

A black and white photograph of a young boy in a school uniform, sitting and reading an open book. The boy is looking down at the pages with a focused expression. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a classroom or library setting. The text is overlaid on the image in various colors and fonts.

BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS
PASTORAL LETTER TO THE BROTHERS

**Consecrated by God the Trinity
as a Community of Brothers**

Who submit their ministry to God's judgment

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría
Superior General

December 25th, 2011

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May the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, Jesus our Lord, furnish you with all that is good, that you may do his will. May he carry out in you what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13: 20-21).

Then the king will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him and say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?" And the king will say to them in reply, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25: 34-40).

Brothers,

The final greeting from the Letter to the Hebrews is a beautiful invitation to renew the covenant with the God of peace through Jesus our brother, teacher and guide; and to renew also our covenant with the children and young people to whom we have devoted our lives. We know that this is God's will for us and that it is pleasing to his eyes. We also know as the text from Matthew tells us that above all we will be judged on the last day and that the important thing is that he can complete his saving mission in us, his instruments, and that we might be able to see his very face in the faces of children and young people, especially the poor.

As Bishop Casaldáliga tells us in poetry:

*At the end of the journey they will say to me:
Have you lived? Have you loved?
And I, without saying a word,
will open my heart filled with names.*

A heart filled with names, the names of children, of young people whom the Lord has entrusted to us, the names of our Brothers who have been a part of our lives, the names of so many anonymous people that we have met along the road... and in whom we have recognized the face of the Lord. The judgment of God will be more about these faces than about our actions; more about our ability for an evangelical fraternal, and disinterested relationship than about our theoretical and empirical knowledge.

At least this is what our Founder also thought in his Meditations for the Time of Retreat, which I will use for this letter as I have in previous years. It is highly revealing, as we will see later, that the judgment that awaits us refers to these words: in the way we have carried out our job. Today we could say our ministry, the ministry that the Lord has entrusted to us in his loving design (cf. Meditations 205 and 206).

Consecrated by God the Trinity as a community of Brothers, we are called to be faithful servants and ministers of his grace, to submit our actions to God's judgment and to the demands of his Word, to live our ministry with Gospel authenticity. This is our way of living our consecration, as we have promised, to procure the glory of God the Trinity. God has called you to your ministry in order to procure his glory and to give children the spirit of wisdom, the insight to know him, and to enlighten the eyes of their hearts (Ephesians 1: 17 - 18) (Meditation 206.1).

As Brother Miguel Campos tells us in his commentary on this meditation, we find here one of the best formulations and the best comment that we can make on our formula of vows. It is another way of saying that our best way of procuring God's glory is through schools that serve the poor, together and by association. Here history and eschatology are closely united, the transcendent mystery of God that is carried out in history as the hearts of children are enlightened with the light of faith. As the Founder tells us in other writings the important thing is to transmit to the young the spirit of Christianity more than knowledge. That

spirit is new life, it consists in the participation of eschatological good, in the communion of the New Covenant, in the Body of Christ that grows until achieving perfection and completion (Miguel Campos, *The Gospel Journey of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*, Volume II, page 253).

The theological reflection that our Founder makes in these two reflections starts from that conviction with a theme from Saint Paul: For we are God's co-workers; you are God's field, God's building. Since we are co-workers in God's work, since we are the dispensers of his mysteries, since we are God's ministers, we feel responsible for the field that God cultivates. We are his sent workers, we are the stewards, representing God's action in history and in the world.

The concept of judgment has its roots in and starts from a relationship that is born of a covenant contracted between the Lord of the world and history and the steward who represents him. It is that life of a covenant which involves participation as co-workers with God, acting as his ministers, and it underscores that fact that the mandate of the mission cannot be arbitrarily accepted, simply because we like it...on the contrary, we have not chosen this mission but we have been chosen and sent (cf. John 15: 16), and the Lord has given us talents that we need to pay attention to (cf. Matthew 25: 14 - 30). That is why there is such an explicit reference in 1 Corinthians 3: 9, which is repeated in various places of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* as a kind of refrain, and it reminds us that we are not the own-

ers of the work but just the trustees who administer the work and it is basically over this responsibility where judgment will be rendered.

Put another way, the goods that God has entrusted to us and the talents with which God has gifted us to be used in his service are the practical content of judgment. Judgment, then, has to do with that call, that choosing and that commissioning. With words filled with tenderness our Founder expresses the same idea in another of his meditations: You should look upon the children whom you are charged to teach as poor, abandoned orphans. In fact, though the majority of them do have a father here on earth, they are still as if they had none and are abandoned to themselves for the salvation of their souls. This is the reason God places them as if under your guardianship. He looks on them with compassion and takes care of them as being their protector, their support and their father (Psalm 68: 6) and it is to you that he entrusts this care (Meditation 37.3). And one day he will ask an accounting of us.

I conclude this introduction with some rather provocative words which may awaken the very best in us as Brothers and at the same time they may give us some confidence before God's judgment. During the time I have spent in Rome – quite a few years already – one Brother General Councilor, as he was speaking about one of the Regions of the Institute, confided the following to me: What surprises me, and I am speaking not only of that particular Region, but perhaps of all the Regions of the Institute, is the lack of spiritual vitality. It is as if we don't get the connection be-

tween passion for the mission and passion for God or of God working through us. In short, the principle and the foundation that we find in the Meditations for the Time of Retreat never cease to give form to our fraternal contemplative life as mediators of the signs of God, present and active, signs that fight for the right to life on the part of children and young people, those who are abandoned and marginalized. In the words of the Founder, that is the most important thing...

1. God's judgment throughout salvation history

It seems important to me to reflect on God's judgment throughout salvation history, the judgment of Jesus Christ as Lord of creation and of human history. Many times, perhaps, we have inherited a concept that closes us in on realizing our own private issues which have as a kind of spearhead a fierce individualism and an accent on prioritizing certain lacks. Sometimes an outline of moral perfection may have been proposed to us that is more centered on faults, sin and deficiencies than on achievements, virtue and efforts made in favor of our brothers and sisters and on the gratuitousness of God's grace. This type of thinking puts to one side family relationships, professional obligations and work with a view to contributing to the common good, to being for others.

Furthermore, many times this focus is accompanied by "images" of great artistic works that have been well ingrained and that often go into the subconscious level. Paintings, statues, music, movies, etc., that continue to feed

our subconscious images and that provoke a state of terror and anguish. Some medieval representations provide feedback for our feelings and they paralyze us. The first task in this situation consists in recognizing and identifying these images in order to open ourselves to a new view and under new light as we reread this article of our faith. This is important because, in fact, the second coming of Christ is about waiting for his return as a judge of the living and the dead. This is an article of faith in the Christian creed: we all must appear before him to give him an accounting of our lives.

We need a biblical view of the concept of judgment which has its roots in the Covenant. This is a fundamental conviction, without which faith and hope in God's judgment in history is distorted. By means of the special relationship of the Covenant, God is the Father protector of Israel who defends Israel from her adversaries and from injustices. For the Israelites the foundation of that relationship is God's mercy, his compassion, his judgment that defends and saves them. God is the Judge of all created things, the universe and history and it would be inconceivable to think that he would judge in any other way than in a just way. He provides justice for all those who are abandoned, marginalized, unprotected. God is the defender of the poor, the orphan and the widow (Deuteronomy 10: 18; Psalm 82: 3; Psalm 103: 6; Psalm 140: 13; Job 36: 6).

