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LASALLIAN EDUCATIONAL MINISTRY (5) HOW? SCHOOL AND NON-SCHOOL APOSTOLATE

"The end of the Institute", says the Rule of 1705, "is to give a Christian education to children, and it is for this purpose that the Brothers keep schools" The end: Christian education of children; the means: the school. The school, for De La Salle, was the principal and ordinary means, linked intrinsically to the finality of the Institute. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish end from means.

It is equally important to be precise concerning the school that De La Salle chose as the ordinary means. It was not just any school. It was the Christian gratuitous school, the school which embodied the values we spoke of earlier, the school which was free of charge and therefore available to the poor for whom it was primarily intended.

The Christian School, available to all

The General Chapters have reaffirmed the Christian-School-available-to-all as the "foremost apostolic work of the Brothers", (Declaration 44) and as the "privileged instrument" for educating the poor. (Rule, Chapter 1). Obviously, to be such a privileged instrument the school must be creatively adapted to the needs of the poor and realistically available to them. Brothers sometimes erroneously interpret exhortations to give higher priority to service of the poor as exhortations to choose non-school apostolates. That is to mix apples and oranges. Matters concerning the FOR WHOM and matters concerning the HOW, while related, are distinct.

An Extraordinary History

Brothers, the history of Catholic schools in the United States is a clear manifestation of the faith and commitment of our Catholic population. We can and should be legitimately proud of our central role in this development, a development indicating that we were "inculturated" and "inserted" actively in the local Church long before these expressions became fashionable.

The Institute grew in the United States not in response to the needs of the poor class in a Catholic population; but rather in response to the needs of a Catholic minority in a population heavily Protestant, and, in varying degrees, suspicious of and even hostile toward the increasing Catholic population. Catholic schools made possible for the children of minority Catholics, many of them immigrants, many of them poor, a Catholic education which helped them to preserve their faith and to compete competently in United States society. The focus was the Catholic minority, regardless of social or economic status, and not the poor segment of a Catholic population. The financial sacrifice for Catholic education that even low-income Catholic parents, as well as young people themselves, have made and continue to make today is one of the most striking characteristics of the United States Catholic Church. In like manner the effort the Brothers have made and continue to make to keep tuition as low as possible through their contributed services, careful economizing, and creative fund-raising testifies to the desire of the Brothers to make their schools available to as many young people as possible.

Continuing Mission of Catholic Schools

As the Catholic minority has gradually moved up the economic ladder, we have accompanied them, building new schools in new neighborhoods and providing FSC communities. Catholic schools continue to play an important part in the mission of the United States Church, even though the majority of Catholic families, for financial or other reasons, choose not to avail themselves of their services.

Other Possibilities

While the Christian school, ideally gratuitous, is the "privileged instrument of our apostolate" the Institute, says Chapter I of the Rule, "is open to other possibilities for teaching and education adapted to the circumstances and needs of the time".

Of the 1005 United States Brothers directly engaged in the apostolate: 89% are in FSC schools; 11% are in apostolates apart from FSC schools (1983 statistics).

Guidelines governing the "work of the Brothers in schools not directed by them and in educational activities apart from schools" are provided in the Declaration (50-52) as well as in Propositions 11,12 and 62 of the Second Regional Chapter. The essential is that the educational activity be carefully studied, approved by the Visitor and Council, and become an integral, not marginal, part of the District Mission Plan, as well as the plan of a specific local community: "Those engaged in such apostolates do this work as members of a community and with the consent of their superior. They represent the Institute; it is important that they think of themselves in this way and be accepted and supported in their work by the other Brothers". (*Declaration, 52*)

Sometimes, especially where positions of leadership are concerned, Brothers will, of necessity or at least for understandable reasons, not be associated with other Brothers in their daily work. But our Institute preference is that Brothers work together and by association. This preference is not motivated by a blind obedience to a past tradition, but by a conviction that an FSC community working together and by association is a potent instrument for good.

Our Challenge Today

Brothers, as we reflect on our history in the United States, we cannot help but be impressed. What has been accomplished is a tribute to the vision, the faith, the zeal, and the courage of the Brothers who lived before us. We have to be just as wise, faith-filled, zealous, courageous, and creative today as we try to find our way in a country where Catholic descendants of the first settlers and immigrants "have arrived" (John Tracy Ellis), where a well-educated and zealous laity are assuming more and more responsibility for Catholic education, where new ministries are being created, where the role of men and women in religious institutes is changing, where the number of Brothers has diminished, where the cost of Catholic schools is a formidable and often insurmountable obstacle for low-income families, where many United States citizens live below the poverty line, where immigrants and refugees arrive regularly, with or without documentation, where a Church come-of-age grapples with its responsibility to "let go" of its provincialism and to think and act internationally, sharing its human and material resources.

Men of 1984

In short, this is 1984. As "living men" — men of 1984 — we must discover how fidelity to our Lasallian charism can best be lived today. It is not surprising that there is a tendency to pull the curtains down, to withdraw into the familiar, to try to reinforce what we have, to retreat in order to survive. There is a predictable and understandable reaction to calls for new ventures in response to new needs: "We must be realistic... Where are these Brothers to come from? Our numbers are declining... We have too many commitments already..."

And yet, the Church continues to challenge us to think otherwise. "Institutes dedicated to the active life should sincerely ask themselves in the presence of God, whether they cannot broaden their activity in favor of expanding God's kingdom among the nations; whether they might not leave certain ministries to others so that they themselves can spend their energies on the missions". (*Ad Gentes, 40; Declaration 24*) And, I can add, on other critical needs.

Distribution of Personnel

After the General Council visit to the United States in 1978, we recommended a deliberate policy of reducing the number of Brothers in some institutions and of withdrawing the Brothers from some others, in order to make more Brothers available for urgent needs, particularly of the poor, at home and abroad. This same orientation is at the heart of Circular 412. These recommendations reveal our confidence that Catholic men and women can assume more responsibility for Catholic schools today.

Both steps, of course, require careful preparation. No school should ever have to close because of our decision. Such moves in no way reflect negatively on what we have done or what we are now doing. The problem is not at all what we are doing; it is rather what we are not doing. There are so many young people deprived of Christian educators. Members of religious institutes are best able to respond, having the freedom, the supports, the structures that make a response feasible.

Turning over an institution to others and withdrawing Brothers for whatever reason, is always painful for the Brothers, and is inevitably accompanied by protest from the local people. But we have to be disposed to suffer the hurt and to subordinate our own feelings to the mission of the Church.

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Rome