialogue with God. He is the Lord who has called us. This dialogue must be real, a constant feature of our lives as God's children, personally and in community, if we are not to burn ourselves out and waste our forces in setting up and developing plans which do not really speak to our needs and do not serve our mission effectively.

Under one form or another, it is very important for us all to recognise that "the great need of Western man at the present day is for a recovery of the tradition and the widespread practice of prayer. When we have perfected our techniques of education and art and production, including the production of the means to destroy our world, what then? For what sort of life shall we educate? Why and what shall we produce? What is the end that makes human living worthwhile? If we turn our back on the great spiritual tradition of mankind, instead of trying to develop it, what are

we proposing to put in its place?" (18)

It is only when we agree on this point and become convinced of the necessity and importance of prayer in our lives, and of the demands that this must make, that we shall be able to set aside some of those conflicts that divide us from time to time and prevent us from adding to the richness of our common life with this treasure of God's grace. Let's think about some of these conflicts.

### **A question for the individual or a community effort?**

We accept that there is a constant dialectical tension between "individual" and "community." We know the nature and supreme value of the human person, and we shudder to think of the continual danger of alienation and oppression which threatens the value of the individual.

**Redemptor Hominis** is a solemn appeal to bishops, priests, religious families, to all the sons and daughters of the Church, "to save the whole person, with all his qualities. It is not a question of 'man' in some abstract sense, but of real, concrete, historical man, every individual human being." (19)

Community life is there to protect and to develop the life and potential of each individual person, so that he may live autonomously and fulfil his own destiny. At the same time, the **Declaration** points to the text of **Gaudium et Spes** which tells

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(18) Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

(19) John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 13.

us that "it has pleased God to make men holy and to save them not merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges him in truth and serves him in holiness." (GS 32; LG 2) (20)

This is very clear. And yet, in the process whereby the individual is accepted into and withdraws from the community, it is not rare to see conflicts arise which affect our prayer-life as well as other aspects of our life-in-common.

People say, "Prayer is a personal thing," and, in a profound sense, they are right. Others say, "Above all, prayer must belong to the community," supporting their statement with excellent arguments. The danger would be to exaggerate the impact of either conclusion to the detriment of the equilibrium which we need. If I consider prayer as my personal affair, I am in danger of taking no part in the effort to promote and organize the prayer-life of the community. In seeking to follow the inspiration of the Spirit, about which our Rule has something to say, (21) I can forget that the Lord with whom I claim to be in dialogue is Father and that he wants his children to be united and open in true brotherhood, not only in prayer but in each day's life. This would be to fail to recognise that the highest form of community experience is common prayer where, in God's presence, all our worries and problems dissolve. This makes it possible for us to come to him together, seeking his inspiration, asking him to confirm us in our desire to serve him.

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(20) *Declaration*, 1967, 20, 3.

(21) 1967 *Rule*, 3d.

"Today we use the word 'community' too easily: everything must be 'community.' I think we are making a fundamental mistake. It's true that everything must be stamped with the notion of 'sharing,' but, to be real, community needs greater depth... We talk about the 'economic community,' the 'community of the neighbourhood,' 'community of ownership,' the 'school community,' the 'parish community.' Do all these expressions really refer to the true concept of community?" (22)

Today, prayer-in-common expresses and enriches the values needed for our common vocation. We must pray together, That's the best way of resolving our problems of how to communicate together. In prayer, mysterious bonds are formed between us which root us in the community of the Trinity. When priests or other groups of Christians stop discussing and start praying together, something happens which surpasses all their possibilities. There's a change of vision: instead of looking hostilely at one another, we start to look to the Lord who is above all.

Moreover, let's not forget that the community dimension of prayer exhausts neither its capacity nor its content. Prayer will always be the mystery of a dialogue between the creature and the Creator, between the child and the Heavenly Father, and this dialogue gets richer so that prayer can become more or less complex, including prayer in a liturgical setting. True community prayer is enriched spiritually by all who take part in it. In no sense does it rule out or get in the

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(22) *Sinite*, Instituto Superior de Ciencias Catequísticas San Pio X, Madrid, no. 74, various authors, p. 124.

way of personal prayer. What would a community celebration mean, however elaborately prepared, without personal experience, without each participant's inspiration and attention to God? It would be nothing more than pure spectacle, empty noise, to which we could easily apply the Master's well-known judgment: "This people honours me with the lips, but their hearts are far from me." (Mt 15, 8)

### **Fixed times or spontaneity?**

Spontaneity is good, and we need not regret the loss of detailed rulings which laid down that the same exercises of exactly the same length should be performed by everybody. But neither can we contemplate without serious misgivings the "anti-structural approach" which scorns a well-established tradition and leaves it up to each person's whim to fix times and methods of prayer. We would never propose this way of acting for any other form of community activity. And let us remember that prayer is a value which is lived by the whole community.

