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THE IDENTITY OF THE BROTHER OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

Paper given by Brother Alain HOURY, Visitor of Paris,
to a Plenary Assembly of the French Episcopate at Lourdes, November 1983

The following text was composed for the Plenary Assembly of the French Episcopate in November 1983 at Lourdes.

The introduction to the study of the dossier "Religious life and the missionary prospects of the Church in France" was to be made by two religious men and two religious women. My contribution, as agreed with the other interested parties, would dwell on the links between the Brothers of the Christian Schools and the profession of the teacher-educator, and on the lay character of our religious life.

The twelve minutes for which the text was written, and distributed to the bishops, were reduced to six and I had to condense it on to both sides of a single sheet.

This kind of text, midway between one giving testimony and a theoretical explanation, because of its brevity, inevitably leads to omissions and rather brief summaries. It is not so much interested in recalling the important points which make for the originality of the Brothers' religious life not only in the Church but also in comparison with most other forms of religious life.

Underlining these differences does not mean being in opposition to them but realizing the gift which is made to us, for the Church and the world, in following St. John Baptist de La Salle.

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Address delivered at the Conference of the French Hierarchy, at Lourdes, November 1983, by Brother Alain Houry, Visitor.

Today here are 1,700 Brothers of the Christian Schools in France. Their median age is 62 years so we are faced with the problem of ageing personnel. I can not continue my present work (e.g. looking after a number of schools for which we have responsibility) if I do not look to the future by involving myself in the ministry of vocations. That requires that I make plainly understood the originality of the religious life of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. For if what we are does not correspond with what we do then it is impossible to understand either the one or the other.

Few religious live their lives so closely associated with a precise task. "The end of the Institute", wrote the Founder, in the original Rule, "is to give a Christian education to children and it is for this purpose that we keep schools."

You see from this that the apostolate of the school (and particularly of the Christian school) is an essential element of our religious life even though the field of apostolic action is much wider.

We believe that in the relationship between teacher and pupil, in the educational process, fundamental principles are involved — the salvation of the young person and the building up of the Church. Our work as teachers and educators is not just a means of sharing in the world of work and justifying ourselves in the eyes of our students. It is in doing this work that we show to young people that through us they can find salvation both temporal and eternal.

To consecrate yourself for life to the education of the young presupposes that you experience God in so doing. This is what inspired the first Brothers to reshape the schools of their time and make them accessible to all. It could be said that the criterion of the authenticity of our experience of God is the progress of our work.

Our work becomes for us the substance of our religious consecration (Declaration 48,2). The spirit of faith and of zeal, characteristic of our institute, leads us to exercise our profession of teacher-educator in a contemplative manner, avoiding any dichotomy between our religious life and our professional life.

"Make no distinction between what concerns your state of life and your sanctification", recommended St. John Baptist de La Salle. For a Brother, his work with young people and his spiritual life are one and the same. This is far removed from the so-called two objectives of the apostolic religious life.

It is important to make people understand that a profession can be a path to perfection.

Our manner of consecrating ourselves to the young implies, for us, a real bond between culture and faith. The Brother dedicates himself to the education of the young and helps them to attain, through culture, their full human

potential (GS 53) (Declaration 13,5). He seeks, with his young disciples, to Christianise the cultural milieu in which they live. He is a teacher who is also a witness — an elder brother who lives with them.

St. John Baptist de La Salle quitted his aristocratic and ecclesiastical milieu to become part of the culture of schoolmasters and their pupils. This is how he and his Brothers "left the world" by accepting fully the Gospel which challenged a system that approved the practical exclusion of so many young people.

Could we do the same thing to-day? I believe that a law which would prevent the Brothers from getting to know the living conditions of their students and from speaking to them as Christians in the course of the day, would scarcely be conducive to the fulfilment of their catechetical ministry. Such would be the case where religion became an optional subject in the school curriculum. The living tradition of the Institute "has always sought to unite closely the work of evangelization and that of civilisation and access to culture (Declaration 40,2). "Our world", said the Chapter of 1966, "needs witness given at the very heart of profane realities and the lives of men, by persons who know and love God as a living person." (Declaration 11,14)

In view of what I have said, you will not be surprised if I now stress the lay character of our Institute. We remain unambiguously lay religious. This was our deliberate choice from the beginning and it was calmly restated, after mature reflection, by the last two General Chapters, held since the Second Vatican Council. In no way do we wish to form part of the hierarchical structure of the people of God. (1) Why? "Community exercises and work in school demand the whole man", said our Founder (Memoir on the Habit).

"The whole man". St. John Baptist de La Salle was concerned all through his life with the problem of the use of time. Because he could not be completely faithful to his duties in the Cathedral Chapter and at the same time see to the consolidation of his first community, he resigned his post as canon of the cathedral of Reims, a post very useful to the Church. He had often to defend the originality of his foundation against those who wanted it incorporated into the juridical and pastoral framework of the time.

As lay religious, we are, in a way, witnesses to a very modern ecclesiology. We have inherited from our history an instinctive distrust of any ministry which proceeds from an a priori position. The manner of my own intervention is an illustration — arises from the fact that we are called first to live, in order to see later how our life fits in with the pastoral plans of the Church of France. Pastoral care of the young may not, in certain sectors, have always been given due priority but that did not prevent us from feeling ourselves truly part of the Church in our dedication to the young: the call of Christian families was not lacking.

May I, as a religious superior, be permitted to remind our bishops that it is not fitting for a community of Brothers (or Sisters) to be unable to participate in the Eucharist on week days. A parish Mass at 9.00 a.m. is out of the question for those who practise a profession. Proper conditions are required if we are to carry out our pastoral mission.

I must also say a few words on the Brothers' educative service to the poor and on their community life. Community is based on a common mission. Community life means a life of sharing, of prayer and much more besides.

The community can, by its own dynamism, create new forms of service to young people in difficulty. Often the work is similar to that carried out by other agencies. Sometimes we must invent, create and find time to do such work outside our normal work. And if the needs of France are great they must not make us forget the appeal of the young Churches.

It is with this in view that we insist that the formation of every young Brother in France must include a period of, at least, two years in a Third World country. Such an experience of the international character of the Institute (four fifths of the Brothers are not French) and of the extent of the world problems which we face, helps the young Brother to enter more readily into the missionary designs of the Church of France.

However, we do not define ourselves, primarily, by what we do nor by the pastoral services we render. Religious life has its own inherent value and significance as a sign and this implies a fundamental poverty and independence of productive activity. More than in their work, I believe in the silent presence of the Brothers. "God loves you", they seem to say to the young, "and the proof is that we are among you because it is He who has sent us to you."

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(1) Brother Vincent Ayel in the session, "How to initiate into the religious life to-day."

* After the renewal Chapter of 1966-67 two main texts express the Institute's concept of its vocation:

- The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World to-day.
- The Rule and the Constitutions (while awaiting definitive approbation).