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## THE BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS IN THE WORLD OF TO-DAY

The above title is that of the "Declaration" published by the General Chapter of 1967. Brother Luke Salm, professor of theology, Manhattan College, contributed much to the final draft of the text. He explains in this paper the motivating force of the "Declaration."

### WHY THIS DECLARATION?

The contemporary world has experienced profound changes in almost every aspect of its political, social and religious life. As a result, many individuals and groups seem to have lost their sense of identity. Thus the search for identity — group identity as well as personal identity — is a characteristic concern of people everywhere in today's world.

At Vatican Council II the entire Church was challenged to a program of *aggiornamento*, a renewed sense of the identity of the Church as the people of God relating to the joys and sorrows of the contemporary world. Religious congregations were challenged to do the same. Each Institute was invited to adapt and renew itself in such a way as to make its identity and purpose — its very *raison d'être* — manifest to its members, to the Church, and to the world at large.

For the Brothers, the search for the identity of the Institute and the identity of the individual Brother within it was undertaken as the principal concern of the 39th General Chapter held in Rome in 1966-1967. The Body of the Institute, represented by the Chapter, had to ask such basic questions as these: Why does the Institute exist? What is the role of the Institute in relation to the Gospel? to the Church? to its Founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle? What are the essential elements that constitute the identity of the Brother? How can the Brother integrate within himself the many elements that comprise his religious life? How can the Brother give new vitality to his apostolic work? In short, what does it mean to be a Brother in today's world?

The response of the Institute to these fundamental questions can be found in the document entitled *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration*. More than any other document that emerged from the renewal Chapter, the *Declaration*, as it is called, represents the mind of the entire body of the Chapter. The text was discussed and debated on the chapter floor paragraph by paragraph. Some 500 suggestions to improve the text were received from the delegates and processed by the commission responsible for putting it into definitive form. It is not surprising therefore that the final vote was all but unanimous. That gives reason to hope that the special guidance of the Holy Spirit runs through its pages.

In presenting this text to all the Brothers, the late Brother Charles Henry, the Superior General at the time, describes the *Declaration* as "one of the principal documents of our 39th General Chapter." He goes on to say: "It is, then, in the light of the *Declaration* that we must read and understand the texts of our General Chapter, including the Rule and the Constitutions. It is the basis of the doctrine that you will find in each of them." Ten years later, in 1976, the 40th General Chapter reaffirmed the *Declaration* as a still valid statement to animate the apostolic mission of the Brother.

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The INTRODUCTION to the *Declaration* states that the Institute, "faithful to the spirit of Vatican II," intends to undertake the work of renewal and adaptation on the basis of the three sources proposed by the Council: a return to the Gospel, fidelity to the Founder, and the "signs of the times." Concerning fidelity to the Founder, CHAPTER I stresses fidelity to his spirit and charism, not necessarily to "specific texts and practices that may have to be abandoned." Thus fidelity to the Founder is a dynamic process, entrusted to the Institute, that involves a community search for his charism in dialogue. In relation to the signs of the times, CHAPTER II recognizes that the Institute will have to play "a more active role in the life of the world and the Church." The Brothers themselves recognize this; the Church desires it; and the world, caught between optimism and despair, needs the witness of consecrated persons who know the ultimate meaning of the world and the mystery of human existence.

Chapters III, IV and V constitute the heart of the *Declaration*. CHAPTER III defines the identity of the Brother: he is a baptized Christian, consecrated by vows in an exclusively lay Institute; he has given himself to a community totally dedicated to an educational mission with a special preference for the poor; his mission involves not only the ministry of the Word of God but the total educational process that brings students to full human maturity, the school being the preferred but not the only means to accomplish this apostolate. CHAPTER IV challenges each Brother to make his own personal synthesis of these elements, recognizing that "there is no changeless and universal type of Brother to which all should conform."

CHAPTER V addresses the problem of how to integrate the religious life of the Brother in its three principal dimensions: religious consecration, community life, and apostolic mission. Religious consecration, rooted in baptism, introduces the Brother into a new manner of life, a new community relationship, a new sense of mission and so it implies a new and irrevocable commitment of the entire life of the Brother to Christ. Community life is the place where the Brother meets God and finds his personal fulfillment. Since the purpose of the Institute is apostolic, apostolic action is of the very nature of the religious life of the Brother. These three elements work together in a remarkable integration and interdependence. The apostolate is a community enterprise and is, at the same time, an expression of the religious consecration of the Brother. At the same time, religious consecration motivates the apostolic work and stimulates the community to be an authentic community of faith. Thus the Brother lives an integrated religious life in an apostolic community of consecrated men.

The last three chapters of the *Declaration* deal with specific aspects of the apostolic mission entrusted to the Institute. CHAPTER VI calls for a rededication to the service of the poor through education. The Brothers are to combat poverty in all of its forms and to give special attention to the educational needs of the most neglected of the poor. Even when the Brothers are not teaching the poor directly, they will nonetheless sensitize all their pupils to the problems of justice and peace in the world. Thus every Brother must make his own the decision of De La Salle to go to the poor "with the heart of a poor man."

CHAPTER VII deals with the work of education as an authentic apostolic mission. For the Brother, the work of evangelization and catechesis holds the primary place, with attention to the professional training and personal qualities of the teacher, the relevance of the Christian message to the concrete experience of the students, and full respect for religious freedom. The teaching of religion cannot be divorced from the total educational experience which is itself apostolic and a preparation for catechesis. The Brother does God's work in whatever he does for the advancement of human civilization and culture.

CHAPTER VIII reaffirms "the intrinsic bond which links the school with the ultimate purpose of the Institute." But it is not enough to reaffirm the school; it has to be renewed. This calls for more creative methods in relating to contemporary culture, a respect for the students as persons, educating them to freedom in a genuine school community, adequate preparation of the teachers, and a reappraisal of traditional commitments so as to emphasize quality education over mere numbers. In addition, it is appropriate that the Brothers begin to exercise this apostolate outside the schools, provided they do so as members of a community and as representing the Institute.

The *Declaration* concludes with a short exhortation to each Brother to enter fully into the personal work of renewal and invites them to seek the help of the Holy Spirit and their heavenly patrons to bring supernatural blessings on the enterprise.

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