The reaction to the suppression of excessively uniform timetables imposed from without has caused havoc in some places where people, acting especially under external pressure, have been unable to remain faithful to what is essentially an internal demand. The situation remains that our communities are invited by the Rule to organize their own life of prayer. They must establish timetables which help the weakness of each Brother and provide opportunities for him to unite with others in worship and prayer. For this, sufficient time and facilities must be foreseen, so that each person's prayer does not become

too hard to fit in and sometimes practically impossible. We must certainly avoid all forms of "minimalism" or any kind of "task-work mentality," which would be a complete contradiction of the contemplative, prayerful dimension of community life, to which we look for visible witness of what religious life is about.

"Community projects," in quite a number of Districts, stop short of being specific about mental prayer, acting out of I don't know what kind of fear or human respect, and leaving it entirely up to the initiative of each Brother to find the time and place for fulfilling the "first and principal exercise of the day." But is this really a purely personal affair? Are we not too optimistic in our judgment if we believe that all of us have reached such a degree of maturity that any help from the community in this matter is totally useless? Or perhaps — God forbid! — the attitude arises from a general lack of interest in this important duty and privilege for each Brother?

The conclusion — rather a painful one in general! — that I have drawn from certain signs and external indications is that many Brothers' esteem for mental prayer has sunk to a very low level. Unfortunately this conclusion is confirmed by the replies to the enquiry which I mentioned earlier: 56 per cent of these suggest that many Brothers give a very low priority to the faithful and sincere practice of mental prayer. "The weak point"... "We have a long way to go"... "Not enough time"... These expressions and others like them show how basically widespread is this sickness. Only 20 per cent believe that this religious duty is done well in their area. The remainder — 24 per cent — put forward vague or qualified judgments which in general point to

a defective situation, although from time to time there is some evidence of a tendency for things to get better.

There is no doubt that a sincere conversion is called for. Let us set aside those endlessly vague expressions of appreciation which show nothing concrete, and let us agree to take more seriously those strongly expressed convictions of our Holy Founder. Then our community plans and projects will be faithful instruments setting out strong convictions and serious resolutions, which might help us to keep them. The life of the Institute is at stake.

### Are working and praying the same thing?

The phrase is attributed to Don Bosco. At least it looks like that. Pius XI seems to confirm this when, commenting on that saint, he said, "Work and prayer are the same thing... Work is a prayer and prayer is a work." (23) The meaning of this statement suggests a link with Saint John Baptist De La Salle's famous sentence to be found in the **Collection**: "Do not discriminate between the particular duties of your state and those which refer to your salvation and perfection." (24)

Has the classic Benedictine « **Ora et labora** » been reduced to a tautological slogan? One could say that this is how it is understood by those (perhaps quite a significant number) who leave aside their prayer to take on activities which are

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(23) Quoted in the *Acts of the Salesian General Chapter*, 1922, 15.

(24) *Collection of Short Treatises*, Reflections on the Retreat, 4.

more or less concerned with the apostolate or with social action. We must remember that to interpret the words of a saint as if they were those of any kind of author, without taking into account the context of his life or the interpretation which he himself brought to the words, shows a lack of historical honesty which could lead to almost any dangerous misinterpretation, however sophisticated.

Work becomes prayer in reality only when a truly **missionary** motivation or orientation gives religious meaning and value to actions performed as part of a mission to serve other people. Let us not isolate the notion of work, and let's know how to limit it by following the example of our Saviour who put aside long periods to converse with his Father, even though crowds of people were asking for his help. And let's not forget those saints who attributed high status to work done for the Lord and for his service, into which they threw themselves heart and soul with total self-giving, precisely because the fire on which they were offering their sacrifice was fueled by hours generously set aside to spend with God.