Judgment in the Old Testament cannot be understood without relating it to the search for justice and to the es-

chatological hope of the realization of God's Kingdom throughout history and to definitive revelation. The Kingdom in which all oppression disappears and the rights of all are respected. The eschatological dream of Israel is this Kingdom which the prophets recall with messianic traits of a people led by their Messiah, a King consecrated as Judge.

To live submitting to God's judgment is a matter of faith. An invincible faith that God, who above all is love, rules and prevails over the history of the world and humankind with his power, and his Word determines right and sets the rules of justice. God tests the heart, he does not judge from what is outside and he knows perfectly well those who are just and those who are guilty. Aware that we are all weak and sinners, but aware also that *as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. For he knows how we are formed, remembers that we are dust* (Psalm 103: 13 - 14).

In the New Testament, especially in the Synoptics, judgment is presented with apocalyptic tones which, by means of catastrophic signs, reveal the final liberation and the full establishment of God's Kingdom; but also there is an expression of the central focus of judgment being the attitude that we have had as regards a neighbor in need. The Gospel of Saint John repeatedly underscores that fact that Jesus came into the world not to condemn the world but to save it, and the death and resurrection of Jesus which is placed in the hands of the one in whom we trust and are saved which is an anticipation and a guarantee of our final fate, as

Saint Paul tells us: *For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us* (Romans 5: 6 - 8). There is no doubt that we can approach God's court with confidence, aware that all is grace.

2. Personal and ministerial judgment

...not only regarding your own person but also regarding the talents and graces you have received from God to fulfill well the service that he himself gave you. For he has made you the guardians and guides of children who belong to him, over whom he has acquired the right of father not only by creation but also by holy baptism, whereby they are all consecrated to him (Meditation 205.1).

It is wonderful to see in our Founder how one of his strongest ideas takes root again in these two meditations. As we can demonstrate, the personal cannot be disconnected from the ministerial, and therefore *we cannot distinguish between the duties of our own state and what pertains to our own sanctification and perfection* (Collection of Various Short Treatises, page 77, point 4). Upon analyzing his more autobiographical writings and especially the last things he wrote we can see a clear consistency in his thinking. For him it is not about theory but it is about personal experience: *I shall always look upon the work of my salvation and the foundation and government of our community as the work*

of God. Therefore, I will abandon the care of both to him in order to act only by his orders. I will consult him frequently regarding all I must do for the one or for the other. Often I will say to him the words of the prophet Habakkuk: Domine, opus tuum. Lord, this is your work (Rules Which I have Imposed Upon Myself, 8).

The idea is that we live a unified and unifying spirituality. This is a wonderful richness that we have inherited. This indissolubility is made manifest here between the personal and the ministerial dimensions as we can also see in the questions that he raises: *Have you up to the present looked upon the salvation of your students as your personal responsibility during the whole time that they are under your guidance? You have exercises which are arranged for your own sanctification, but if you have an ardent zeal for the salvation of those whom you are called to instruct, you will not fail to perform them and to relate them to this intention. In doing this you will draw on your students the graces needed to contribute to their salvation, and you can be assured that if you act this way for their salvation, God himself will take responsibility for yours. Take on this spirit for the future (Meditation 205.2).* We find this idea expressed even more strongly in another meditation: *You have committed yourselves to God in the place of those whom you instruct. By taking upon yourselves the responsibility for their souls, you have, so to speak, offered to him soul for soul (Exodus 21: 23). Have you sometimes reflected on the commitment you have made (to be responsible for those whom God has entrusted to you), in order to be faithful to it? Do you have as much care for their salvation as you have*

for your own? You should not only take all possible care of them, but consecrate your life and yourselves entirely to procure salvation for them (Meditation 137.3).

These conclusions are rather absolute and not at all wishy-washy as we can see also in the statement the Founder makes when he tells us that God will first ask us for an accounting of the souls of the children we teach before asking about our souls. *This is what Saint Paul brings to your attention, when he says that those who have been put in charge of others must render an account of them to God* (Hebrews 13: 17). *He does not say that they will render an account of their own souls, but of the souls of those for whom they are responsible, and it is over those souls that they must watch because they are obliged to render an account to God for them* (Meditation 205.2).

We find this kind of thinking also in the way the Founder understands discernment which, in light of the Word of God, starts and ends in real life; in the way he understands the annual retreat as a space of encounter with God and with the young people we teach; in the way he understands prayer which is personal but which should have an apostolic dimension. The Founder uses a strong image, that of the love of Christ for his Church which Paul attributes as a marriage and John Baptist de La Salle sees as a relationship between the Brother and his students when he tells us: *Act in such a way through your zeal that you give tangible proof that you love those whom God has entrusted to you, just as Jesus Christ has loved his Church* (Meditation 201.2).

Therefore, this has to do with loving children and young people as Christ loved his Church even to the point of being incarnated in it, giving his life, being crushed, consumed and sacrificing so that others have life in abundance. *The basic reason for this is, that when they carry out well the service of guides and leaders of the souls entrusted to them, they fulfill at the same time their own duties before God. God will fill them with so much grace that they themselves will be made holy while they are contributing as far as they are able to the salvation of others* (Meditation 205.2).

Love of God is inseparable from love of neighbor, just as faith is inseparable from zeal. I believe that here lies our spiritual secret and I think that this should be the major priority for us. Not to differentiate, as the Founder asks us. These texts from our origins invite us to approach our founding story as a kind of parable that speaks to everyone, starting from the emergence of a community of Brothers consecrated to the Trinity for the educational service of the poor, in perfect unity and with full integration. We are called to integrate the mystic and the prophetic.

The Founder uses a language that is more dependent on prophetic tradition than on the apocalyptic. To render an accounting is an action that helps us to discover what we carry inside. The process that comes from outside and enters into the deepest part of the heart reveals to us the quality of the relationship of the Covenant with the God of the poor and the respect and love of children and young people who have been entrusted to us. Brother José Pablo re-

minded us that the vow of stability is related to concrete persons and not to abstract principles or lofty ideals. We commit ourselves to *living beings who are loved with their hearts of flesh and whom we do not abandon, just as a father does not abandon his own. Profession takes root in a person by means of a network of relationships, affection, and service* (Circular 406, page 133).

Our participating in the glory of Trinitarian life, which is so emphasized in Lasallian spirituality, makes us continue the work of Jesus who is sent by the Father and witnesses of the love of the Father as revealed in Jesus, with the strength of the Spirit, for the life of the world. This experience, at the same time contemplative and yet charged with action, makes us feel, in the words of Teilhard de Chardin, as if we are *children of heaven and children of earth* in a profound inner unity, without one drowning out the other. I believe that the 2004 Congress on Consecrated Life sensed very well this deep unity when it invited us to live a double passion: for God and for humankind. (Cf. Final words to the May 2011 Intercapitular Assembly).

3. Faithful stewards of God's grace

Jesus Christ, having been appointed by God to be your judge, will say to you as the owner said to his manager, Give me an account of your administration (Luke 16: 2). *He will then look into the very depths of your heart to examine whether you have been faithful managers of the wealth he has entrusted to you and of the talents which he has given you to work in his service* (Meditation 205.1).

Without mentioning it, the Founder borrows a fundamental idea from Saint Paul: *Thus should one regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Now it is of course required of stewards that they be found trustworthy* (1 Corinthians 4: 1 - 2). First of all, we are stewards, not landlords, of all that the Lord has placed under our care in order to make his face visible and to serve the children and young people that he has entrusted to us.

