



# Letter of Brother Superior

8th December 1985

CASA GENERALIZIA  
dei Fratelli delle Scuole Cristiane  
Via Aurelia, 476 - C.P. 9099  
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Dear Brother,

I am sending you this traditional letter on a day when our fraternal union is felt in a special way throughout the Institute. It is a day of prayer and reflection when we are all invited to centre our thoughts on the forthcoming General Chapter and to beg the Lord, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, to favour it with his blessing.

In writing to you I wish to express, with renewed affection and deep sincerity, my hopes for a Chapter Year which will be outstandingly happy and rich in grace. May it be for us all a time of peaceful collaboration marked by a calm but earnest preparation for our great assembly, sharing with one another the insights and reflections it inspires.

May God be with us in a special way during the coming months, and, for our part, let us be faithful to make our own the prayers we find in the liturgy, asking the Lord to keep us free from the flattery of self-illusion, from the pleasures that lead astray, from evaluations influenced by self-indulgence, and from negligence and faint-heartedness which jeopardise the purpose of our life and mission. And let us also ask Him to use us to bring the same freedoms to others.

This letter is, as always, a means of greeting you, of sending you my best wishes, of assuring you of my fraternal affection and of offering you some guidelines whereby we may all go forward in unity of purpose. As I prepared to write it, the thought came to me that we might usefully take a retrospective glance at the way we have come together and pause to look again at some landmarks distributed along the route we have travelled.

Year after year, in May and December, I have offered you some reflections prompted by needs that have occurred, projects that have been envisaged and problems that have confronted us. I have avoided writing to a preconceived plan, preferring to put my thoughts to you in a familiar and simple style. Each letter has been an invitation to you to read, reflect and act, rather than a formal exposition of a theme with a too didactic flavour. As I wrote in my letter of May 1980: "*A letter of this kind cannot possibly pretend to constitute a treatise, even a partial one, on themes of significant interest to us all. Rather it must limit itself to being a cordial yet pressing invitation to study such themes personally and in community*" (p. 39).

These regular missives, with their informal reflections, have been interspersed with Circulars which were prepared with careful study in General Council and presented in a more doctrinal and formal way. It is not difficult, if we look carefully, to discover that there have been complementary themes and common emphases in the two ways of addressing you. Ideas which we wanted to bring to the attention of the Institute in a special way have been repeatedly stressed. Compare, for example, Circular 406 on **The Consecrated Life** with the

Christmas Letter of 1978, or Circular 412 on **The Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice** with the letters of May 1978 and 1979, or Circular 408 on **Our Mission: the Institute in the Young Churches** with the Christmas Letter of 1981. The first part of the last-mentioned Circular stressed our evangelical ministry as being essential to our vocation, especially in school and after school, and particularly by way of catechesis, and this was likewise emphasized in the Christmas Letter of 1977.

I addressed two letters, with different approaches, one to young people during the Tercentenary Year (May 1981); the other to all our collaborators and to all people who share our understanding of our mission (May 1982). In both letters I stressed our need to open our communities to others in order to share with them our Lasallian spirituality and to foster our mission without being monopolistic or exclusive about it. Circular 415 on the **Perspectives for 1986** drew attention to this development in the evolving life of our Institute, basing its observations on the findings of the 1981 Intercapitular Meeting.

Thus I have been offering a series of fundamental ideas and major themes to the attention of everyone. And I think it may be worth while to gather together, in the informal setting of this letter, some of those ideas which appeared to be of particular interest and concern to us all. Let us proceed on those lines.

**LIVING THE REALITY  
OF OUR CONSECRATION**

### Keeping our vision in clear focus:

Religious consecration, well understood, is a matter of identity. It is a question of an integral element in what defines us as Brothers. "*The Brother*," says the **Declaration**, "*is a baptized Christian who responds to a special and mysterious call from God. He consecrates himself completely to to God and to His service by his religious profession*" (13, 1).

Circular 406 (25.12.1977) explained the notion of Consecration at length, in response to a wish of the 1976 General Chapter (Proposition 35). During the sessions of the Chapter it had seemed indispensable that "*further study and reflection on the nature of Consecration be undertaken and encouraged among the members of the Institute as a whole*" and that this should "*start with our day-to-day life, in a spirit of communal and ecclesial discernment governed by the light of faith*" (cf. Circular 406, pp. 29-30). Worries and misunderstandings about our Consecration had already emerged in the well-organized enquiry which preceded the Chapter.

The Circular confronted a certain dichotomy which is always liable unfortunately to influence judgment whenever the subject either of our Consecrated Life or of our Mission is under consideration. Among various texts quoted in the document we may recall here a well-known passage from **Evangelii Nuntiandi**, 69. In it PAUL VI says this:

*“Religious, for their part, find in their consecrated life a privileged means of effective evangelization. At the deepest level of their being they are caught up in the dynamism of the Church’s life, which is thirsty for the divine Absolute and called to holiness.”*

In my Christmas Letters of 1976 and 1978 I returned to his theme, echoing in each respectively the teaching of PAUL VI and that of JOHN PAUL II.

In 1977 I mentioned something that PAUL VI had said on 6th November to a representative group of Superiors General:

*“What is your role in the Church? You are followers of Christ, you are His imitators and witnesses. In the spirit of charity you serve His people. In the measure you live this charity you are models of a higher kind of life: the evangelical life.”*

In 1978 I quoted JOHN PAUL II’s first address to religious, the one he had given to a group of 90 Superiors General. In this he stressed the following points:

1. **The special importance of the consecrated life in the Church.** It is, he said, *“part of that spiritual plenitude of the people of God originated and formed by the Spirit of God. Without the consecrated life the Church would not be fully what she is.”*

1.1. Religious have their place in the inner dynamism of the Church. They are called to bear witness to it. They exemplify in

their persons the radicalism of the Beatitudes and they are signs of God’s presence in the world. They are such in a more perceptible way by reason of the contemplative dimension of the life they live, their life of prayer.

1.2. A religious is called upon to be *“a real presence of the crucified and risen Christ in today’s world,”* to be a “challenge” to a society in which mere efficiency has become an idol to which even human dignity is often sacrificed.

2. **The incorporation of our vocation and mission in the service of the universal Church** through the structures and activities of the local church. This integration has been less than sufficiently in evidence so far, and it is something that needs to be specially noted. It is what our Founder looked for in his Institute as he repeatedly tells us: *“You are called to the work of building the Church”... “Your ministry is one of the most important and necessary functions in the Church...”* (Med. 199).

3. **A sincere and generous wish to integrate with a world full of tensions and divisions** so as to share its problems and struggles, adopting an unequivocal stance in favour of the poor and of all who are victims of human selfishness. And all this must come from a Christian way of looking at things, from a vision clarified by the light of the gospel and from a love made ardent by an assiduous contact with God. No room here *“for radical socio-political influences which in the long run prove to be counter-productive.”*

The surest way of keeping the focus of our vision true, and thereby making a really positive contribution to the solving of social problems, is to rely upon God for our part in the struggle. There is encouragement in the following words of the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez: "*It is impressive to see a people becoming increasingly better organized and effective in asserting its right to a just way of life and at the same time developing a deep sense of prayer and a conviction that love and justice are, in the final analysis, a free gift of God.*" ("Beber en su propio pozo," Salamanca, ed. Sígueme 1984, p. 145).

The passages I have quoted from the papal pronouncements ratify and endorse with the highest authority the broad lines of thought traced out in our Circular 406. It may be said briefly that the Circular brought under review all the permanent and fundamental values of our consecration: values not always well assimilated but which must not be neglected if our religious life is to be authentic.

Since PAUL VI and JOHN PAUL II expressed themselves in this way much has been studied, written and spoken on the Consecrated Life, more perhaps than at any time in history. Their guidelines enable us to form authentic and true concepts and encourage us to put them into practice.

Furthermore, the thoughts I have briefly referred to in the quoted Christmas letters find support in such a declaration as the following, from a recent meeting of the French Episcopal Conference ( Lourdes, 28.10.1985):

*"In the midst of a people consecrated by baptism, the religious is God's gift to His Church*

*for the fulfilment of its mission in the world. The life of a religious is:*

*— a life totally dedicated by vows to God under the guidance of the Spirit;*

*— a life lived wholly for Christ and His Gospel;*

*— a communitarian life of faith lived according to a pattern set by a Founder;*

*— a life motivated by a will to serve the Church;*

*— a life of all-embracing service of love to mankind;*

*— a life lived in hope of a kingdom already present but also to come."*

### **The present application of this vision: the revision of the Rule; other evaluations:**

Without any doubt, one of the factors that have helped to foster a valid synthesis between theological reflection, generally accepted doctrine and the actual life lived by religious, has been the need for religious Institutes to revise their Constitutions and produce a new version.

In our own case, Circular 416, of July 5, 1982, and the Christmas Letter of the same year, gave the first suggestions for an organized work of revision and offered specific guidelines of procedure. The 'Roman Group', and especially the International Commission, appointed for the purpose, applied themselves determinedly to do an excellent job, and the result of their efforts was the **Draft of a Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools**, a copy of which has been sent to every community.