Work and prayer must belong together, each penetrating the other without getting dangerously confused with it. It's a question of loyalty and balance. We must learn to call things by their names and to look at everything as God looks at it. Louf uses chapter 13 of the **Letter to the Hebrews** to describe the double liturgy which every Christian must celebrate all the time: on one side, the sacrifice of prayer, through which we never stop calling on the Lord's name and interceding for all humanity; and on the other, the sacrifice of love, through which we place all the gifts we receive from our Father at the



service of our brothers and sisters. Shortly afterwards, the author adds that "one could never accuse true prayer of being cut off from life and getting lost in unreality. Prayer which deserved to be reproached for this would show that it was not true prayer. Instead it would be formalism or merely sterile introspection." (25)

The texts of our Holy Founder telling us not to separate our work, which is **ministry**, from our prayer, are many, and they are persuasive, especially when expressed in his **Meditations**.

Metz draws our attention to the fact that "as disciples of Christ, we must become aware, as must those who share our method of prayer, of the One to whom our prayers are addressed, and of what we mean when we talk about God." (26)

The characteristic features of the God who is Creator and Liberator, to whom we turn, must also become visible in **our** behaviour and our attitudes. In a word, we must "live our prayer" and "pray our life."

"In prayer we are, with Jesus, the world's ambassadors before the Father. The whole of humanity must recognise its own voice in our prayer: it is a humanity in need of redemption, forgiveness, purification." (27)

Reasons which are offered to justify cutting down our prayer-time can hardly be regarded as

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(25) Louf, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

(26) J.B. Metz, *The Courage to Pray*, Burns and Oates, London, 1980, p. 21.

(27) Louf, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

acceptable. After all, they are often excuses for activities which we have not been asked to do. Is it really possible to justify the lack of balance between shortage of time for prayer and a heavy load of serious work which really ties in with our mission and with the demands of obedience? Few of the pretexts offered stand up to serious examination. Let's help one another to see clearly and to act sincerely in God's sight, so as to set ourselves free from fallacious and sophisticated talk which stops us from being what our Holy Founder wanted us to be.

### Methods, forms, styles...

Do we need material to help us? It exists. And yet there are problems in knowing how to use techniques. Sometimes conflicts arise.

We admit that playing down or ruling out the use of a particular method of prayer may spring more from presumption or from negligence than from a correct appreciation of human psychology or of the means God uses to reach us. The variety of methods available allows us to adapt our prayer to our different personalities and to our different stages of personal development. We can use the method that best suits this particular time or situation.

We have the particular method proposed by our Founder: a rich heritage for us, if we really want to live his spiritual teaching. It is Christ-centred; it opens up a dialogue with God; it is truly affective prayer; its focus on the presence of God is treated very methodically; it offers scope for gradual progress to suit each person's stage of development in the art of prayer.

Brothers Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos are preparing a new edition of **The Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer** (for which we are waiting impatiently!). The main achievement of their presentation will be to help us understand the spirituality of the **Method** and its meaning for us, the Brothers of today.

At the moment we see books on different methods of prayer and meditation multiplying around us, both within and outside our Church. Scarcely a month ago, I had the pleasure of hearing a Benedictine major superior talk about experiments in the "zen method" practised under his direction by a group of monks, sisters and lay Catholics in a monastery in Japan, with very helpful benefits for the practice of meditation. I've also had the chance to hear about similar experiments tried by some of our Brothers, which have really helped their prayer-life and especially their serious practice of carefully prepared, daily mental prayer.

Trying out these well-tested methods can be a sign of personal interest in making progress in the art of prayer. But, more than anything else, taking part in good "prayer-groups" can offer us most help: sampling the variety of styles of prayer can help us to discover new possibilities and new values for ourselves, which can help to eliminate routine and indifference.

A good many responses to our enquiry comment on the progress observed in the quality of community-prayer when it is animated creatively by different Brothers taking turns to make prayer-in-common more lively.

These signs of new interest which I have

pointed out briefly are excellent. Yet, like other movements, this one is not free from deviations and errors, and can sometimes cause difficulties. For instance, we could point to the problem which arises from the attitude of some Brothers who automatically oppose any kind of change in the pattern, formulate or times of prayer. They come from well-trodden, even monotonous paths, which they defend with reference to some notion of "fidelity"...or perhaps they are naturally opposed to change and therefore resist ideas and initiatives proposed by others. These Brothers must learn to recognise that the "forms" in which prayer is expressed are not the essential thing, and that their stubborn and inflexible refusal to accept changes can make them responsible for the lack of success in others' prayer. The same thing is true for those who take the opposite position of accepting no form of prayer-in-common unless it fits into the new pattern they prefer. Acting in this way shows an urgent need to ask the Lord for that "love which is patient...always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes." (28) St Paul says that this kind of love is God's gift to all who believe in him.