The Father whom we serve as we identify ourselves with Christ in the Spirit and the Kingdom we construct are our absolutes. The Landlord with a capital “L” is God the Trinity, the landlords with small “l’s” are the young people, children and the poor we care for. Like Saint Vincent de Paul, we can say that the poor are our landlords and lords. We are stewards of God’s grace for them. We are stewards of all that we are and have in order to make these available for his service: spiritual and material gifts, time, body and soul and even that unique gift that makes us different from others and that makes us unique and unrepeatable. One day the Lord will say to us: *Give me an account of your administration... He will then look into the very depths of your heart to examine whether you have been faithful managers of the wealth he has entrusted to you and of the talents which he has given you to work in his service* (Meditation 205.1).

In the Gospel of Luke we find a sketch of the image of the faithful steward, as we recall the end of each liturgical year. *Who, then, is the faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute [the] food al-*

lowance at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so (Luke 12: 42 - 43). To be faithful stewards is to be faithful to the Lord and to make our own his interests while we adjust our own interests or get them in line with his interests. This means putting our talents at his service as the Founder invites us to do. To be a faithful steward, in the words of Isabel of the Trinity, means that we offer ourselves to Christ in order to become a kind of “spare humanity” to continue his incarnation, his mission, death and resurrection. To be faithful stewards is to go out of ourselves and our own selfishness to serve and respond *with open eyes and burning hearts*, with creativity and zeal, the needs of the children and the young whom God has entrusted to us, especially the poor, the least loved, those who find no meaning in their lives, those with learning disabilities, immigrants...

To be faithful stewards is to live up to the ultimate consequences of our vow of association for the educational and evangelical service of the poor, aware that it is their patrimony, God's grace, that we administer, just as did the Founder and the first Brothers in 1691: *And, for this purpose I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest; I, Nicolas Vuyart, and I, Gabriel Drolin, now and forever and until the last of us survives or until the complete establishment of the Society, vow association and union, to procure and maintain said establishment, without leaving, even if we are the only three remaining in said Society and even if we are obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread alone* (Heroic Vow).

To be faithful is more the result of a grace, of a gift from God than the fruit of our own efforts. Our fidelity, always relative and imperfect, is founded in God's fidelity. Paul, with his passionate style, expressed it in these words: *Therefore, I bear with everything for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, together with eternal glory. This saying is trustworthy: If we have died with him we shall also live with him; if we persevere we shall also reign with him... If we are unfaithful he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself* (2 Timothy 2: 10 - 13). We must trust more in God's fidelity and in his "stewardship ability" than in our own, as Charles Péguy said it so beautifully and with a bit of irony in one of his poems entitled Night:

*I administer well, poor children;
I rule the entire creation,
which is much more difficult!
I think maybe you can, without great loss,
set your affairs in my hands, wise men,
because maybe I might be as wise as you.
I think you could
leave your worries overnight
and the next day, you would find
your business too damaged ...
Maybe even find something better!,
because I love you as the apple of my eye,
and I am attentive to your pains and cries ...
even those who do not dare to admit them in public...
Maybe tonight ...*

Yes, perhaps tonight, but with the certainty of his Word: *Remain faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life* (Revelation 2: 10).

4. Anticipating judgment

If you want to prevent the account which you must give him from becoming heavier with the passage of time, make it every day to yourself. Examine before God how you are conducting yourself in your work and whether you are failing in any of your duties. Come to see yourself clearly. Find fault with yourself accurately, unsparingly, so that when Jesus Christ comes to judge you, you will be able to face his judgment without being afraid. For when he comes he will find nothing to condemn in you, because you will have anticipated his judgment... (Meditation 205.1).

The Founder invites us to anticipate God's judgment in order to be able to face him without fear. In Meditation 206, he highlights for us the most concrete things in professional life and community that will lead us to live fully and from the depths of the heart the covenant with God, to unify once again the professional and spiritual life, anticipating seriously but joyfully God's final judgment in favor of the poor. In this way we feel privileged and we appeal to the mercy and compassion of God the Father-Son-Holy Spirit, who has chosen us to proclaim the Gospel to the poor and to the young who are far from salvation.

We ensure a good judgment if we anticipate *daily* that final judgment, placing before the Lord the children and young

people we have instructed: *Be assured that the best way to do this and to be pleasing to Jesus Christ, when he judges you, will be to present to him all those children you have instructed as part of the building of the Church and have brought by your care into its structure to become the sanctuary where God dwells by the Holy Spirit* (Ephesians 2: 22) (Meditation 205.3).

It is here where all expectations are inverted:

- from the concern for oneself to a total dedication to others,
- from obsession about personal development to growth in concern for the marginalized and those who are far from salvation,
- from a curriculum mainly focused on individual interests to one that emerges from God's saving plan for everyone, starting with the poor,
- from personal perfection to the contribution towards the common good so that *all of them will come to the age of the perfect man and the fullness of Jesus Christ*, as the Founder proposes to us in citing the letter to the Ephesians (cf. Meditation 205. 3).

To anticipate our judgment is to read reality in a critical way and not to be afraid of taking a counter-cultural action when necessary, as the Founder invited us to do in his last recommendations. This also has to do with, in the words of Brother Miguel Campos, a self-critical anticipation of a gift received.

To anticipate our judgment is to make our own the concept of Lasallian discernment. A discernment that ought to start

from the needs of the poor and God's saving plan for them and to which we are committed. One that is born of contemplating a provident God who is attentive to the anguish of the poor, contemplating a Messiah who is poor and powerless and who has *nowhere to lay his head* and whose mission in his own words is to proclaim the Good News to the poor. A discernment that would include for us personal time for reflection, ongoing prayer, community dialogue, an annual retreat in the Lasallian style, where young people and the poor are ever present to us. A discernment that has as its center and purpose *God's glory and the good of the Church* through the educational and evangelizing service of the poor and, starting from them, all young people (cf. De La Salle's letter to the Brothers in 1714).

A discernment that comes from deep faith, irrevocable hope, unconditional love and which is translated into an ardent zeal. Faith that, like that of De La Salle, *is not primarily conceptual. It is action, an ability to look at and consider all things...an ability to do all things...and to attribute all to God. God in history...A faith that impels us with a passionate strength for the God of the poor. A faith that is focused on the reality in which we live and the conviction of the action of the ever-present God in it: the truth about what is happening in our country and in our history, in the despairing situation of the marginalized, the abandoned, the poor* (Brother Miguel Campos, *Discernment*, Rome 2006).

To anticipate God's judgment in our regard is to make our own two means recommended to us by the spiritual tradi-

tion of all times but is it important to update this tradition. I am referring to the review of life and to fraternal correction.

We could define the review of life in Lasallian terms as looking at life with God's eyes or looking at life deeply from a faith perspective not in a private way but starting from God's saving plan and his putting his plan into action through our ministry. This is about reading the events of our world and history in order to discover the living God of Jesus who wants all to be saved and to have life in abundance and, at the same time, asking ourselves how we are collaborating with this plan of salvation. *The review of life is new vision of life because the Lord himself has entered into our life. The review of life does not necessarily contribute new ideas or knowledge about life, but it should always renew the way we look inside ourselves, our intimate concern for the world* (A. Maréchal).