The dominant keynote of the many texts quoted in the new constitutions is what we have stressed ourselves: the profound evangelical inspiration of our life and a careful attention to our Founder's thought. Throughout the new rules the identifying features and the demands of consecrated life, which we have been recalling here, are clearly and precisely delineated, together with an emphasis on the indispensable need for an intimate, personal relationship with Christ which the religious life presupposes. The constitutions urge the need to "experience God" in one's own life. And, as before, but with a new emphasis, the preferential option for the poor is affirmed with sure and urgent criteria for a commitment to the promotion of justice. An apostolic spirituality, dynamic, enlightened and firmly eschewing any idea of manicheist dualism, is put before us. All this can be verified by an attentive study of the new **Draft** — a study which we have all been urgently asked to undertake.

A rapid enumeration, or even a more leisurely consideration, of the characteristics deemed essential to the profession we have adopted, could provoke a sceptical or ironical reaction: the theory, it may be thought, is very different from the lived reality. And yet, let me repeat it, we are speaking of the vital conditions, the constitutive elements, of that "prototype" of a Brother which was conceived by our Founder and which we have promised to live up to. At least we have promised to make an honest effort to live up to it, and the degree to which we do so will be the measure of our vitality as well as of our sense of fulfilment.

The **evaluations** we are undertaking to see how, in fact, things stand with regard to these and other

conditions of our consecrated life, coincide with the "Synod of evaluations" relating to the Second Vatican Council. Let us say, here and now, but more as a passing comment than as a formal report which it would be impossible to offer in this place, that significant progress is discernible in our Congregation. This is so, for example, in the evidence we have that formation is deeper and more sustained, and also in the signs of an improving organization of permanent formation. On the other hand, we have to say, with regret, that there has been a worrying decline in the spirit of faith and of prayer, in so far as these can be judged by external criteria. It has been said of us, and with reason, that we seem to be professional men rather than prophets. Our consecrated life does not sufficiently shine through the complex activities in which we are engaged. And the negative effect of this is to be seen, for example, in the diminished, sometimes non-existent, attraction our vocation has for well-disposed young people, and also in the number of our defections.

### Vision and foresight

*"We are, par excellence, imitators and witnesses of Christ."* The Popes and Bishops have told us this in the documents I have quoted. But the fact needs to be more self-evident, living and working as we do in a secularized world. I use the word "secularized" with the significance given to it by the European Bishops during their recent Symposium of 7-11 October. (The theme of their discussions was precisely "Secularization and evan-



gelization in the Europe of today".) Theologians and experts in the sociology of religion are largely agreed that in a world which is a prey to "secularism" it is more than ever necessary for Christians — and, **a fortiori**, for religious — to exert mutual support in faith, hope and charity through communities penetrated with Christian humanism. Such communities need to be recognized as such and to be credible in the eyes of many Christians who are beset with doubt in this world of ours and who are searching and pondering in so many different ways. Failing that, they must lapse into indifference.

In the foreseeable future, religious life will undergo change (it has been the case throughout the centuries of history) but it will always maintain its essential character of **an evangelical life shared by a group of free persons** who, in a well-defined but suitably flexible organization, will move forward with the freedom of the children of God in search of the Kingdom. And they will do this in an ambience of human tension where they will be seen as "signs of contradiction," because they will personify values not easily accepted by the majority of people.

### Prayer and the Consecrated Life

Religious are "signs of God's presence in the world. *They are such in a more perceptible way by reason of the contemplative dimension of the life they live, their life of prayer.*" These were the Pope's words in the allocution I have quoted. In the rest of his discourse, which I have summarized

above, he made it clear that prayer is not the only means of manifesting God's presence in history. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta pointed out in her beautiful and profound address to the Lasallian World Congress at Malta in 1976, to care for the poor with love is to be an expression of God's providential love for mankind. But it remains true that our "experience of God," which we are to communicate to others, is revealed in a special way in the personal and community dialogue we hold with Him. It is this that shows our dependence on Him "*in a society in which mere efficiency has become an idol to which even human dignity is often sacrificed*" (John Paul II).

I dedicated my Christmas Letter of 1984 to this duty and privilege of ours, which is our assiduous dialogue with God in prayer. In its pages I proposed for the attentive consideration of everyone "the serious problem" which, in the view of many besides myself, confronted us — **a problem all the more worrying in so far as its seriousness and importance are not well understood.**

To forget God in practice, to be oblivious of His incomparable attentiveness to us, is possible even in lives which have been consecrated, in a public and solemn manner, to Him. Such unmindfulness exists when we leave aside, or grudgingly endure, periods of time intended to be devoted to Him, occasions set apart for the praise of His glory, for acknowledging His supreme dominion over all creatures, for expressing with conviction our vital dependence upon Him — periods which, by the very fact that we intersperse them with our activities, are meant to express our conviction that everything we hope to achieve is meaningless and inef-

fectual if it does not draw its inspiration and strength from Him. To acknowledge God for what He is and to place Him at the very centre of our lives is to "take Him seriously."

We drew attention to the present relevance of mental prayer at a moment in history when the impulse of the Spirit is manifested in not a few movements for renewal in prayer. I invited you to consider the notion that our duty of prayer should be deemed a vital need rather than an obligation imposed by some extraneous law. And I stressed that the personal aspect should not be divorced from the community aspect when we are determining our quota of prayer. Timetables and Community Projects should guarantee that the community safeguards and effectively promotes the fidelity of each of its members with regard to what is so deeply essential to our common profession.

To speak of problems is to speak of life as it is. There is no life without problems, and it is in overcoming them that our existence unfolds in growing strength and maturity. The concern of the Brothers over the matter I am discussing — our life of prayer — was clearly shown in the numerous reactions that my letter evoked. Similar concern has been shown in the way our suggestions have been welcomed and implemented for the "Year of Prayer" which we invited you to undertake in preparation for the General Chapter. We know of quite a number of district and community initiatives in favour of the renewal and intercession we recommended as the best way of disposing ourselves for the Chapter and of guaranteeing the help of heaven on its deliberations.

St John Baptist de La Salle tells us: "*In a reli-*

*gious community you are in a house of prayer, where prayer should be your chief occupation. The spirit of God will dwell therein, and God will shower His blessings thereon, only in so far as it is a place of prayer"* (Med. 62. 1).

There could be no clearer or more emphatic statement of the inescapable condition of our being able to achieve, in the way De La Salle conceived it, the great service which the world and the Church expect from us.

RETRACING THE GOSPEL  
JOURNEY OF THE FOUNDER

The May letter of 1980, which was greatly enriched by the inclusion of the Pope's own letter written to us on the occasion of the Tercentenary, briefly recalled, in that context, the meaning of our relationship with Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

*"The Brothers honour Saint John Baptist de La Salle as their Founder..."* says the concluding article of our present Rule.

*"The Brothers make it clear to everyone that they love Saint John Baptist de La Salle as their Founder..."* is the wording proposed, with an added nuance of affection, in the Draft of the Rule prepared in view of eventual approval.

I recalled in my letter that to reduce our remembrance of the Saint, and our fervour in honouring him, to a mere external show of enthusiasm, worked up by techniques redolent of mass psychology, can do more harm than good. Veneration of a Saint is quite pointless if it lacks spiritual content and motivation.

The Tercentenary celebrations provided, in fact, a notable opportunity to stimulate study of the life and teaching of our Saint and a desire to deepen our understanding of his meaning for us. In consequence there was an increased enthusiasm for studying the Founder and his work with the aid of the abundant and detailed information now available. Is there reason to suspect that all this was but the flowering of a transient springtime? Happily I am able to say that such is not the case.

The sustained interest of those who are looking for an ever greater Lasallian documentation is finding a fitting response in the work of Brothers who are specialists in the field.

### Lasallian studies

With regard to the **Cahiers Lasalliens** series, we are able to say that two new studies are approaching the stage of publication. One is devoted to the iconography of St John Baptist de La Salle, the other to the sources of his Meditations.

Brother Joseph Cornet, of Kinshasa, has written the text of the first of these two works, and Brother Emile Rousset, of Paris, is preparing an abundant illustration for it. The authors have deliberately chosen to stop short at the date of the Founder's beatification in 1888. That event, and still more the canonization, gave rise to a proliferation of iconographical works, many of which broke with the tradition established by the earlier portraits of the 18th century.

Brother Jean Guy Rodrigue, of the district of Montreal, is putting the final touches to his manuscript of **A contribution to the study of the sources of the Meditations for Sundays and Feasts**. In this, Brother Rodrigue has undertaken a patient confrontation between the meditations of the Founder and the works of the spiritual writers most frequently used by him.

With regard to the **Lasallian Vocabulary**, the team responsible for the "Cahiers" is nearing the conclusion of a typewritten draft of some 6000 pages in which are cited all the various examples

of the way the Saint used the words which appear in his written works. But we are indebted to a team from the Region of France for the no less difficult and demanding task of reproducing the material by offset process in weighty bound volumes, the first of which appeared in the spring of this year.

