

11-O-10

BROTHER JOHN JOHNSTON, SUPERIOR GENERAL, REPLIES TO OUR QUESTIONS (1)

The 41st General Chapter elected Brother John Johnston Superior General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools for the period of the next seven years. During the previous ten years Brother John was Vicar General of the Institute. For the benefit of readers of LASALLIANA we have been able to put some questions to Brother Superior concerning the work of the General Chapter and the prospects for the seven-year period leading to the next General Chapter. Our questions and his replies follow.

1) Brother Superior, how do you view the 1986 General Chapter in retrospect?

Several features seem to me to have characterized the 41st General Chapter and of these I would like to mention particularly the following:

★ The Chapter was a special grace for our Institute, conducted as it was in a climate of intense prayer. The Capitulants were concerned to respond to the action and orientations of the Holy Spirit and they repeatedly sought His enlightenment for a clearer discernment of the signs of the times for our Institute today. It was undoubtedly the action of the Holy Spirit which made it possible for the successive meetings to take place in the right atmosphere, with the participants ready to listen to one another, to reflect deeply on what was said, and to seek to discern the nature of our present-day situation and of the decisions that need to be made.

★ As a result the Capitulants became very conscious of the inestimable good the Lord is accomplishing all over the world through the instrumentality of the Brothers. They made it their concern to pay close attention to what they learned in this matter, a reciprocal concern which resulted in a deep sense of the solidarity which links all the regions of the Institute.

★ This sense of brotherhood, profoundly experienced over a period of two months, evoked a consciousness of the unity of the Institute which transcends the diversity of languages, cul-

tures, ways of expression and modes of living.

★ At such times it is easy to perceive that the profound unity of the Institute derives from the fact that we are all sons of the same Father, Saint John Baptist de La Salle. We are Brothers because we share his life and because his spirit permeates our lives. It is in this sense that the Rule aptly affirms that "constituted as the image of the whole Institute, the General Chapter is, since the days of the Founder, the ultimate expression of the communion that exists among all the Brothers. It perpetuates among them the living fidelity to the special charism of the Institute" (Art. 84).

★ It is in the nature of things that this sense of fraternal union engenders joy, for a Chapter is a family celebration, an occasion of thanksgiving for the gift of vocation and for all that the Lord has accomplished in each and every Brother; it is a time for praise and gratitude.

★ Hence the circular convoking the 41st General Chapter spoke of it as a celebration, and such it has proved to be, as all would agree who had the privilege of taking part in it as representatives of their confrères.

2) What then, in the excellent conditions and spirit prevailing throughout the Chapter, were the principal themes considered by the Capitulants?

Naturally, a first mention must be made of the work that was accomplished in establishing the new text of the Rule. This task occupied the greater part of the Capitulants' time, though the work was greatly facilitated by the "Draft" produced by the International Commission for the Rule and by the many notes received from the Brothers in view of the Chapter. With the advantage of these data the Capitulants were able to undertake a lengthy process of discernment which I would summarize in the form of three questions:

- what does God want us to be?
- what does He wish us to do?
- how does He wish us to do it?

This process of discernment resulted in a consensus on all fundamental problems and a strong majority vote on the way of dealing with each of them.

But, parallel to this important work on the Rule, certain other specific themes contributed likewise to a deepening of our understanding of our particular vocation. The *Messages*, *Propositions* and *Recommendations* that emanated from the Chapter have given partial expression to the richness of so much reflection. Circular 422 has provided a substantial report of the Chapter's proceedings. The themes enumerated there will

largely determine our aims and priorities, our objectives and our programs of action, for the next seven years. Among these specific themes I would draw attention especially to the following four:

★ *Association and Interdependence:*

The idea of unity in the Institute was constantly present in the discussions. The Chapter underlined it with its references to *association* and *interdependence*. The spirit of unity in the Institute will be a sure guarantee of apostolic efficacy. In specific terms it presupposes our willingness:

- to grow in knowledge of one another;
- to share our personnel and resources;
- to make ourselves available for the tasks that face the Institute.

★ *Our role as evangelizers, catechists and ministers:*

On this theme we need only refer to the Founder and re-read his insistent exhortations regarding it. We are ministers to the young, not exclusively so, but the young remain our principal focus. We are called to be, so to speak, experts on youth, to know how to respond to their search for a meaning in their lives, for a faith. For that we must know: how to live with them as their brothers; how to help them to develop their human potential; how to bring them to an awareness of God's presence in their lives and to a readiness to commit themselves to Him and to His service; how to become more effective in telling them the good news of the Gospel.

★ *Solidarity with the Poor:*

In calling the Institute to greater solidarity with the poor, the 41st General Chapter has repeated a theme of its two predecessors. But instead of producing a new document specifically to that subject it invites each Brother to manifest that solidarity in acts, to choose ways and means of experiencing what it is to be poor. Certain passages of the Chapter's "Message to the Brothers" underline this theme.

★ *The Lasallian Family Movement:*

The Capitulants were able to recognize the importance and vitality of various Lasallian movements which have developed in various parts of the world, and they perceived these as a call of the Spirit to us to re-think our ways of relating

to non-members of the Institute and re-consider the nature of their role in relation to ours. This awareness has already found expression in a "Message" and in certain capitular propositions. But these are only a beginning to what needs to be accomplished regarding the various groups that make up the Lasallian Family.

Such are the four key themes that resulted from the reflections of the Capitulants about the purpose of the Institute and about our reading of the signs of the times. And each one of the four represents a specific, important and inspiring challenge for each and every one of us.

3) Are these themes totally new in the recent history of the Institute?

No. They represent rather a continuation of what was undertaken during the preceding generalate, that of Brother José Pablo. It is a matter now of ensuring development and growth to what has already been sown. As examples of what I mean, let me enumerate briefly a few of the points insisted upon by Brother José Pablo during the last decade:

- the need for the service of the poor and the promotion of justice to become dominant characteristics of the identity of the Brothers;
- a high priority to be given to the missionary role of the Institute;
- schools seen as the privileged, but not exclusive, instrument of the Brothers' apostolate, but schools that are more than good academic institutions, schools that are Christian communities of faith and love, creatively adapted to the needs of the students and effectively accessible to the poor;
- the wholehearted acceptance by the Brothers of their role as animators, giving the highest priority to religious education and the pastoral care of young people;
- the fostering of the growth of the Lasallian Family in all its dimensions;
- the question of our identity and mission in this rapidly evolving world;
- the challenge to the Brothers to be men of zeal, and to live this spirit "together and by association".

Such are some of the characteristic emphases of the last generalate which found reiterated expression in the discussions and decisions of the recent General Chapter.

Bro. John JOHNSTON