We do not live the mission that we carry out as a personal adventure, our commitment is a community one; even though the Founder in these two meditations questions us on a personal level, we cannot forget that to be faithful stewards and give an account to God depends largely on the fraternal relationships that we have; we ought to be faithful stewards, supporting one another and giving an account to God with more confidence if we feel supported by our Brothers. *A brother helped by his brother is like a strong city* (Proverbs 18: 19, Douay-Rheims edition). We should help one another especially in our mission and correct anything

that might weaken that support and make it less effective evangelically. And it should always be done with great love. As Saint Augustine tells us: *Love and do what you will. If you are silent, be silent because of love; if you speak, speak out of love, if you offer correction, offer it out of love; if you forgive, forgive out of love. Keep the root of love deep in your heart for from this root can come nothing but good.*

5. Our evangelizing mission

It is God, by his power and very special goodness, who has called you to give the knowledge of the Gospel to those who have not yet received it. Do you look upon yourselves, then, as ministers of God? Do you fulfill the duties of your work with all possible zeal, and as having to give an account of it to him? (Meditation 140.2).

When John Paul II received the General Chapter of 1986 in a private audience, he told us that it is up to us to carry the Gospel to the world of education. His idea coincides with that of our Founder who, as we know, also told us that the Gospel should be our first Rule. The Founder often repeated this theme. When speaking about our students, he tells us: *God sends them to you so that you may give them the spirit of Christianity and educate them according to the maxims of the Gospel (Meditation 37.2).*

In Meditation 206, in *crescendo* fashion, he points out three steps for us to keep in mind in order to do this: instruction, vigilance, intention.

- **Instruction**

The first step is instruction which implies preparation and zeal as well as a priority for catechesis. *You will give an account to God whether you have been exact to teach catechism, and whether you have taught it on all the days and for all the time prescribed for you; whether you have taught your disciples the things in the catechism that they should know according to their age and ability; whether you have not neglected some students because they were the slowest, perhaps also the poorest...* (Meditation 206.1). It is wonderful to see how our Founder invites us to be especially concerned about the slowest and poorest students..., as we can also find in many of his meditations (cf. Meditations 80, 86, 128, 137, 176, 190...). This is an invitation for us not to let ourselves be led by appearances, especially when he says: *whether you did not show favoritism toward others because they were rich, or pleasant, or naturally possessing more lovable qualities than the others* (Meditation 206.1).

But the priority given to catechesis does not mean that secular subjects should be neglected because, as he says, they are *strictly required of you*. Today the Rule speaks to us about a *human and Christian education*, and we are probably more aware now than in the Founder's time that to humanize is to evangelize; and that to humanize today in our world is one of the most important priorities that we have in our educational mission, in a world of "fleeting" relationships and such dehumanization. Here we can again recall what constitutes the heart of our spirituality: *do not differentiate*.

I believe that some testimonies can help us to appreciate what this means. The first one is already well-known by many, and it comes from the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa as he was receiving the Nobel Prize this year: *I learned to read at the age of five, in Brother Justiniano's class at the La Salle School in Cochabamba, Bolivia. This is the most important thing that happened in my life. Almost seventy years later I vividly recall how this magic, being able to translate words from books into images, enriched my life, as it broke barriers of time and space...*

A second story comes from a former student of ours from Venezuela: *My school was unique and I was proud of it: La Salle School. I don't know if I should call it my second home when really it was my first. There was passion there...the traits that it left me with, which are indelible, have not changed at all..My school made me what I am today and it taught me how to be. A good part of what I carry within I owe to that school. In its classrooms I learned about the meaning of democracy, respect for others, concern for my country, the poor, God, about academic excellence, competition in sports, and passion for music, music, music* (Leandro Area, Analítica.com, Caracas, June 30, 2011).

The third story comes from a personal experience of mine during my visit to Argentina in the city of Córdoba where a meeting of young Lasallians from throughout the country had been organized. Some participants were former students. One of them, at the end of my visit and my talk, came up to me to say: “Brother, I want to share something

with you. The most important thing that has happened in my life is that I attended La Salle School.”

- **Vigilance**

In some sense it can be said that each of you is a bishop, that is, the vigilant guardian of the flock God has entrusted to you, (Acts 20: 28) and consequently you are obliged to keep watch over all those who belong to it, because, as Saint Paul says, you have to give an account to God for their souls (Hebrews 13: 17) (Meditation 186.3).

It is interesting to see that this vigilance is not limited to school but that it includes life in general. In a way school structures are blown wide open, not in the sense of denying them but overcoming them: *Do you believe, perhaps, that you are responsible for your disciples only during the time of school, that your vigilance need not extend to their behavior outside of school, to help them as far as you are able to live everywhere in a Christian manner...? (Meditation 206.2).* Therefore I believe that we can speak of the pedagogical sense of Lasallian vigilance and at the same time of vigilance as a pastoral and spiritual responsibility.

This is an active type of vigilance, whose ultimate purpose is to lead children and young people along the way of salvation. We are called to be sacraments of the love and tenderness of God, and to feel ourselves responsible for each one of them. *This is what God has provided in giving children teachers whom he has charged with this care, and to whom he has given the concern and the vigilance not only to*

prevent anything whatsoever harmful to their salvation from capturing their hearts, but also to guide the children through all the dangers they meet in the world... (Meditation 197.3).

We know also that vigilance is a Gospel imperative. It is revealing that in the three short parables of Luke (Luke 12: 35 - 48) on vigilance and the faithful steward, the activity takes place at night. This is surely a sign that we do not always have absolute certainty but that we always must have absolute trust, no matter our limitations and doubts, that it is God's work, the work for which we are simply the stewards, not lords, as Archbishop Romero also reminded us.

Stewards and servants who need to place the Lord's interests as well as the interests of the Kingdom before our own, unconditionally, humbly and with historic patience, knowing that time belongs to the Lord and that he knows when the time will come. But we must always be *vigilant, awake and prepared* like the servants who wait for the master to return from the wedding or like the homeowner who waits for the untimely arrival of a thief but above all, in our case, in relation to the children and young people we teach and in whose service we are; we must be vigilant, awake and prepared like the faithful and careful steward the master put in charge to distribute rations to the workers at the proper time.

– **Intention**

What you say and do need not be as great a concern in the account you will have to render to God as the intention and the

manner of these actions. Of intention Saint Paul says that whether we speak or whether we act (Colossians 3: 17), we must do all things in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, not in order to please men but to please God (1 Thessalonians 2: 4). This is the purpose you must have and the sole motive that God wants you to have in your work (Meditation 206.3).

For John Baptist de La Salle the most important thing, even more important than saying or doing, was the intention of both of them. We should understand the term “intention” within the framework of the spiritual tradition of French spirituality of the seventeenth century as a relationship of fidelity, communion, life and of a deep identification with the *Spirit of Jesus*. From this standpoint we should read, for example, what the Founder proposed to us in the Rule of 1718: *Be continuously vigilant over yourselves so that you do not commit any action, as far as possible, by natural impulse, custom or by any human motive; do everything guided by God, moved by his Spirit and with the intention of pleasing him* (Rule of 1718: 2.6). This is also expressed in the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* in the form of an invocation: *Come, therefore, Holy Spirit, take possession of my heart, and animate all my actions to such an extent that it may be said that you produce them more than I, and that I no longer have life, nor movement, nor action except in so far as you yourself give them to me. Happy those who live and act only by the Spirit of God. It is of them that we may say that they no longer live, but that it is Jesus Christ, or rather the Holy Spirit, who lives in them* (Method of Mental Prayer 2: 64).