Successive issues of the **LASALLIANA** series, the publication called **DOCUMENTS AND TESTIMONIES**, as well as numerous editions of the Institute **BULLETIN** and the dissemination of Institute news in **INTERCOM**, have made available to a wide readership the results of various studies.

Some Lasallian booklets written by Brother Jean Pungier, and translated into several languages, have been well-received by a considerable number of Brothers: "An Educator and a Saint at grips with the Society of his Time," "Ministers of Grace," "If we were to re-write 'How to run Christian Schools' today" and (not yet available in English) "Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle; le message de son catéchisme."

At regional level diverse undertakings have revealed the same serious interest in the study of our Founder. Translations and publications of his works in the principal languages have appeared in scholarly editions. I should like to mention, as a significant example of such studies, the foundation in the United States of the "Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies." A series of courses on the inspiration and influence of La Salle has been announced to take place at this Institute during the summer vacations of the next three years. There are few ways in which the name and memory of my venerated predecessor could have been better honoured than by associating him with the foun-

dation of this centre of Lasallian Studies!

Brother Saturnino Gallego has completed a work of outstanding importance on St John Baptist de La Salle: a biography written both with scientific rigour and filial devotion, and constituting certainly the most recent and up to date life of the Founder; and together with this a selected edition of the principal writings of the Saint. Both volumes will be published in the prestigious series "Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos" (B.A.C.) of Madrid. I hope to be able to present every member of the General Chapter with a copy of this new biography fresh from the printers.

It is impossible to mention every example but a reference must be made to the brief popular biography of the Founder written by Brother Charles Lapierre and published in France. Its title is **Marche en ma présence**, and the general interest it has aroused may be seen from the fact that the first edition was quickly sold out. And finally, mention may be made of a biography of De La Salle in Italian by Elio d'Aurora. The work, entitled **Monsieur de La Salle: Una fedeltà che vive**, has recently reached its sixth edition, having won for its author the national "Belgirate" prize for a work of non-fiction.

### **We are called to identify more closely with the Founder**

It is obvious, however, that we cannot be satisfied only with learned studies of the Founder as a historical personage or with commentaries on his life and work which add up, more or less, to

a compendium of scholarly literature. The interest in the Saint, happily widespread as it is, presupposes and calls for an appreciation and veneration for the values his life incarnated and his work fostered. In other words, the reading and study of such works should logically intensify our desire to incorporate those values existentially in the witness of our own lives. The authentic understanding of the Founder which is the object of the current rigorous study of sources must have its correlative in the authenticity of the lives of his disciples and in that of the apostolic works honoured with his name and inspired by his teaching.

"We are La Salle today!" is a slogan used by numerous secular Lasallian groups. We only wish that such an elevated aspiration could become a reality for them and for all of us! It is a reason for joy to note the relevance of De La Salle for people today and the force for good that his name represents. It is for us, surely, to lead the way in appreciating him at his true worth and in generously embodying in ourselves the values of his life and writings. By so doing we shall, as the new Rule invites us to, "*make it clear to everyone that (we) love Saint John Baptist de La Salle as our Founder.*"

**SHARING THE MINISTRY  
OF THE APOSTLES**

“Take pride in your ministry by making yourselves, as St Paul says, qualified ministers of the new covenant.” With these words St John Baptist de La Salle concludes one of his Meditations (199. 3), drawing his inspiration, as so often, from the teaching of St Paul (2 Cor. 3. 6).

We need not concern ourselves here with the semantic investigations of the canonists or the prolonged discussions of the theologians about the nature of “ministry.” Such might lead us to a less spiritual understanding of our work than our Founder intended us to have by his frequent use of the term “ministry.” We are convinced that certain categories confer more responsibility than honour. We are in line with De La Salle’s thinking when we say with St Paul: *“I have no right to boast just because I preach the gospel. After all, I am under orders to do so. And how terrible it would be for me if I did not preach the gospel”* (1 Cor. 9. 16).

In my first Christmas Letter, the one of 1976, I invited all the Brothers to **make an act of faith in our mission**, because it is a tragic fact that many do not believe in it. At the same time I mentioned that one of the characteristic means whereby our mission is fulfilled is **catechesis**, and that exercised in school, though not exclusively so.

De La Salle realized that the great need for young people of his day was for faith-inspired teachers, witnesses and catechists. The need for such is certainly no less today. The young need spiritual leaders much more than they need political and social demagogues.

The declared programme of the present Pope’s pontificate is the redemption of man, the restoration



of freedom to all men, giving meaning and dignity to their lives. The primary task to which we are called by our vocation is to bear witness to the same end and transmit a sincere faith.

### **A community of faith: an evangelizing community**

This is what each of our communities should be, as our Circular 415, PERSPECTIVES FOR 1986, pointed out (pp. 19 and 54).

Insistence on the pastoral approach, the pastoral dimension of our work, is clearly to be seen in our most recent communications to regions and districts (see, for example, pages 10 and 21 of the same Circular).

As communities and as individuals we are repeatedly invited to become "signs of faith" (a term which has acquired much popular appeal today) in contemporary society. Nor must we fear that this will make us also "signs of contradiction" in a social ambience whose values, even at the highest level, are not exactly those of the gospel.

If it is generally agreed that the renewal of the Church depends much on "basic communities," would it not be strange, even absurd, for our own communities to be other than self-evidently imbued with an evangelizing spirit?

Such an illogicality will be avoided if we examine seriously and frequently what kind of **image** we project, if we ask ourselves what those who notice our lifestyle and our general comportment really think of us. We might even, in a friendly way, invite such people to tell us frankly how they see us and what they expect from us — and be grateful if they are frank. This could help

towards making our witness more intelligible and credible. It could help towards ridding ourselves of whatever runs counter to the aim we are pursuing together and which we want to achieve for the good of society and the Church.

### **Educators in faith**

The education of young people in faith, especially needy young people, is the primordial ministry envisaged by St John Baptist de La Salle for his disciples, among all the various tasks of the Church. "*The end of this Institute is to provide Christian education for the poor. For this purpose it conducts schools...*" (1718 Rule). We exist, as De La Salle repeatedly makes clear, to form our pupils in a true Christian spirit. He envisaged a school as a privileged setting for catechesis, in which pupils and teachers spend the day together "so that, having the children under their care from morning until evening, the Brothers may teach them to lead good lives... inspiring them with Christian maxims" (ibidem).

The Christmas Letter of 1979 offered some simple reflections on our mission. In the feed-back which followed its publication one noticed, here and there, that some Brothers feared that we were losing sight of our commitment to work in school, or that our esteem for that work was in decline: so many other forms of apostolate and different initiatives seemed to be drawing us away from a total dedication to this area of our mission. Doubtless, those who reacted thus did not take sufficiently into account that giving some scope to new educational enterprises need not be deemed a

flight from our school work but rather an adaptation of it, based on educational considerations, to meet new needs and changing situations. At all events, a careful and unhurried perusal of that letter and of other communications in which we have dealt with these educational initiatives and undertakings would help to dispel this misgiving.

We should not forget that there are various countries — and the number of them has increased recently — where our direct involvement in the school world is becoming impracticable or insignificant. But this does not mean that the purpose of our Institute cannot be fulfilled; it only means that new ways must be found for fulfilling it.

Nor should we lose sight of the fact that, in practical terms, the Christian education of the poor can be better achieved, in even greater conformity with the declared purpose of our Institute, through means, institutions and structures no longer patterned on the type of school to which we have been accustomed. To discover these new means, to “go forth” in search of better ways of fulfilling our mission, is to manifest a fidelity which is at once true, dynamic and realistic.

Above all, we must always bear in mind that what matters more than maintaining a substantial presence in schools is that our presence anywhere should be what it is called to be: a presence that inspires, that conveys the message of the gospel, that gives new life. School for us is called to be different by the very fact that it is Christian. It is to be different from what it has been before by being even better than it was. It is to be different from other educational establishments by having a characteristic and distinctive spirit which envisages

something far more than the mere inculcation of human learning. It is to be different because our Founder made it so. A school, in his understanding, does not seek merely to extend and reinforce services that already exist; it aims to create something additional to them. It seeks out the lowly and the forgotten in order to “teach them to lead good lives” by means of a pedagogy which is realistic and suited to their needs.

Let us keep in mind, finally, that there is an immense area of the world where development and human progress call for a huge educational effort, where there is need for well-run schools capable of giving quality and direction to the lives of millions of children and adolescents yearning to better themselves. Schools that do exist there have meagre facilities and inadequately trained personnel. De La Salle looks today for people willing to share his vision and give it fulfilment by helping these peoples to build a better future for themselves. Whoever doubts the urgency of the present need for our primordial apostolic work has a too limited vision, an inadequate grasp of the needs of today’s world.

### **Our specific educational purpose**

In an undertaking as complex as that of education there is always a danger of lapsing into ambiguity in our judgments. We need to keep asking ourselves what we are about, what we are aiming for in the educational service we provide. Such self-questioning is worthwhile and even necessary with regard to our schools at different levels and of various types. Likewise centres of

higher education conducted throughout the world under the aegis of De La Salle should face, in a responsible manner, the question of their Lasallian identity, the question why disciples of St John Baptist de La Salle exercise their concern and creativity at that level of education. I have, in fact, been able myself to take part occasionally in staff meetings of our universities organized specifically to study the implications of a Lasallian inspiration and name for the nature and content of the teaching provided in such institutions.