How much progress we would make in our personal and community prayer if we would decide — even better, if we would pool our initiatives and efforts — to study methods and forms of prayer which would promote practical knowledge of an activity which is so important. What a mistake to believe that everything consists in following the inspiration of the moment or the mood of each day! This would be a deplorable

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[28] 1 Corinthians 13, 4-7.

way of thinking of our relationship with God in mental prayer.

It is still necessary to respect the techniques of prayer which come to us from far away and long ago. These techniques "can set us all on the road to prayer; but they cannot of themselves bring us to our destination. They have first to grow beyond themselves in order to be taken up into the Paschal action of Jesus... That gulf between a natural technique and the **gift** of prayer is not to be bridged from man's side. Every technique runs up against the death of Jesus... Through the faith of him who prays, it can gradually be subsumed within the vitalizing dynamic of Easter." (29)

### A struggle or a facility?

For us, prayer is a privilege and a right, a comfort and an encouragement, a joy and a support in our service of God, on our way towards Him. The Psalms are so full of these ideas.

Our love for God and for our brothers and sisters drives us towards a prayer which is always more beautiful, more attractive, more varied, more up-to-date. And yet we must not forget that it often demands effort and struggle, concentration and perseverance on our part. To want our prayers to be so attractive that they are unreal would be not to take seriously the realities of the spiritual life. We can put order into our life and work and find salvation, only if we face the truth.

Praying is a matter of the will. "Prayer is

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(29) Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

also a work, a discipline. It cannot rest upon mere spontaneity. It does not come easily, just as being a person does not come easily. And prayer is the greatest, highest expression of us as persons.

"Do you **want** to pray? The question seems a silly one, but it is crucial... I want to pray even more than I did when I first began to do so. But my imagination seems to have become barren. My thoughts won't express themselves. I have lost all feeling for God or religious practices. My very will seems dead... So far from being silly, our question ('Do you **want** to pray?') has brought us to the very heart of the whole matter. **To want to pray is the heart of prayer.**" (30)

The Lord invites us to pray "without losing heart." (31) And on his part, St Paul writes to the Christians in Rome whom he is getting ready to meet, "I beg you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of the Spirit, to help me through my dangers by praying to God for me." (32) His prayer does not come across as an easy way out, a sort of running away from life's difficulties.

Once again, I invite you to look back at the saints, at our teachers in the art of prayer, and especially at our Holy Founder. We shall never reach the contemplative dimension for ourselves and for our communities that I have been discussing without becoming reconciled to the idea that to be men of prayer and communities of prayer

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(30) Butler, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81.

(31) Luke 18, 1.

(32) Romans 15, 30.

presupposes making a firm decision to accept discipline and renunciation.

### Silence and solitude?

Can we still use these terms without a certain apprehension? Neither of them enjoys great popularity among today's values. And yet they are values which have always had a close connection with spiritual activity, with prayer and contemplation.

Do they belong to a different culture, to a far-away world? Who could dare to argue that they do? Perhaps there is a way of presenting these two themes which might vary according to the mentality of a particular age, so as to make them intelligible and acceptable, when at first they seem to make no sense. But let us agree: a method of teaching which really takes into account the student's capacity cannot take the risk of harming him by concealing the essential truth he is to be led to discover. So how can we underrate what the Gospel, the saints and the spiritual masters in all traditions insist on for today as for yesterday: that silence and solitude are necessary if we really want to be able to pray?

God's preference for the **desert** is a biblical theme of great significance. Let's remember the start of our Lord's mission: "He was led by the Spirit into the desert," (33) just as his precursor had been, to proclaim "in the desert" (34) the

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(33) Matthew 4, 1.

(34) Matthew 3, 1.

need for conversion. Later on St Paul followed them, saying he had gone "off to Arabia" — "I did not stop to discuss this with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem," when "He who had specially chosen me...called me through his grace and chose to reveal his Son in me, so that I might preach the Good News about him to the pagans" (Gal 1, 15-17).

Despite the interest of this theme, a few brief allusions must suffice, without going into detail about all that Scripture tells us of the life of the prophets and the friends of God in the desert.

In the Bible, the **mountain** is presented as a privileged place for prayer. It is the place which is the opposite of comfort, routine and disturbance by the crowd. Think of the familiar names: Sinai, Horeb, Sion, Gerizim, Carmel, etc., as well as of the mountain of temptation (35), that of the sermon and the new law (36), of the multiplication of bread (37), of the Transfiguration (38), and of the Lord's Ascension (39).