Intention is determined by a spirit. Our spirit, the spirit that should animate us translates into active faith and burning zeal. Once again it is well worth remembering the words of our Founder about what is most important, about what should concern us: *That which is of the utmost importance, and to which the greatest attention should be given in an Institute is that all who compose it possess the spirit that is peculiar to it...for it is this spirit that should animate all their actions, be the motive of their whole conduct; and those who do not possess it and those who have lost it, should be looked upon as dead members...* (Introduction to the Chapter 2 of the Rule of 1718).

As I recalled in my words to the last General Chapter De La Salle could not have given us a more integrated spiritual path. Nor could he have directed us more decidedly in the midst of our professional lives to that which is most important. De La Salle does not put mystical vision and prophetic action as opposite poles. He makes no distinction between interior life and apostolic obligations. Nor does he subordinate one to the other. They are united, which is what happens when a truly evangelical man unifies them, living an active faith in the practice of impassioned love. The center is God who acts and includes us in his actions as collaborators and ministers, as disciples, ambassadors and angels, as apostles and messengers of the Kingdom in the Church and as prophets, managers, stewards and servants. It is for that reason that we feel strongly that we are associated with the God of Life, with the God of the Kingdom, the God of History, the God of the Poor.

And we do this with Saint Paul, who impels us to do all things *in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ* as the basic condition for our ministry to be evangelically effective. This had to do with conforming ourselves on an ever deeper level of identification and not just copying an exterior model (cf. Meditation 196.3). This concern for achieving interior conformity with Jesus should lead us to feel that we are a *sacrament of Christ* for our disciples: *Jesus Christ himself wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your instructions as if he were giving them to them. They must be convinced that your instructions are the truth of Jesus Christ* (Meditation 195.2).

Intention is motivated not only by the spirit that animates it, but also by its purpose which gives it meaning. The Founder writes: *If we truly love God, everything we do should be for his glory* (1 Corinthians 10: 31), *Saint Paul says. It should be for no other reason that you have withdrawn yourselves from the world, for it is God who must be the purpose of your actions, just as he is their source* (Meditation 90.3).

Yes, a God who wants all to be saved and arrive at the knowledge of truth, a God who wants all to have life and life in abundance, a God whose principal glory is the full life of the human person. It is for that reason that the three “to’s” in our formula of vows are the criteria for our *giving an account*, because they present us with the three purposes that should animate our ministerial life.

- *To procure your glory as far as I shall be able and as you will require of me.*

- *To conduct, together and by association, schools for the service of the poor.*
- *To do whatever I may be assigned...* (Rule 25).

God's glory is our final absolute, but we know that his glory assumes our radical commitment as Brothers fraternally united in a common project "together and by association" in service of the poor with total availability to be wherever our service is most needed.

6. A more human and more brotherly world

These are not the words of the Founder, but I believe that if you read his writings and look at the example of his own life and his central idea not to make distinctions, his clear option for the poor and his view that at the final judgment we will give an account more for the care that we have given to young people than for our own virtue, we will be led to think that a more human and brotherly world is indeed in keeping with his fundamental thinking. In the same way today, we are sensitive to the issues of justice, peace and the integrity of creation as one of the best ways to achieve this.

Today a popular slogan is *another world is possible*. That possible world will be one that is more human and more brotherly. I believe that one of our greatest challenges is to be Brothers in order to help our neighbors be more human. Our being Brothers, in turn, helps us to appreciate more the horizontal dimension and to make manifest with our lives that, despite differences, it is possible to live as brothers and sisters. The fraternal style of our community rela-

tionships, which should extend also to the mission, should be an anticipation of the future city and a reflection of Trinitarian life.

If the Founder invites us to anticipate the final judgment, I think it would be appropriate that we evaluate the extent to which we collaborate in building a more human and more brotherly world and if we are an alternative for doing so. We cannot think that our life as Brothers is dispensed from considering our own human successes and failures because we are a part of humankind itself. What we can do is to provide some humanitarianism: Jesus asks the Father: *I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one* (John 17: 15).

To be a Brother does not mean enclosing yourself inside a bubble and washing your hands of the world's problems, but rather being incarnated in it in order to humanize it and to help bring about God's Kingdom. How else can our life be significant in the world? We can also ask ourselves if today our vocation as Brother presents an *alternative* to dehumanization. Does it respond in its structure and lifestyle to the urgent need for humanization that the world has today? Those who look at so much dehumanization and come to us because they seek an alternative – will they find it? *Christianity is not just another religion that offers some services to respond to the need for God that human beings have. It is a prophetic religion born out of Jesus to humanize life according to God's plan. We can "function" as religious communities gathered around expressions of worship, but if we do not*

transmit compassion or demand justice, if we do not defend the forgotten or take care of the last, then where is the plan that animated all of Jesus' life? (José Antonio Pagola) And we must not forget the words of the Gospel: *But seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides* (Matthew 6: 33).

Along with Saint Peter we, too, *await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells* (2 Peter 3: 13). But at the same time we know that in our mission we are called to be builders of justice and to teach young people about solidarity, commitment, building a better world. One day we will also be asked to give an account of these things. We should read our vow of association for the educational service of the poor in this light. Because if God our Father places in our hands the care of these children and young people, then it's about building, along with them, a world in which God's love for all is obvious, especially for the small, the last, the poor, the marginalized, the excluded and the least loved...

Peace is the result of justice. I have been deeply struck by the attention and the great interest and profound concern that our young people have for peace. On the international level, the Lasallian youth movement has established a day in the year to pray for peace and to discern, with a lot of imagination and creativity, concrete times for service to those brothers and sisters who are going through hard times and who seek peace. A poet from my country, Jorge Debravo, wrote:

*I cannot offer you peace, my brother man,
because peace is not a medal:
peace is a land enslaved and we have to go and liberate it...
If we throw ourselves into love that will be enough.*

Certainly peace is not a medal that is offered to us as peace presumes liberation and much love. To educate for peace is a duty about which we will be judged. In his message for the World Day of Peace this year Benedict XVI told us that *religious freedom is the path to peace*. I think about so many Brothers and Lasallians who carry out their mission with young people from distinct cultures and religions, aware that all are God's sons and daughters. This is precisely what the Founder tells us when he speaks about the mission that the Lord has entrusted to us: *For he has made you the guardians and guides of children who belong to him, over whom he has acquired the right of father not only by creation but also by holy baptism, whereby they are all consecrated to him* (Meditation 205.1). This means that for the Founder all children are God's sons and daughters by the very fact of having been created by him. The Pope says to us in his message: *If religious freedom is the path to peace, religious education is the highway which leads new generations to see others as their brothers and sisters, with whom they are called to journey and work together so that all will feel that they are living members of the one human family, from which no one is to be excluded* (January 1, 2011). I hope that we can, on the day of judgment, listen to these wonderful words of Isaiah as being addressed to us: *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one bringing good news, announcing peace!* (Isaiah 52: 7).

I was also struck this year by the number of times that the Pope spoke about the care of creation and ecological balance. The North American magazine *Foreign Policy* (FP) stated that *Benedict XVI has the distinction of having placed the Church, in a way unexpected, at the head of the defense of the environment and in reporting the dangers of climate change* (www.foreignpolicy.com of November 30, 2009). For example, the Pope tells us that *Human ecology is an imperative need. One of our political and economic priorities must be to adopt in every way a manner of life that respects the environment and supports the research in and use of forms of energy that preserve the patrimony of creation and are that safe for human beings. In this regard, it is necessary to review our entire approach to nature. It is not a place solely for exploitation or for play. It is man's native land, in a certain sense his "home." This is fundamental for us. The shift of mentality in this domain, that is, the constraints it brings, allows us rapidly to become more proficient in the art of living together that respects the alliance between man and nature, without which the human family risks disappearing* (Benedict XVI, *Address to 6 New Ambassadors*, June 9, 2011).