Opposition to Catholic schools in certain countries, even if it does not take the form of actual persecution and organized campaigns, has given cause for anxiety by threatening the necessary autonomy of such schools. Without any doubt, pressures of this kind make the work of education more difficult and sometimes discourage the personnel concerned.

Yet all this should help us to examine more closely our response to certain unfriendly, and sometimes ill-founded, questions that are posed like: What exactly are we doing in Christian schools? For whom do we run them? How do we run them?

Such questions, as I say, are put in a critical spirit, but they are good in themselves. They provide an occasion for a sustained examination of conscience. They concern the authenticity of our mission and they correspond, to put it briefly, to an attitude which the Patron of Teachers believed should be ingrained in the Christian educator, namely, a deep sense of his personal responsibility. Meditations 205 and 206 are a rich source of material for our reflections about this, and for our dialogue with God.

## **A CLEAR CHOICE IN FAVOUR OF THE POOR AND OF JUSTICE**

The 1976 General Chapter was particularly forthright about this subject. Proposition 13 enumerated specific orientations to be implemented at various levels, and Proposition 14 called upon each District to submit within a two-year period a statement of the progress already made and further planned concerning **the educational service of the poor and action on behalf of justice.**

A deadline, December 1978, was fixed for the completion of this study and the communication of results. I chose the theme of this enquiry for my Christmas Letter of the same year. It was, without doubt, one of the most productive of my letters in terms of feed-back: there were numerous written responses and an abundance of reflections and suggestions arising from meetings held during subsequent months. The theme caught your interest and the study of it became a matter of profitable concern.

The same topic was central to the following letter, the one of May 1979, which included a report on the dossier of information and impressions received from the various districts. But Circular 412, of 15 September 1980, more especially provided the opportunity to reflect at length on the information received. My letter had given notice of this in announcing that "*a Circular or document of the General Council would convey to all our communities more detailed information*" on this matter.

The May 1978 letter recalled the basic orientation provided by the General Chapter in its Proposition 1: "*The Brothers must integrate personally, as well in their communities as in their*

*institutions, the components of Christian education, the ministry of the word, the service of the poor and action on behalf of justice in the world."*

Solidarity with the problems of the world, I wrote, above all with the world in which the poor become ever poorer, the increasingly urgent calls of the Church and the specific intentions of our Founder in bringing his Institute into being, all combine to impress upon us the need for greater attention to these problems and a firm determination to confront them.

### **An educational service**

To work for the betterment of the poor and to make them more able to recognize and solve their problems; to alert them to the ways injustice operates in the world and to make them aware of appropriate and honourable means of countering it: this is a service which can and must be effectively provided by our educational ministry. The Synod of 1971 included in its final document a deeply interesting chapter on **education for justice**. I quoted the following passage from it when the document was of fairly recent publication and was still being studied: "*Education should help all men to be even more fully human, to avoid being continually manipulated, to become capable, on the contrary, of forging their own destiny and creating truly Christian communities...*" (Synod 1971: final document).

Need we recall once again the criticism levelled at Catholic schools (though not only against them but against current systems of education in general)

that they serve rather to perpetuate the established social order than to improve it in favour of the oppressed. It is a judgment which is not entirely accurate, nor based on strictly objective criteria, but it has an element of truth which poses a question for us and should prompt us to take a serious look at the matter of who are the principal beneficiaries of our educational service and to what extent that service benefits the poor.

### **A right understanding**

Circular 412, which was particularly well received by the Brothers, devoted its fourth section, to the question of developing the right mentality about these matters, both by a deeper study of the life and doctrine of the Founder and by fostering a social awareness in ourselves, with the study of present-day problems and our way of dealing with them. A re-reading of the relevant pages (66-100) of the Circular will help to enhance the necessary understanding to which I refer.

There is an undeniable effort taking place to develop a communitarian attitude to the problems of the world, and this effort is far from being exclusively or conspicuously our own. It is clear to all, from various publications, that the Church and Religious Institutes are reflecting deeply and praying about this moral imperative to turn to the poor. One notices, for example, how theological writing in Latin America is much concerned with the need for religious communities **to become involved** in the world of the poor. There is a new sincerity and depth in the growing preoccupation

with the problems of the poor, and religious are more and more perceiving this as a way of identifying with Christ and with His own particular approach to the salvation of the world.

The development of an effective sense of religious poverty and a genuine commitment to the service of the poor are at the forefront of the Church's thinking and specifically as shown in the present understanding of the nature of the religious life. But alongside this thinking there is cause, paradoxical as it may seem, to have to lament and deprecate the existence of many abuses of the virtue and vow of poverty. False ideas are in evidence on this matter which call for rectification and a more authentic kind of formation. On the other hand, such misconceptions about what fidelity really means are not the same everywhere or in everybody. One is aware that many people, through meetings and community endeavours and especially by the sincerity of their own lives, are sensitizing and shaping our collective conscience on this question of commitment to the world of the poor and disinherited.

It is obvious, but worth drawing attention to, that there is no question of obtaining from everyone, or even expecting from everyone, the same degree of acceptance and implementation of a practical involvement in this area of our apostolate. It is for each one to give his assent and reflection to what the gospel requires of us in our contemporary situation, to understand and encourage those who show a determined wish to live its full implications and to conform more closely to the ideal by a lifestyle more in harmony with our "preferential option for the poor."

### Some pointers to the right route

In this ongoing process of interaction between, on the one hand, the impulses of the Spirit and, on the other, the diverse levels of response on the part of different individuals, communities and cultures, it is possible to discern certain significant signs of progressive "conversion" towards the poor.

1) **At global level**, I give as an example, our decisions, in recent years, to extend our work into countries where it did not already exist, this despite the Institute's diminished personnel. In 1980 we made a foundation in Chad, a country with one of the lowest national incomes in the world. In the Ivory Coast a technico-agricultural training centre has been opened for the young people of Daloa. At present we are making a start in El Salvador where the District of Central America is about to take charge of an orphanage for the children of war victims.

The insufficiency of our numbers in both the northern and southern hemispheres persists alongside the appalling social, political and economic inequality that exists. I would mention, in passing, that of the 190 novices we had in November 1985, over two thirds belong to the southern hemisphere. As is well known, Fr. Bühlmann, in his book **The Third Church**, has studied this matter of shifts in the statistics of Church membership from one country to another and the possible developments this entails for the not very distant future. Here I limit myself to recommending serious reflection on such data and studies which help us to appreciate the implications for our own mission. The inferences are both inescapable and enlightening.

2) To attempt a fairly detailed account of what has been happening **at regional and district level** would take us too far and would inevitably leave gaps.

Fresh undertakings in the vast area of the Amazon, as well as in various sectors of Africa and Asia, are involving our personnel in ways which show that the challenge of poverty is clearly seen as a prior concern.

Responses to an inquiry in 1978 included a reiterated complaint about the lack of information and adequate means of training in favour of the promotion of justice. We can say now that numerous workshops have been organized in many districts, and that programmes of study related to the question of justice in the world have been introduced in our centres of higher education; also that the discussion of the subject in district assemblies and chapters has served to enlighten the Brothers on the problems involved and that practical plans for the solution of those problems have been drawn up.

Some districts have re-organized their present commitments in order to give more attention to greater needs. Establishments have been handed over to secular staffs in order to release Brothers for work in less favoured areas. Naturally this has not been done without due preparation of conscientious and responsible personnel capable of maintaining the tradition and spirit of the establishments they have taken over. Nor have the Brothers totally dissociated themselves from such establishments; to have done so would have been a too easy way out. But with such procedures our Brothers have been able to tackle the "miracle" of

creating new works and a new style of ministry, despite statistics which are less than heartening.

3) But we have to say that there are districts which are not so determined about developing this mentality or taking means that would help and encourage it. In such sectors of the Institute it is not exceptional to meet Brothers who are dissatisfied and impatient that aims clearly laid down in our documents, and made urgent by problems that refuse to go away, are not being met in practice. It is at the district level above all that a clear and concerned awareness of our collective obligation must be formed. It is there that our community discernment should lead to concrete resolutions in keeping with local situations and possibilities. It is at that level that paths must be opened up so that the wish of the Brothers to create, within the terms of our vocation, something that corresponds to present needs may not remain ineffective. It is a question of our pulling together, and a question of the Institute's future.

Anything else gives rise to the separatist and harmful phenomenon of individuals or groups whose generosity exceeds their appreciation of the discernment and solidarity that are invested in a community, and who take on tasks which fall outside the line of obedience. Their wish to be of service is commendable but we cannot approve what can only be obstinacy if they keep themselves apart from our Lasallian fellowship. The situation is worse when, as has happened, though fortunately only rarely, their opinions are in clear opposition to the directives of the Church and to those of the Institute guided by the Church, concerning the political involvement of religious.