The desert-days which have been introduced into some of the big renewal-programmes in the Regions or at the Centre of the Institute are very significant and very encouraging. Yet we are still far from the intense love for the desert and the mountain, for retreat and solitude, with which the Bible is filled. Would it be impossible to find a way of incorporating the exceptional and the

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(35) Matthew 4, 8.

(36) Matthew 5, 1.

(37) Matthew 14, 19.

(38) Matthew 17, 1.

(39) Matthew 28, 16.

symbolic into our normal community life? What must we think of the contrast which exists between the teaching and constant example of all the masters of the life of prayer and the disorder, noise and distraction which only too often sound the dominant note in a number of our houses? Would the "community project" be less effective and less concrete if it ensured some periods of silence and peace, without in any way cutting down on the generosity of our Brothers' commitment to the service of the poor to which we already consecrate a lot of our time?

Do we **want** to pray? It's an important question. As we have already noted, "To want to pray is the heart of prayer" (40). But does that imply a clear and active will? To the inward discipline (the totality of acts and attitudes necessary for the exercise of piety) must be added the exterior discipline of fixed times and rhythms, of an adequate exterior framework or pattern, of carefully chosen bodily postures. We have to make prayer possible and easy, but we shall not succeed without taking some firm decisions (difficult but meritorious) to get rid of whatever gets in the way of prayer and makes it practically impossible. We have to put in that personal effort for which the Rule asks us, when it speaks of promoting and organizing together our life of prayer, which is so important.

### **Called to be, in our turn, masters of prayer**

If we re-read carefully all that St John Baptist De La Salle tells us about the Brother's ministry,

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(40) Butler, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81.

we'll surely notice that he wants us to form young people in prayer. He always wanted (and still does) the Brothers to form Christian believers whose faith goes beyond mere conformity, external acceptance of the ordered religious system. In the inquiry to which I have referred several times, I had included the question, "In general, is the Brothers' formation of our pupils and our collaborators good, very good, or inadequate?" The results which came in are far from unanimous. More or less equal numbers of notes are divided between "good" and "inadequate." Rare exceptions use words like "excellent." And finally, a rather large number of Brothers show they are taking a growing interest in this aspect of Christian formation. Progress increases in proportion to the growing importance assigned by the Brothers to concern for pastoral action to face up apostolic needs.

Some very significant things are happening, but they are not yet sufficiently widespread in the different Regions. I'm referring to retreats, periods of recollection, special meetings for young people, houses of prayer, prayer-groups...As the Lasallian youth-groups develop, wanting to get a better understanding of De La Salle and to put his message into practice today, it is logical that new initiatives for prayer-in-common, as for social and apostolic action, will come into being and develop. Thank God, it seems that our Brothers are becoming more sensitive towards this basic aspect of education, with a new surge of **education for faith** (which should be very important for us) and education for creativity, which will show practical results. Unfortunately, the movement does not exist everywhere and has not yet made sufficient impression for those who consider our

apostolic work to include it among the charisms and ministries we are known to exercise in the Church.

When we draw attention to this limitation, are we forgetting our specific work and present responsibilities? Certainly not. It would be a great pity for us all if we reduced our mission as Christian educators and limited our social and evangelical apostolate (for which a Lasallian Christian school exists) merely to academic and professional concerns. Our educational centres have acquired a certain prestige (quite rightly), and we must maintain this for the service of our mission. But these same institutions must never stop enriching their fundamental values and they must also set up priorities in their activities. This has not always been understood. What exists only as a means must never be allowed to get in the way of the specific end for which our Founder established the Institute.

We don't wish to prolong this letter and threaten its usual brevity by quoting the **Meditations** and other writings of St John Baptist De La Salle; but I invite you to reflect at length on this theme. It will help us to deepen and extend our responsibilities to form Christians, and also to sow Christian values even outside the usual limits of Church circles, as many of us are trying to do.

Another response, though generally not a numerically outstanding one, speaks about Brothers getting involved in movements which are rather thinly spread in the Church, such as Christian communities with a particular interest in and practice of a life of prayer, charismatic groups or other groups which may be only beginning.

Once again, it's not a case of giving up our special mission, but of opening it up to life in all its manifestations, particularly those of the Spirit. Perhaps those who take part in one or other of these activities are not professionally involved, but they deserve the warmest congratulations for their courage to do their job without losing the desire to improve it.