I believe that we will be asked to account for how we cared for our earth and how we taught our young people to care for the earth, our mother earth, God's creation that we are called to continue, since the Lord on the seventh day, the day he rested, put it into our hands. Faced with unbridled consumerism that we experience today and which affects us in some way, faced with situations of poverty that many times cause scandal, it's necessary to educate ourselves and

to do this with a look to the future with rational care for the good that the Lord has entrusted to our stewardship and about which he will ask an accounting from us. The Spanish philosopher Adela Cortina, a specialist in ethics, puts to us a very concrete proposal: *I propose that starting right now, all of us who are involved in educational tasks set ourselves to the task of deactivating the mechanism that understands that **happiness consists in consumer goods**. If this mechanism, which is like a time bomb, is not deactivated, we can do whatever we want, but it will be beyond repair because people will continue to think that happiness consists in this and that being successful in life is defined in that way.*

7. We will be judged on love and by Love

*You are under the obligation to instruct the children of the poor. You should, consequently, cultivate a very special tenderness for them and procure their spiritual welfare as far as you will be able, considering them as members of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 6: 15) and his well-beloved. Faith, which should animate you, should make you honor Jesus Christ in their persons (cf. Matthew 25: 40) and make you prefer them to the wealthiest children on earth because they are the living images of Jesus Christ our divine Master. By the care you have for them, show how truly they are dear to you... (Meditation 80.3). It seems to me that this text is a wonderful reading of Matthew 25. As Saint John of the Cross tells us, for his part, *at the twilight of life we will be judged by how we loved.**

Our vocation as Brothers is a vocation to love since it is founded in the love of God, the mission that we have to make visible in our works through dedication to young people, being witnesses of his mercy and tenderness. Our lives as Brothers will have meaning when the Lord's passion for his people runs through our veins and when we are able to extend his merciful and saving love in our service to the young, especially those who are poor and who live in at risk situations, when we are bearers of a gift freely received that we cannot attribute to ourselves and with which we can do nothing except to share it.

Medieval theologians said that where love reigns, there are eyes that are able to see. Our mission is to extend Trinitarian love, which is shared love. God is love, not some far away abstraction; God the Trinity is the source of that *very special tenderness* to which the Founder invites us, especially in our relationships with the poor. *Tenderness is without a doubt the clearest mark of God in creation; the best that human history has developed; it is what measures the degree of humanity and understanding of a person. This tenderness is opposed to two stances that are very widespread in our culture: first there is "hardness of heart," understood as a barrier, a wall, as apathy or indifference towards another; secondly, there is the "withdrawal to oneself," egocentrism, arrogance, the absence of concern and care for others* (Father Milko René Torres).

Matthew 25: 31 - 46 is a test of what our judgment will be like and what we should anticipate each day in our personal and community discernment. As we can see, the criteria

for the judgment, and this no doubt inspired the Founder's thinking, refer to what we have done for our brothers and sisters in need and not our own personal merits or norms and prescriptions: *"Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me"* (Matthew 25: 40). This is in keeping with the message of the prophets: *Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh?* (Isaiah 58: 6 - 7). There is no doubt that this text from Matthew concurs with the thinking of John: *whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen* (1 John 4: 20).

Once again I believe that the invitation from the last General Chapter is very pertinent: to be Brothers with open eyes and burning hearts, because according to this Gospel text the result of our account giving will depend on our sensitivity in seeing the needs of our neighbor and the haste with which we seek a remedy. *Judgment is in our hands, in the present time: we save ourselves based on the freedom with which God has gifted us to be able to choose life or death, blessing or a curse. It is true that we cannot be certain about who will be condemned or who will be saved, but we can be sure of God's fidelity, which is not missing in his words and that he has promised his Kingdom to the blessed who devote themselves to the task of love* (María Concepción López, PDDM).

8. Lasallian icons of faithful stewards

As I have done since 2007 I would like to share with you in this Pastoral Letter some stories, which can be for us an icon, of events or Brothers who speak to us of a faithful steward of *the talents and gifts received from God* (Meditation 205.1) for the educational and evangelizing service of young people.

– Our mission in the United States and Canada

This year my principal visit was to the United States and to Canada. As in previous years in other Regions I had some great experiences that provided proof of the great vitality of our charism, of the generous commitment of Brothers and partners, of new vocation and apostolic experiences. The talents and graces received are of great benefit to the many children and young people in both countries.

In the United States, as always, visiting the various San Miguel schools had a great impact on me. This is a wonderful program for children from immigrant families of diverse origins. Each child receives very personalized attention and the warm atmosphere in the school as well as on the part of Brothers and teachers is wonderful. The same can be said for the Lasallian structures that are in place to drive the Lasallian mission. I was also able to visit other developmental centers and I can say that in our schools for the economically well-off there is a serious religious formation program and students are invited to participate in solidarity programs. Some of the Eucharistic liturgies I had with students were really moving. My sense is that young

people today are much more open to the religious dimension than were students of a few years ago.

I would like to highlight two experiences in particular. The first one is a pastoral ministry vocation program called LTIP (Lasallian Teacher Immersion Program). Students who are planning to be teachers participate in this program and they come from the three District universities. It was my pleasure to meet with them. They live together in community and, while continuing their studies, they come together for times of reflection, formation and discernment and every year there is a missionary experience in Guatemala. The idea is that they live a vocation process that may lead them to discover the Brother's vocation as a life choice for some and for others there may be the discovery of the committed lay Lasallian lifestyle with commitment to the mission in a different way.

The second experience, called *On the other side*, is a program for young people in our schools who wish to take an in-depth look not just theoretically but experientially at the situation of immigrants. I was also fortunate to meet with some of these groups. It was very moving to see the impact that this program had on the young people after having spent a week in a border zone. The commitment they want to live in favor of immigrants after this experience is extraordinary.

Canada is one of the Regions where the Brothers are older. Nevertheless the Lasallian mission there is healthy, thanks to the Brothers who were able to attract young people who

are committed in a very creative way to evangelizing, catechetical or summer programs. I had the opportunity to celebrate Founder's Day in Montreal in May and there I experienced the great apostolic dynamism that animates them. It also seems to me that Canada is the Region in the Institute that has learned how to maintain the youthful spirit of its many retired Brothers who, as far as they are able, have great interest in the Lasallian mission and follow it very closely. The plan is to contact some young Brothers from other Regions who may be able to invigorate the mission and ensure its future.

One Canadian icon that can inspire us in administering our talents and graces well in favor of young people is Brother Adolphe Chatillon (Théophanius-Léo) who was declared Venerable this year. One of his recommendations to the Brothers and novices was: *Begin by making happy those you want to be good.* Speaking of the Brother as God's worker, he said: *Who else but the Brother is God's worker, working more assiduously and at length for Our Lord's interests?... God's mystery entrusting his great interests to human beings, unknown hands, the spurned...*

– **Saint Miguel Febres Cordero**

We just celebrated the centenary of the death of our Ecuadorian Brother saint. A saint who lived his vocation fully as a Brother teacher and catechist along the lines marked out by the Founder in his Meditations that have inspired this letter. On February 9, 1910, Brother Miguel lived out his definitive encounter with the God of Life, that

wonderful encounter of *giving an account to God of what he has done as a minister of God and as a dispenser of his mysteries for children* (Meditation 205.1) and *of his own duties before God* (Meditation 205.2) since the realization of these lead him to *carry out well the service of guide and leader of the souls entrusted to him* (Meditation 205.2).