Only in community, and in accord with the community, can we accomplish a Christian social service in favour of justice, a service to which we feel ourselves urgently summoned by our vocation. To have to submit the suitability of given projects to the assent of the community as a whole may seem a restraint but it is the best guarantee of success. In the long run it ensures security and follow-through to undertakings which, when organized personally and independently, often turn out to be merely ephemeral if not simply blunders.

This capacity for discernment and mutual support which the members of a community should exercise as a community (cf. "Draft of the Rule" arts. 40-41) cannot achieve its purpose without a deep sense of responsibility and a spirit of fraternal charity. Its exercise is to be seen as a duty rather than as a right.

Tensions will not be lacking from any dialogue which is aiming at accurate discernment, but as Circular 104 pointed out (p. 104), with an opportune reference to **Gaudium et Spes** (43), there can be valuable tensions which "*we should not seek to reduce by sacrificing one or other*" of the dialectic elements.

And there are few areas where community dialogue is so necessary, so encouraging and so fruitful as when we seek together, in fidelity to one another and in specific situations, to achieve something in such complete accord with our common vocation as **an educational service offered first and foremost to the poor, and a generous participation in the promotion of justice.**

**OUR WORK FOR THE  
MORE DISTANT POOR THROUGH  
OUR MISSIONARY SERVICE**



The logic of the gospel, which admits of no limits in the following of Christ, the “sequela Christi,” and the logic of our religious profession which is radical by definition, continually beckon us to go that bit further. If there is question of serving the poor then it is the poorest of the poor to whom we turn. If we are thinking about being open to all needs and all distress we cannot overlook the sufferings of those furthest away from us. This is what the **Declaration** speaks of in the following words: “*To affirm today the apostolic character of the Institute is also to proclaim its missionary character. It is not, of course, exclusively missionary, but it has been established ‘to bring the means of salvation within the reach’ (Med. 193. 3) of youth who are deprived of educators and whose evangelization has been neglected...*

*“As with all other Congregations engaged in the active life, now is the time ‘sincerely to ask ourselves is the presence of God whether we cannot broaden our activity in favour of expanding God’s kingdom among the nations’ (Ad gentes, 40) at the expense of leaving to others certain ministries” (Declaration, 24).*

In my Christmas Letter of 1981 I included a series of reflections and information about our MISSIONARY SERVICE — our service, that is, for bringing to the young and the poor, in all five continents and of all races, the good news of the gospel, to alleviate their distress and to prepare them for a life more human in concept and in the conditions in which it is lived.

## A service inspired by a profound faith

I drew attention in my letter to the fact that our missionary calling has the same basis as that on which the Institute was first called into existence. De La Salle made the corner-stone of the theological edifice he constructed in his meditations on our ministry, the Pauline saying. "*God desires that all men should come to the knowledge of truth*" (MTR 1. 1). There are no narrow horizons about that! The greater the need, the more imperative the challenge to our availability!

As a basis for our self-examination, in line with some ideas proposed in my letter, the question put by the last General Chapter (cf. Circular 408, p. 64) remains valid: IS THE INSTITUTE MISSIONARY ENOUGH? According to the number of our Brothers at work in countries classified as "mission countries," we are amongst the Institutes with the highest total. But the numerical aspect does not answer the full implications of the question. We must not lose sight of what the Council document **Ad gentes** said in the passage quoted above. It is in the light of that that we need to examine to what extent we are a missionary Institute. The following considerations, among others, are relevant here.

## Our missionary conscience

How far do we feel ourselves called to broaden the scope of our assistance in favour of those who possess little or nothing and who are in dire need? What reasons are there to make us feel the greater

or less urgency of charity, or even of justice, for these people?

I said in my letter that a study of such reasons, as revealed in the simple enquiry that had been made, showed a considerable increase of **interest in the promotion of justice and a better service of the poor**. This was an encouraging and positive response very much in keeping with values happily finding favour today.

Nevertheless, it would not suffice for this "better service" to be understood only, or principally, as a greater effort to provide material improvements or to teach people to live better and maintain their struggle, if they were not at the same time given the profound reasons for living and striving which our faith supplies. I say this because there is always the danger of diminishing and impoverishing the significance of our ministry. It is not just hypothetical to say that among the motives inspiring our missionary service certain "reductions and ambiguities" can creep in, as **Evangelii nuntiandi** warned in its explanation of the correlative term "progress-evangelization" (pars. 31-32).

The missionary responsibility of the Institute is centred in every Brother by reason of that duty incumbent on every Christian (**Ad gentes**, 35) to share with others less favoured what has been received in abundance from God in the way both of spiritual and material benefits. Aid programmes for the Third World devised by various countries are based on political prudence: there is an increasing concern to prevent catastrophes threatened by the ever-growing injustices in the world. Our motivation is of a different kind, based on a different conception of man and of people in distress.

It is the conception which inspired the great missionaries of all times, the conception which springs from faith and which charity translates into enterprises of disinterested assistance.

It does not seem to me too evident that a concern to deepen this conception in ourselves and develop a missionary conscience by means of well-organized programmes of study is prevalent amongst us. I do not think such concern is obvious enough for people who see us to recognize us as a missionary Institute.

And yet that is what we are. The publication of the second issue of DOCUMENTS AND TESTIMONIES, dedicated to our missions, caused astonishment. For quite a number of people it represented a veritable discovery of little-known achievements of which, even so, the publication described only a few examples. SECOLI, our Service of International Lasallian Co-operation, publishes regularly a simple bulletin designed to convey knowledge of the places where the Brothers are at work, what they are doing and what they hope to do; it also comments on the trends of present-day missiology. But it is certain that more could be done with such information and one always wonders what impact such a service, as well as the missionary publications of the Church, makes on many communities and Brothers.

### **Secretariats for promoting this mentality**

Such secretariats do exist and are more or less well-known. It is not necessary to repeat here the names of some whose activity at regional level

is reaching wider areas and becoming better known. But there are regions, and not a few districts, where such secretariats do not exist or else are not dynamic enough in the way they function. This is a sign, as well as a reason, for a poorly developed missionary sense in those districts.

Unless there are people and organizations to open up our awareness and interests towards wider horizons we easily get shut inside a narrow provincialism and let ourselves become engrossed in business around us which should not by any means exhaust the total potential of our zeal. The work of our missionary secretariats should be encouraged from above by those in charge of each section of the Institute, but also from below, that is, our secretaries should be able to count on the attentive interest and co-operation of everyone. It is only thus that plans can be devised for giving material help to countries in need, as well as programmes arranged which will enable Brothers and students to develop a well-informed, responsible and mature missionary sense.

This is what SECOLI exists for here in Rome as well as to facilitate co-ordination of information and help throughout the Institute. I should like to take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation and sincere gratitude for the great good accomplished by the Brothers in charge of SECOLI in the fulfilment of their important charge. And I extend the same appreciation to all who exert a similar effort in our missionary secretariats at regional, national and local level.

## The challenge of decisive inculturation

There is much talk today of “inculturation,” and this because it is important, because it is timely — and because it is difficult! For ourselves it is a recognized watchword which we have translated into act. It cannot be said of us that racism is one of our capital sins. But better still would it have been if some of our missionaries had completely avoided letting certain traces of this attitude infiltrate into their way of seeing things and of acting.

Today times and ideas have changed, largely because the colonial period has come to an end. The change has meant a gain for the true understanding and style of missionary work. We are now preparing real “intercultural communities” according as, happily, the children of nations most recently incorporated into the Church, or still in process of being incorporated, are growing in number and importance among us. The deepest inculturation of the Institute in our new districts and delegations will be achieved through them. And that will mean the happy culmination of a long missionary process generously undertaken and carried through by men who came from their distant homelands to implant and incarnate the Institute among these nations. The fact that the native-born people of those countries will be capable of carrying on our work, in fidelity to the Founder but also in fidelity to their own national culture, constitutes the best proof of the excellence of the work done by the missionaries who went to them from other districts of the Institute.

Even so, the actual process of inculturation is too complex to be carried out exclusively by the

Brothers indigenous to those countries. There are many various and important values that have to be respected and inculcated in a religious life and in a correctly understood mission placed generously at the service of a people. It is essential for these values to be known and lived in depth. Work accomplished together and the cultivation of a true “communion” of spirit and action between the missionaries from overseas and the autochthonous members of the Institute will come to be more and more a sign of brotherhood in Christ and the key to success in the process we are speaking of. This goal of mutual fidelity and reciprocal integration is the urgent and demanding challenge for both sides at this moment in our missionary collaboration.

## Formation an inescapable priority

All this delicate and complex process will not be carried through in the way it should unless we can count on men sufficiently experienced to take part in it. People called to missionary work from countries where Christianity has been long established cannot hope to accomplish every form of evangelization. Priorities have to be established. In the missionary districts, as we call them, we are currently experiencing a heartening increase in the number of candidates for the Institute and this number is likely to grow. But the available formation personnel in these districts are few in number and the situation is aggravated by the increasing demands on their time.