While recognizing the obvious good will, the enquiry shows that the formation received does not always permit those who work within and outside our educative communities to become "leaders" in the full sense of the term. But it does bring out clearly the positive influence of CIL and of the different regional centres of continued formation in preparing leaders.

As far as education goes, the old aphorism, "You can only give what you've got," has never been more true. The evidence of our ability in formation will be shown by the measure in which interior renewal continues to deepen and our contemplative dimension keeps developing, for individuals and communities.

### **What should we do to improve?**

We are convinced of our need to increase the power of our activity and witness in the field of prayer. The means to achieve this are not new — they are well known to us.

In the questionnaire I have been quoting, the responses (especially those pointing to certain types of progress) stress several initiatives which have already been started. We must develop these and make them more widespread. We must put more energy and life into them each day.

We must take special care to help those in charge of the formation of our Brothers to put into action a clearly stated methodology which is both sound and creative. It is universally agreed that those working in formation, of whom so many qualities and sacrifices are demanded, must be men of prayer, steeped in our Holy Founder's conviction about the role of prayer in the life of the individual Brother and the Institute.

The special times of continued formation organized for Brothers of different age-groups give a special place to the experience of prayer in their programmes. We know the wonderful memories which the Brothers taking part in CIL keep of the week of prayer. We also know about the desert-days which are a feature of Sangré de Cristo. We cannot offer a complete list of everything that is happening in this area, but these two examples are a good illustration.

I ask the communities to keep up their efforts to promote continued formation and their life of prayer. Many Brothers Visitors in their replies to the enquiry stress the great importance of the initiative and creativity of those who take turns to lead the community prayer, which is such a great help for all members of the community. We have already indicated that the "community project" must always foresee and ensure adequate times and rhythms for mental prayer, so as to make this possible and easy for the Brothers.

If, from time to time, the community could arrange a day of recollection, of more intense prayer, somewhere away from the usual setting of its life and work, this would surely be an excellent way of fostering the union of hearts

and minds, of bringing about peace and understanding among its members.

Sometimes Districts have organized retreats which place special emphasis on the theme of prayer. Occasionally this has been done on a regional level. Experts on spirituality have taken part; so have witnesses to what can be achieved in the life of prayer. Such experiences are powerful incentives to renewal. They are indispensable if we are to shake off the torpor and inertia which are slowing down and threatening the life of the Institute.

Some Brothers Visitors suggest that we organize a YEAR OF PRAYER. A few Districts have already taken up the initiative. Without wishing to multiply years consecrated to this or that objective, but recognizing that such a means could well be an enormous help in concentrating our attention on an important point which might too easily be forgotten, it has occurred to me that we could take advantage of a happy coincidence.

In a few months we are going to open the year of immediate preparation for the General Chapter. To make the best use of such an event, we need the very special help of the Holy Spirit. Therefore we are proposing to all the Brothers and to all our communities that a programme of activities and special initiatives be adopted to make the months between April 1985 and April 1986 a true YEAR OF PRAYER, an authentic renewal of our life of dialogue with God so as to beg his divine assistance for those who will meet together as the 1986 General Chapter.

It is appropriate to remember what happened

in the Cenacle when the Apostles were preparing for the coming of the Holy Spirit. He alone can change hearts and move wills. We must prepare in the same way for the new meeting with the Holy Spirit which our next General Chapter must be.

Towards the end of his life, Karl Barth used to say that he could explain the crisis through which the Catholic Church was going only in terms of our having turned our backs on the Blessed Virgin. Commenting on Catholic broadcasts, when he listened to the radio, he would say sadly, "You no longer have the Virgin!"

Respecting the value of this famous Protestant theologian's witness and opinion, the last thing we want at this time of special preparation for our General Chapter (or, for that matter, at any other time) is that we should lack the motherly help of the Most Blessed Virgin. She was never absent from the great events of St John Baptist De La Salle's own life, nor from those which marked the birth of our religious family.

So that the life-giving Holy Spirit may be with us, developing the power of his action and leading us surely to where the Lord wants us to be,

so that our spiritual communion may be more real and our apostolic efforts more effective,

so that our great works may find their true meaning and have practical effects among the poor and the young, as our Founder always wanted,

to you, Brother, who have been reading this Christmas letter, and to all our Brothers, with true affection and in its deepest meaning I address the liturgical invitation:

### **Pray, Brothers!**

United in prayer and in fraternal love which comes from our Father in Heaven, I remind you once again that I am your Brother and your servant,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "H. Jose Pablo". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the left from the bottom of the name.