It was not difficult for Brother Miguel to give this accounting. In spite of his simplicity and humility the traits of his personal life and apostolic activity are obvious and they show a job well done and a right purpose which, for De La Salle, following the thought of Saint Paul, says that *whether we speak or whether we act, we must do all things in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, not in order to please men but to please God* (Meditation 206.3). As Paul VI said of Brother Miguel: *Wisdom dressed in love, science that sees human beings in the light of Christ, a divine image which is projected – with its duties and sacred rights – towards eternal horizons.*

In his personal life we could look at:

- Seeking God's will and faithfulness in following it. *I must close my eyes once and for all and hurl myself towards my God with trust.* Strength in being faithful to his vocation as a Brother, in spite of family opposition, is one way he showed this.
- Making the Word of God the center of his life, his principal source. *I will read the New Testament every day and I will frequently repeat verses of the Gospel to the children.*
- Daily celebrating the Eucharist and his prayer time before the tabernacle. *Let us hunger and thirst for Jesus in the*

Eucharist, the beginning and the source of all holiness. Prayer makes men of God and only men of God can train children of God.

- His desire for holiness and God as the object of his desire. *The heart is rich when it is happy and it always will be happy when it has God as the object of its desires.*
- His living out of a faith that was not opposed to the concept of incarnation and far from real life. *Our faith must translate into works, be in the present, not be routine, be a spirit that gives movement to our whole way of acting.*
- The exigency with which he lived his religious life, his life as a Brother. *In our vocation we participate fully in all the gifts of the Holy Spirit who moves us with strength and gentleness towards the things of God, so that we might live in conformity with the spirit of our Institute.*

Brother Miguel continues to be a singular figure for our entire Institute, an icon that should encourage us, especially in giving a clear priority to catechesis, as one of the most important dimensions of our lives as Brothers of the Christian Schools. Following the traits of the Founder, Brother Miguel reminds us that by vocation we are ministers of the Word and we are called to live it, pray it, proclaim it and share it. *You have the advantage of sharing in the duties of the apostles by teaching catechism daily to the children under your guidance and by instructing them in the maxims of the Holy Gospel* (Meditation 159.2).

Brother Miguel also reminds us of what it says in the Declaration: *It is not in books or in words that the young first en-*

counter the God who calls them, but rather in the one who catechizes them (Declaration 40.5). The world today and especially the young hope that we share with them a renewed face of God, the result of our personal experience and our familiarity with the world, a God who is a friend, able to love freely, to pardon unconditionally, who is always close, who suffers in the flesh of the poor, who desires a full life for everyone. All of this must be animated by great love. What is sewn with love is born of love. I will not call on students except by their first name, as far as possible, in order to respect in them the sublime character of Christians and children of God.

We all are familiar with Brother Miguel's preferred mission. In his own words, he said: *I would abandon everything in exchange for consecrating myself to prepare living tabernacles for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, because in a child's life there is nothing as important, nor of such transcendence and, therefore, no more beautiful or delightful task for the teaching apostle. These children have won my heart: they are what I regard most in the world: the First Communion group. For Brother Miguel: A child is a delicate plant that must be cultivated with care. Therefore: I want to use all means to make pleasing to the children what I demand of them.*

– **They shall bear fruit even in old age (Psalm 92: 15)**

At our General Chapter of 1993, we used this Psalm to write a final message to our senior Brothers. We also included a citation from the Rule: *As religious vowed to the ministry of Christian education, the first apostolate of the*

Brothers consists in the witness of their consecrated life. The message went on to say: *The great number of senior Brothers in the Institute is, no doubt, a grace... it is a witness for the Church and for the world to see that it is possible and it is worth the effort to live religious life faithfully.* Those words come to mind when I speak about the following Brothers who incarnated this ideal, one living beyond the age of 90. I am speaking about Brothers Fermín Gaínza and Louis Camilleri, true icons of what it means to be faithful stewards of God's grace and dispensers of his mysteries.

– **Brother Fermín Gaínza**

He was born in Chile but he spent nearly all his life in Argentina. In fact, his influence was felt well beyond these two countries since he was the Director of Novices for men from Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay and Brazil. At the same time this novitiate was inter-congregational in that it included Brothers of the Holy Family, Brothers of Christian Instruction, Christian Brothers, Sons of the Immaculate Conception and Brothers of Charity of Gent (1968 - 1997). This was a unique and extended experience that we had in the Institute, being ahead of our time.

Brother, spiritual master, involved in formation work, poet, painter, architect, and sculptor he was, above all, a man of faith who discovered Jesus Christ as the key to his life since his novitiate and he managed to grow in ongoing commitment to prayer and charitable service. A great servant and faithful friend of the poor, he was also a calm and very clear teacher. He had a profound love for the Founder whose

teaching he interiorized and shared, especially regarding the Method of Mental Prayer, which he learned through experience rather than through a theory contained in books. He was rooted in God and from there he reached out to the heart of others, especially to so many generations of young Brothers he trained. One of his constant expressions was: *Don't close in on yourself* – be there for others. Those words recall the unity of life that emerge from the meditations about which we have reflected.

Many Brothers trained by him have preserved an indelible mark from this experience in their lives. When he died this year, a Brother of Christian Instruction, who was his novice, sent this letter: *Brother Fermín was one of the means that Providence used to confirm me in my vocational journey. His example as a man of God marked my novitiate and his witness remains as an image of reference to which I return if I have to give an example of a Brother who was a companion on the journey in the name of Jesus. May God continue to bless religious life and in particular our Congregations with men of his stature. We have already begun to re-encounter him in the heart of the Trinity which he often used in his works* (Brother Guillermo Dávila).

A former Holy Family Brother, for his part, wrote: *I don't remember exactly what I had asked him but it had to do with the limits of how my prayer was slowing down and that really saddened me. Fermín said to me: "Pablo, go up to the blackboard and draw something that has no limits." I stood there looking at him not understanding what he was asking me. Fer-*

min laughed and said to me: "Limits do not have a shape, or surroundings, they make something appear more beautiful or less beautiful but there is something when all is said and done. Become a friend of limits." And as I went to sit down, he said to me: "And if you want to be perfect, seek the Kingdom of God...and his justice" (Pablo Cavazzoni). How simply he got to the essential point. And the essential point was that limits are also a grace because they allow us to live humbly, to discern and to beg for communion.

Paraphrasing our Vow formula and anticipating the 2007 General Chapter decision, on June 24, 1983 Brother Fermín offered this proposal to the Most Holy Trinity, by means of the underscored parts: *And for this purpose I promise and vow to unite myself and remain in society with the Brothers of the Christian Schools who keep, together and by association, schools in service of the poor, wherever I may be sent and to do whatever I may be assigned. I promise to keep this vow faithfully with the totality of my being according to the Rule for all my life, with the help of your grace, the protection of Mary and Joseph and the fraternal prayers of De La Salle my father and those of the Brothers, Sisters and partners in heaven and on earth with whom I want to live in association...I will try to live this calmly, silently, simply. While I can, I will work so that my Brothers pray with a sense of beauty (Blessed Angelico). Until Sister Death comes to AWAKEN me to enter into your Easter. Amen. Abba.* I believe that this is about the best preparation for "giving an accounting." And in this same light, and to conclude this section, we can read one of his poems devoted to educa-

tion. It is nice to think that when our boat is asleep our flag will continue to fly.