In face of this, we have to say that the best help a well-established district could give at present

would be to provide volunteers able to collaborate in the work of formation of candidates in the developing countries. Brothers who feel themselves called to missionary work could likewise serve best by volunteering to help in this way.

Such service could even take the form of contributing to formation sessions and short courses organized in these districts, for example, during the summer vacation. Better still, of course, if volunteers were able to make themselves available permanently or for a number of years. We have met Brothers who have declined to offer themselves for this work on the grounds of their conviction that formation in any country should be carried out by men of the same cultural background. We agree with this as a principle which respects the whole concept of inculturation. But we should not overlook the fact that the existing situation requires certain modifications to be made in that judgment. Respect for every culture requires that formation be conducted in a way that combines diverse elements and is not exclusive in character. Nor must we forget that there are situations in which autochthonous formators are just not available and we cannot leave such districts permanently without men well-equipped to carry out this work.

### **Understanding education as the great means of promoting a country's total well-being**

The desire for education among the peoples in missionary countries, especially among their millions of the younger generations, has become more intense with the independence many of those

countries have achieved in recent years. The customary attitude of more or less resigned passivity that belonged to the times when it seemed that everything had to be done for the benefit of the colonizing power has given way to another attitude much more self-assured and creative. To build a secure future, to make themselves capable of genuine economic and social autonomy, to found a family with prospects of a serene and prosperous way of life and to ensure this by a decent and well-paid job — these are the powerful and preoccupying aspirations of millions of young people. Many of them have left the rural districts for the towns and the resulting areas of urban destitution are growing all the time. For the other millions who remain in the country parts, the dream is to make the land yield richer harvests with less killing work.

Concern about religious matters runs the risk of being stifled by so many pressing anxieties. This is why it is an all-absorbing and understandable preoccupation for the bishops and other pastors to provide competent educators for these masses of young people. But where are they to find them? We are talking about authentic Christian educators concerned to instil the faith, as well as knowledge, in their pupils and to equip them not only with the means to face life and its challenges but also with a real understanding of the meaning of life and of the labour they will have to undertake.

It is at our doors that many of those bishops are knocking for a solution, at least partial, to this tremendous problem which threatens the future of the younger generations and therefore of the countries to which they belong. The bishops want to be able to count on an Institute which, by title

and calling, stands for the preservation of Christian schools, to ensure an effective Christian presence in their schools. It is significant that, for the last five years, at meetings held between the principal representatives of the African Bishops and the delegates of the Union of Superiors General, the bishops have asked us that the theme of our discussions be youth, considered in all its aspects.

It seems to me easy enough to see an analogy between this situation and that which made St John Baptist de La Salle into the founder of an Institute. Our Brothers in missionary countries keep on trying, with reduced personnel and resources, to cope with the great needs, meanwhile evolving methods of education which really correspond to the situations and demands they face. They seek to be less importers of foreign ways of doing things than devisers of methods and systems suited to the countries where they are working. These Brothers are very far from thinking that the apostolate of the school is something that belongs to the past! Anyone who thinks it is, is just not aware of the enormous needs of our time. Meanwhile our missionaries continue to hope for help. They have an appreciation of the far-reaching perspectives of the work to be done — and we are far from matching up to what they expect from us!

### Catechetical work where it is most needed

*“Catechesis... catechists... schools for catechists, these are at once the means and the first requirements for the evangelization of vast areas where the very small number of priests is insufficient...”*

That is what I wrote in my letter of December 1981, and I can say the same thing today. The insufficiency of priests in missionary lands is vastly more problematical than it is in countries where Christianity has been long established. Catechists are called upon to be not just teachers of religion but also leaders and animators of the Christian communities. They can hope to fill this role only to the extent that they will have been trained for it. Centres for the formation of catechists are calling out for Brothers to offer themselves for this work — a ministry so much in keeping with *“what we are by vocation,”* with what is our *“principal function”* (Declaration, 38. 1).

It is true that in some corners of our missionary map the Brothers have taken up this work as their chief activity. Schools for the training of catechists have been put in our charge by the bishops, but the number of men we are able to deploy there is really minimal. In the majority of our mission centres catechetical training has to be combined with other activities related to education in general and social development: it has no specific structures of its own.

Catechesis — education in the faith for millions without means of getting it! Who can estimate in figures the contribution we could make?

### Work which must be constantly evaluated

The nature of the problems keeps changing, and so do the means, therefore, of resolving them. The limited availability of personnel requires that men be deployed in ways that are carefully thought

out. Never has it been less true that it suffices to have good will in order to be able to respond to any need required by our missionary service.

With the approach of the General Chapter some of these problems have been selected for special study as to what has already been done about them, and what further can and must be done. Likewise some groups of Brothers, co-ordinated by SECOLI, have studied the significance and scope of our presence and work in Muslim and Buddhist countries.

It is symptomatic that this study has been carried out with greater efficiency and follow-through than on previous occasions. There are thirteen countries where our apostolate is exercised within a mainly Muslim culture. The record of our work there is both interesting and encouraging. Possibilities of dialogue between Muslims and the Church have been discerned; there is evidence of a breaking-down of the walls of division — the prejudices that have kept Muslims and Christians at a distance from one another; there are improvements in the condition of Christian minorities, hitherto discriminated against and treated as socially inferior; and there is the tacit and discreet witness of Christian values. And this summing-up is not just rhetoric: it is based on hard facts, well-attested.

It is not difficult for anyone who takes an interest in contemporary history to recognize the difference between the former situation and that which prevails today in the majority of these mainly Muslim countries, with the possibility that now exists of co-operative enterprise and constructive dialogue. It is certainly the time for a thorough evaluation of our presence in these countries and

of the potential of that presence in this area of our missionary work.

Much the same may be said about the six or so mainly Buddhist countries where our work has been, and continues to be, appreciated. We hope that the pre-capitular studies and also the deliberations of the Chapter itself will greatly help to ensure the best possible forward planning for a continued presence and progress in this apostolate which has been maintained in exemplary fashion for so many years.

Without any doubt, the specifically missionary aspect of our vocation is presented with exceptional opportunities and challenges today. Alas that the disproportion between them and our available personnel is so vast! It is a situation, at any rate, which calls for a re-awakening of our “missionary conscience” with, in consequence, an even greater participation in the provision of help to the missionary sectors of the Institute.

**NO PLACE FOR  
EXCLUSIVENESS WITH US**



The occurrence of the Tercentenary prompted me to write two special letters, one in May 1981, the other in May 1982. The first was addressed to the young, the second to "the parents, the teachers, the former students, the administrators and those in charge of our schools, the spiritual directors, the associates, and the friends, to all who feel themselves to be Lasallians, who work with us and who share with us the mission and the message of the Founder of the Christian Schools." Both letters aimed to draw special and well-deserved attention to many interesting developments, either still at an early stage or already well advanced. They were intended to be an expression of encouragement to all who are more directly involved in these developments. In both letters, with the very large number of potential readers in mind, I commented on the spiritual ties that bind these persons into a community and into a constellation of communities whose common point of reference and common inspiration is De La Salle. I surveyed the reasons which explain and justify the existence of these communities.

Moreover the intercapitular meeting of May 1981 gave special consideration to this phenomenon of secular persons living and working alongside us and coming to feel themselves more and more members of a great family, THE LASALLIAN FAMILY (cf. Circular 415, pp. 23-27).

Every day it appears more evident that, alongside the constant challenge facing us with the shortage of our numbers compared with the work to be done, there is also and especially a growing sensi-

bility on the part of the laity to their mission in the Church. They are showing increasing interest, for example, in enlisting youth in active social and evangelizing work, so much so that we have to recognize that our mission is not something exclusive to ourselves.

Initiatives of various groups who seek to share our spirit and to take De La Salle as the guide of their life and work are developing apace. And this positive tendency is not an isolated phenomenon nor something peculiar to us. It corresponds to a generalized movement in the Church, apparent in various religious Institutes. For ourselves it constitutes a ground of hope, and hope imposes a responsibility. We have to do everything in our power to ensure that such a movement, so far from falling away, will bear all the fruit it promises.

### **Some early flowerings**

It was around the 1976 Chapter that *SIGNUM FIDEI* was born, bringing to fruition a long series of tentatives and trials. It now numbers 450 members spread over all the continents. These associates adopt a certain "style of life" and some simple and flexible structures which enable them to recognize and encourage one another without interfering with personal independence or freedom of action.

The *LASALLIAN FAMILY* is a title which covers various organizations set up in response to particular problems, but professing at the same time a sincere and consistent attachment to De La Salle. An example is the association of heads

and administrators of scholastic establishments in France who are taking the place of the Brothers in the direction and staffing of various types of educational institutions, and ensuring that their pedagogical and spiritual traditions are well maintained.

Among groups of a similar character I might mention the *LASALLIAN MOVEMENT* of Argentina which runs courses and develops programmes for the training of teachers, young people and other adults in the work of evangelization, with very praiseworthy results. Quite recently other movements have given rise to other groups with a Lasallian inspiration, but it would be premature and inappropriate to speak of them at this stage, though they certainly exemplify the strength and relevance of De La Salle's message.