*To teach is the same
as putting a motor on a boat.
You have to measure, weigh, balance...
And get everything running...
But it is consoling to dream,
while you work,
that that boat – that child, that young person –
will go far by water.
To dream that that ship
will carry our load of words
to distant ports,
to faraway islands.
To dream that when one day
when our own boat is sleeping,
our own flag will continue to fly
in new vessels.*

– **Brother Louis Camilleri**

Brother Louis Camilleri passed away in Malta at the end of May. In him we can also see an icon of the *faithful steward of God's grace*, as his former students remember him. Throughout his long life he was a tireless worker in the apostolate and he showed a deep love for his vocation as a Brother and for the vitality of the Institute. He carried this out as he responded to the signs of the times and even at an advanced age he made great strides in the area of association as a creator and leader of lay Lasallian communities made

up of teachers, parents and former students. He stayed active until the final days of his long life, devoting his time to organizing retreats, meetings with students, former students and married couples.

As an enthusiastic teacher, he was one of those teachers students never forgot, and he was able to instill the desire to learn. He knew how to teach French or history with the same passion with which he worked with students in caring for the school's garden and he never missed an opportunity to invite students to participate in the life of the school. He was supportive of all school events which promoted the unity of the educational community and of adopting whatever new initiative that would improve the training of students.

Brother Louis was known by all for his deep spirituality and his great human qualities. He was everything we think of when we hear the term "*spiritual guide*." The wisdom and experience accumulated during his many years made him a point of reference and an invaluable counselor for young people and adults as well; he was a person who, above all, knew how to listen.

His life was a lesson, a prayer, a presence that was close to God, a word of wisdom and good counsel to encourage a vocation to religious life, give support to a couple to maintain their fidelity to marriage or to help out a teacher in the profession. It is interesting to note that those who knew him expressed the following about him:

I feel that Brother Louis is among us. The only difference is that now I don't see him. I admit that sometimes I "speak" with him and in my heart I "hear" what he is saying to me.

He was an exceptional Lasallian, a "good shepherd" who lived his vocation with exemplary devotion and genuine dedication to his students and to all those who knew him.

The most important thing for him was to imprint on all teachers the Lasallian ideal of ongoing concern for others. His enthusiasm was contagious. I can see him looking at us and saying with a gentle smile: "Work hard!"

Brother Louis is a shining example of what it means to live a vocation, he touched the hearts of many. He is an example of what it means to love.

During his final years I was in touch with the school through the "Old Stelmarians" association as a parent and chorus member and for the past three years as a member of the Signum Fidei fraternity. I can't imagine the school without Brother Louis. But the time has come for us to do things the way he would have wanted, although it will never be the same without him.

He was a true saint. We loved him like you cannot imagine and he loved each of us in a special way. He made us feel special. I had a special friendship with him. He would speak about the Founder at a moment's notice. Whenever I told him I had some problem he would always come up with some anecdote from De La Salle's life.

I believe that these and many other stories give faith to everything that has been said and they show us the path followed by a true disciple of De La Salle, who knew how to teach, love and serve all those whom God, in his providence, “entrusted to his care” and who, no doubt, gave a “full accounting.” One of Brother Louis’ former students wrote: *“In conclusion, if there is one Brother who drank abundantly from the spirit of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, it was Brother Louis. Rest in peace, dear Brother, and you can be sure that your students, Brothers and friends have kept firm in the faith, no doubt, thanks to you.”*

A few days before he died I received a letter from Brother Louis in which he was enthusiastic about the final talk I had given to the Intercapitular Assembly in May. In my response to him, which he never did receive, I told him: *I am happy to hear that you liked the talk and your comments have given me encouragement. I ask that you always keep me in your prayers that the Lord illumine and guide my steps in leadership ministry in the Institute and in the Lasallian Family which he, in his mysterious ways, has entrusted to me. As you yourself said very well, De La Salle is alive, not so much in my person, but in so many Brothers and lay people who live their mission of being instruments of salvation for children and young people, especially those most in need, enthusiastically. I always remember you with admiration and affection. Your dedication to the mission and to the accompaniment you have given to the Signum Fidei fraternity, is very exemplary...*

Conclusion

Surely all of us were impacted by the assassination a few months ago in Pakistan of Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, who was a Federal Minister for Minority Affairs. In the wonderful witness of his life that he left us, he tells us that since the age of 13, after having heard a Good Friday sermon about the sacrifice of Jesus, he resolved to respond to that love by loving his brothers and sisters and by being of service to Christians, especially the poor, the needy, the persecuted...*They've asked me to end my struggle, but I always refused, even at the risk of my life. My response has always been the same. I am not looking for popularity nor positions of power. I am only looking for a place at the feet of Jesus. I want my life, my character and my actions to speak for me, and that they say strongly and clearly that I follow Jesus Christ. This desire is so strong in me that I consider it a privileged way of saying yes – due to this spirited effort to help the needy, the poor, and the persecuted Christians of Pakistan – and that Jesus would want to accept the sacrifice of my life.*

As I conclude this letter I think that this testimony encourages our desire to procure God's glory as we serve our brothers and sisters in need, helping young people to find meaning in their lives, defending the rights of children and adolescents, favoring the human and Christian development of those whom Jesus has placed in our care, especially the poor, the marginalized, the unloved, the least gifted...So we, too, can make our own his final words: *If we carry out this mission, then we will have earned a place at the feet of Jesus and I can look upon His face with no feeling of shame.*

I believe that another reason for approaching the Lord with confidence is that, as Saint John says, we have an Advocate who will come to our defense: *we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one* (1 John 2: 1). For those who are advanced in age, perhaps this time is soon approaching; for that reason I would like to share a thought with our older Brothers who, looking at the past, can recall the ministry they have carried out and a *heart filled with the names* of so many children and young people who were part of their lives and now, in fidelity, are part of their prayer and witness as they continue to collaborate in the saving mission that the Lord has entrusted to us.

A friend of mine, on the occasion of his 70th birthday, sent me a reflection about the final stage of life. Among other things, he wrote: *There is something more. Old age is not just about looking at the end of an era, but it is an opportunity to finish being born and to reach maturity. This supposes personal process and dynamic which life itself offers us and that we have to take advantage of. As Saint Paul says, "although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day"* (1 Corinthians 4: 16). *Human life is always a challenge, but there are some stages that are more urgent and cannot be put off, such as old age. Therefore, reaching it is not a question of "you have so many good things stored up for many years, so rest, eat, drink, be merry"* (Luke 12: 19), *because this stage is ending, but it is a matter of being worn down so that, as R. Tagore said, "the only thing remaining of me, Lord, is that small part with which I can call you my all"* (Father Ángel García, MSC).

At the beginning of this pastoral letter, I cited a poem from Bishop Casaldáliga and I will conclude it with a piece from the same author. It sketches very well the moment of presenting ourselves to the Lord, perhaps with empty hands, but with a heart teeming with love. Along with Paul, we can say:

From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance (2 Timothy 4: 8).

*I have not made love,
I have not had the human glory of fathering,
my name will not be passed on to anyone;
I have not been, in the strict sense of the world, a man...*

*Did I love you, my dear Love,
making good love in a thousand different ways,
seeking you in grace and in sin,
feeling your presence in shouts and wounds,
recognizing your kindness in everyone,
giving you a name with my small life?*

Fraternally yours in De La Salle,



Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría
Superior General