Is there in all this an excessive dispersion of purpose and effort with insufficient clarity and consistency about the lines to be followed? I believe it is much more a case of the Spirit "blowing where it will," and that there appears to be no urgency about applying hard and fast rules. But it is true that these burgeoning developments call for discernment and co-ordination, and a good deal of thought is being given to the matter now with the approach of the General Chapter.

The movements need scope for experimentation, bearing in mind the various cultures in which they are emerging; but they need also to keep in view the ultimate objectives, so as to move forward step by step to a point of convergence guided, we can appropriately say, by the same star.

At all events, we are in the presence of sure signs of a spiritual force at work. Instead of think-

ing about the best way to diminish our commitments and withdraw from our establishments, we find ourselves able to foresee the possibility of widening our sphere of action and influence in the area of service to the poor and to youth, wherever there are needs that call for our support and creativity. This integrating of secular persons into the framework of our life and apostolate, so far from generating confusion and suggesting escape routes, demands from us a really spiritual response, a capacity for giving a firm lead to those who seek to deepen their knowledge of, and their attachment to, De La Salle and to share more abundantly in his spirit.

Obviously these Lasallian groups must be allowed to develop in their own way and not be subjected to pressures of a too paternalistic kind. At the same time it is certain, and experience has proved it already many times, that these groups grow and prosper better when they are in touch with Brothers capable of fostering a spirit among them and strengthening their doctrinal resources so that they do not fade off into a vague kind of idealism or succumb to the influence of dubious ideologies. The most active and authentic members of these groups have no thought of taking the place of the Brothers or of easing them out of the way. They are concerned rather to support and complete what the Brothers envision and strive for, sometimes reaching situations impossible for the Brothers themselves to deal with.

### **An adequate formation**

A gift for leadership is very much something born in people but even they have to have training.

A capacity for dialogue and the power to inspire others are qualities that need to be cultivated and perfected in order that a suitable degree of effectiveness be reached.

We have to admit that our formation has generally been directed towards preparing us to achieve the objectives of our mission ourselves, as individuals and as communities: to tackle enterprises ourselves rather than to inspire other groups and movements into action. Not that we are here forgetting those of our predecessors who, in the course of our history, have proved well able to organize and animate associations of various kinds which have stood the test of time. But these were rather exceptions to the rule.

I think that now the potential and apostolic vitality of the Institute in the decades to come will be invested in the capacity of the Brothers to diffuse the spirit of De La Salle among young people, teachers and friends who assist us in our work or find in it inspiration for their own lives, so that they may be led to make that work more effective, to perfect it, to enlarge its scope.

There is a fairly widespread tendency to view certain innovations with suspicion, but no-one should be afraid in the present instance that to undertake the spiritual animation of others will mean abandoning or jeopardizing our capacity for achievement in the pedagogical field. The exact opposite is the case. The objective is to find ways of developing and enriching that capacity, of giving it greater significance, of guaranteeing a future for it and of forestalling the need to reduce the scope of its activity or the reach and depth of its power to evangelize. Can anyone really believe that secular

persons who devote time and energy to social and apostolic undertakings will prove to be for that reason any less excellent professionals?

### **Co-ordination and structures**

I have already said, and I will repeat it here by way of conclusion to this section, that such a proliferation of initiatives could give an impression of a variety of charisms at work in God's Church. It could likewise make one think that there is a lack of order about them, an insufficiency of clear direction.

But we believe that we should let new life reveal itself and develop properly but spontaneously, before establishing guidelines and structures or associations on a wider scale so as to channel its direction more clearly.

Much good exists in the movements we know of. All of them have the motivating and unifying will to advance in fidelity to De La Salle. The principal role of the Brothers associated with these groups will always be to assess and enhance the values they embody and to nurture their understanding of De La Salle as the energizing and guiding spirit in their lives. These Brothers will seek to cultivate in their groups a true and conscientious fidelity to the Lasallian spiritual heritage. And thus it will happen that these diverse movements will achieve the authentic fulfilment of what they have begun to proclaim and live as the object of their aspirations: WE ARE LA SALLE TODAY!

**THE PERPETUAL STRUGGLE  
BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH**

Our Rule concludes with a chapter on THE VITALITY OF THE INSTITUTE. So does the Draft of the new Rule now awaiting examination and eventual approval. It is a natural instinct to guard and preserve life by every means in our power. This is because every form of existence, spiritual or physical, individual or collective, is always a duel between life and death, written about in all literatures, recalled specifically in the triumphant hymn of Easter Sunday.

Exactly three hundred years ago, in the midst of the many happy occasions of our Tercentenary celebrations, my 1980 Christmas Letter invited everyone to reflect on the decline of our personnel, as revealed in the statistics. This certainly was not with any intention of putting an ill-timed damper on the celebrations, but rather as a call to realism and to an attentive reflection on the historic moment being celebrated. It was an invitation to consider the reality of the situation and its causes and to draw therefrom some useful lessons.

It is certainly a point to be made that the phenomenon of reduced numbers has an explanation in the historical and social circumstances which lie beyond our control. We can say that it is a widespread source of concern fully shared by the Church as a whole. But all this should not serve to sedate our worry about it. The important thing is to see the problem as a "sign of the times" — like many others which present themselves to us without any choice on our part. God is telling us something,

not by words but by circumstances and events, which is the way He has spoken to humanity down the ages. And sometimes His message seems to be that certain situations can no longer continue as they are.

### From the Founder to our days

At a distance of 300 years we are trying to synchronize spiritually with our Founder. We admire him as an authority on crises, a man who knew how to see crises as messages of Providence and to respond by opening up new paths in his itinerary as Founder. How enlightening and encouraging it is for us to recall the memory of him in that year of 1690, or that of 1712, when he saw his Institute in danger of disappearing beneath the load of defections and betrayals.

The attitude he showed is an inspiration to us. His spirit rose above the agonizing problems and his love for God and his fellow-men moved him to make heroic decisions like the 1691 vow or, later on, when he had gone south and found tranquillity in retreat at Parmenie, he sacrificed this and returned in humble obedience to the will of his disciples.

At his school we find that in every crisis there are lessons to be learnt and means taken for a fresh start; that there must be no capitulation to an easy sociological fatalism based on numerical data which, taken alone, are of little value and which always need to be correctly interpreted.

The simple graphs which I included in my letter represented various analyses intended to suggest whatever solutions might be available to us.

### Constant attention to the causes

We recalled in the letter that the rapidity and quantity of the changes that have marked the recent past were such that they could not fail to produce a psychological “shock” and a fatal confusion of mind in many people not fully committed to their vocation and mission. I invited you, for example, to study the negative effects of a secularism which obscures people’s vision of religious incentives and motivations and easily reduces a “sacred ministry” to a more or less decent but burdensome job. I included a reflection on the radical changes in family life that have come about in the greater part of the wealthier countries and which rule out any expectations of great numbers of candidates for our novitiates.

I thought it opportune to insist especially on certain suppositions which dry up the sources of grace for many religious. Throughout the length and breadth of biblical history, from the tower of Babel to the betrayal of Peter, there are examples, as instructive as they are persistent, of humiliating falls and appalling spiritual blindness, permitted by God as a warning and a chastisement for people who trusted too much in their own resources.

Hence I referred to the presumption:

— of those who easily abandoned mental prayer and who thought they could substitute for it every kind of laudable — or not laudable — activity, and this despite all that the Saints, including De La Salle, have pointed out;

— of those who got involved in worldly business which has nothing to do with them and called for no direction or solution that they could offer;

— of those who considered that they could find their own ways of fulfilling a mission and living a consecrated life, taking their personal preference as the norm for what they did and ignoring the opinion of the community and the guidance of superiors, pastors and spiritual advisers.

I alluded to the tendency to settle for a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle, favoured by affluent economic conditions, which in many of our communities was far removed from the spirit of times when a certain degree of austerity was practically unavoidable; a lifestyle which too easily adopted the tastes and standards of the consumer society in which we live, and paid scant attention to the poverty existing around us.

All the attitudes listed in this brief enumeration bring about a loss of the sense of vocation and project an image of it, especially to the eyes of young people, as something bound up with well-to-do institutions, little concerned with such needs of fellow-human beings as those which moved De La Salle to found his Institute.

### **Formation, as always, the key issue**

It would be gravely presumptuous for any community to expect to survive and carry on its work without seeking, by every possible means, to eliminate these false attitudes and without giving the utmost care to the formation of its members. Sound formation is the way to ensure a correct understanding of a community's common objectives and of the best ways of attaining them.

A suitable and seriously organized formation, on

the one hand, justifies and provides a motive for any approach we might make to encourage possible candidates to join us. On the other hand, it is the way whereby we enable those who decide to enter, to understand and accept the genuine meaning of our vocation in the Church. As for those who are fully-fledged members of the Institute, a well-constructed **permanent formation** programme, available to all, will rectify false or outdated ideas and will co-ordinate the criteria for a true appreciation of a mission which has aspects which are never sufficiently understood.

Circular 418 (March 1983) has done much to orientate and push forward an improved structurization of formation in the Institute. There has been manifest progress with regard to the requirements, the duration and the methods employed, in almost all Districts. In some instances, the means are lacking to provide personnel and adequate conditions for the process of formation in a given district or delegation. But the possibilities of improvement are always there. May whatever is done always correspond to what our documents call for and to the conviction we all share about the decisive importance of an excellent formation for our immediate future!

### **Constant vigilance to avoid ever-present pitfalls**

There is always the threat of certain false attitudes, some of which we would specify as follows:

- the attitude of those who were too easily upset by the speed and scope of changes that have

taken place, and whose capacity for hope is diminishing as they dwell with profitless nostalgia on a past that will not return;

- the attitude of some — they were more numerous in the crucial years now past — who in the turmoil of the crisis opted for a cowardly withdrawal, contrary to the unconditional fidelity they had vowed;

- the attitude of those who look for miracles of insight and generosity in others at difficult moments, but are less concerned, in humility and strength, to help them through such crises;

- the attitude of the false prophets who, in face of widespread perplexity, assumed a certain personal infallibility and delivered “*ex cathedra*” solutions which were very different from what serious study and community consensus proposed;

- the attitude of the ill-informed optimists who lacked the quality of being, as we said, quoting some words of Fromm, “hardheaded realists, shedding all illusions and fully appreciating the difficulties — not just dreamers but wide-awake utopians.”

Negative factors are always at work, ready to hinder the normal progress of our life and ministry. The crisis is still with us... But it is generally admitted that its virulence has abated compared with past years.

### **A matter of great concern: the crisis in vocations**

The problem of vocations is shared by the whole Church and by almost all religious Institutes. We know that the average number of young people

showing an interest in a religious vocation, and in our particular vocation, is slightly increasing. But this is due to a consoling rise in certain countries and regions, rather than to what can be called a generalized improvement.

But we must try to confront the problem in the way our Father would. Let us recognize that vocations do still exist, and that if they are now rarer they are also generally better informed and more mature. We have to see that we must deserve vocations and win them, since they are no longer produced by factors relating to a favourable ambience.

We must win vocations more by the witness we give than by means of informative documentation and impressive publicity material. We must gain them with a generous and intelligent vocational ministry, shared and supported by all. It must be more clearly seen that gospel values prevail in the life of each of our communities. Young people today are better informed and more astute than in times past, and they become more convinced by what we are than by the amount we do.

There is need for everyone, but especially the young, to have a more clearly-defined impression of our vocation, an understanding of its true character and of its capacity to meet the needs of youth and the poor in today's world.

Happy crisis, indeed, if it helps to rid us of inertia and routine and leads us to demonstrate and re-affirm, to more convincing effect, a deep fidelity to De La Salle!



**WE ARE CALLED TO A CHAPTER**

The expression "to be called to a Chapter" has, in some languages, taken on the colloquial meaning of being put on the spot, being called to account. Needless to say, no such meaning was intended in the way I used it in Circular 416 ("Preparation for the 41st General Chapter") or in my letter of May 1983, when giving the first indications for the pre-capitular period, or in Circular 420 which was the official convocation of the Chapter.

In these we were speaking of the Chapter as, in the words of PAUL VI, "*an assembly in which the whole religious family is brought together in God's presence, in order to listen to His voice and to proceed to the renewal of itself which consists essentially in augmenting its fidelity to its vocation... It is an exceptional opportunity presented to every Institute first to reflect about its specific character, its purpose and the function it is called upon to exercise in the Church; then to take decisions full of salutary strength for the life of its members.*" (Osservatore Romano, 6.10.1973).

A Chapter, according to Cardinal Pironio, is "*an ecclesial event, a moment of a special presence of the Lord and of the outpouring of the Spirit, not only on the community concerned, but on the Church as a whole.*" It is, then, a gift of God which imposes on us all the inescapable obligation of our human response.

We are, in fact, all called to the Chapter, in the joyful expectation of seeing in it an exceptional grace from God. This is why we are happy to

report that many projects are already in full progress, capable of stimulating and co-ordinating a common effort of participation, which is an indispensable condition of God's bestowing His saving power upon us.

The Commission for the Revision of the Rules has completed, in exemplary fashion, its preparation of a Draft which is to be submitted for examination and approval. The Commission for the Preparation of the Chapter is on perfect schedule with its calendar of matters to be arranged in advance. The working parties which we announced (on the Ministry of the Brothers, on the Institute's relations with Islam and Buddhism, on Ageing Districts and on Lasallian Associations and Movements) are making decisive progress in preparing their reports. The Chapter Delegates are all known and are already receiving instruments of work as well as preparing themselves to be the living conscience of the Brothers they will represent and the voice of their aspirations and uncertainties.

It is not only the delegates who should feel themselves called to the Chapter. We have insisted a good deal in our letters and circulars that the Chapter should really be "General," that is, wide open to the concern of everybody and having the benefit of everyone's reflective co-operation, each according to his particular situation. The delegates will be the actual participants, directly responsible for the proceedings of the Chapter, but whatever they do would be pointless if they did not feel themselves backed up and inspired by the Brothers of their respective districts and delegations.

Nor would it make sense, or be of any real value, to busy ourselves in the analysis of current

situations and in the framing of diagrams and blueprints, if the Spirit were not animating and vivifying whatever needs to be resolved upon, whatever is needed, as in the vision of the prophet, to make dry bones come alive (Ezekiel, 38). Rarely shall we have a more opportune occasion to sing Psalm 127: "*Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain who build it. If Yahweh does not keep watch over the city, the sentinels watch in vain.*"

There are many positive realities to be weighed and assessed. Views will be exchanged on the many gains that have been made, and this interchange of information will serve as a mutual encouragement and reciprocal enlightenment, with all prejudice put aside. There will be some need to amend and rectify certain matters, so that the life of the Institute, its communities and its works, may prosper and evolve according to the designs of God. We have come together already in prayer, in this YEAR OF PRAYER, and very pleasing echoes have reached us of the way this is being celebrated in the Institute. We are united in prayer in order to receive the Holy Spirit as did the Apostles: "*They persevered with one mind in prayer, together with Mary the Mother of Jesus, and His disciples*" (Acts, 1. 4).

1986! It will be exactly three hundred years since, according to Blain, "*M. de La Salle thought the time had come to gather the schoolmasters into a small body and to adopt a uniform life style... He called together his principal disciples, twelve in number, and met with them to confer on the means of giving some form to their new brotherhood, of insuring some stability among the members and of attaching them to their state... He proposed that*

*they all make a retreat, a suggestion which was warmly welcomed. It began on Ascension Eve in the year 1684 (1) and was to continue until Pentecost*" (Blain: "The Life of John Baptist de La Salle" Book II, Ch. 2. Tr. Arnandez).

So we may call it THE TERCENTARY CHAPTER. But let this mean that it is the Chapter which will seek to retrace the steps of the Founder in his spirituality and not only at a significant moment in his history. Then we shall be able to walk the pathways of our time in the strength and security of his companionship. Let it be a Chapter that will reinforce the Institute in its fidelity to its origins and make its founding charism come alive and do its salvific work in us!

In various ways, not just by letters and circulars, we are "called to a Chapter." Let us respond, one in mind and heart, with a total readiness to avail of this Lasallian Easter, this passage of the Lord amongst us!

## Conclusion

My intention, Brother, has been to offer a simple review. And a review inevitably presupposes a certain amount of repetition, leaving aside anything that might distract us from our purpose.

Repetitions can seem tiresome. Still their purpose has been to centre attention on what my love prompted me to convey.

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(1) We have already pointed out in Circular 419, page 14, that Blain's date needs to be corrected.

My omission of other topics of interest in no way signifies a lack of esteem for other ways of looking at things or other preferences. We remain open to new proposals and new ways of looking at things, all related to our diverse cultural backgrounds. What we seek to foster is our spiritual unity, firmly based on certain fundamental principles which have come down to us from the Founder and, through him, from Christ Himself. A sincere, living and shared adherence to those principles will make it possible for us to respect the rich variety of views and circumstances which are part of our life and activity.

To conclude my letter I should like to express the essence of what I have been saying, in the form of a prayer, a petition to St John Baptist de La Salle to be our inspiration and to move us to follow him better:

*Help us, Father, to live more fully and sincerely our consecration to God "as far as we are able and as far as he will require of us";*

*help us to understand and to fulfil more convincingly our ministry of evangelization;*

*to give a truly privileged place in our service to Christ's own favoured ones, those who suffer from poverty and injustice;*

*not to forget, through a blameworthy heedlessness, the poor who are far away from us;*

*help us to be open, in a communion of spirit and mission, to others who also want, while living in the world, to follow you and collaborate with us in your work;*

*help us to confront all crises with humility and courage in the way that you, with the grace of God, knew how to confront them.*

*Be with us in a special way during our Chapter, for which we are now preparing, so that, by means of it, we may in a spirit of unity, reaffirm our fidelity to you.*

I am, Brother,  
Fraternally yours in De La Salle,

*H. José Pablo*