

**A RELIGIOUS AND A EDUCATOR:
TO LEAD THE YOUNG
INTO A WARMER
AND A GENTLER WORLD**

On my desk is a quotation that goes like this: «If you really asked me why I do what I do, the answer I would give is that I do what I do for God. But sometimes, God has a kid's face» (Rev. Bruce Ritter, OFM). If I may, I would like to share a few of those faces with you as a way of explaining what it means for me to be a De La Salle Christian Brother.

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The first of these faces is Donna's. She was sixteen when I taught her English. She was intelligent and attractive, and she was dating a thirty-five year old divorcee. I was anxious and afraid that I would fail to get through to her, and I still recall how overwhelmingly relieved and grateful she was to be helped out of the destructive web in which she was entangled. Some three hundred years ago, Saint John Baptist de La Salle wrote of parents (especially working class and poor parents) who were caught up in the religious confusion of their Age and were so preoccupied with «the constant concern of earning the necessities of life» that they were in need of assistance (MTR 1.2); and he wrote of children too frequently left on their own and so being formed primarily through «the bad example of companions they meet while wandering the streets» (MTR 2.1). Divorce and the disintegration of authority, conflict and dissent within our Church, nuclear proliferation and substance abuse, and a reckless acquisition of possessions, pursuit of pleasure,

and preoccupation with the self mark our present Age. In these troubled times of ours, it has been my experience that many parents (some of them single parents like Donna's mother) still continue to seek the assistance of religious Brothers in the education and the formation of their children. Because they care, they entrust their children to us in the hope that we can help them in the awesome responsibility which is theirs as parents.

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It was on a college retreat that I met Ron. He was nineteen. Like so many of the fine young people today, he is an «impossible dreamer.» A peace activist, a soup kitchen volunteer, a simple man of obvious goodness... Over the years in which I have known him, we have worked together; and we have recreated together. After he became a Brother five years ago, we lived together in Community. Of the things that I have been able to help him with, I am most proud of having helped teach him how to pray. For me, that is at the heart of what it means to be a Brother. Saint John Baptist de La Salle urged our first Brothers to really commit themselves to meriting the esteem and the care of the young people with whom they worked. And once they care for you, he wrote, use the love that they have for you to lead them to God (MSF 115.3). Remember..., he wrote, you are God's ambassadors... God's ministers... (MTR 3.2). It seems to me that this is a vocation not so different from that of parents. We

use love that they have for us to bring them to God.

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Now I know that the word miracle conjures up, for many of us, images of walking on water and multiplying bread. But, I ask you, is it any less of a miracle to help young people know that they are both loved by God AND good? Is it any less of a miracle to help a young person grow in self-knowledge, self-discipline, and self-worth?

The final face I would like to share with you is that of Adam, a former student, who wrote me recently of realizing that while in school he «was untouchable and rather comfortable with that. I was smart, and I was a track star, and I was wild: but I wasn't deep at all. I was well-liked by others,

but I couldn't like myself.» He wrote to thank me for not giving up on him. He said: «And then you entered my life and convinced me that I was good. At first, I thought that if I didn't respond to you you'd leave me alone. But you didn't give up on me... You... led me into a warmer and gentler world. I say this from my heart... Whenever someone tells me how good I am, I thank you.» And I suggest to you that this is the miracle that we Brothers hope to help perform in the lives of young people. We hope to be able to assist the Bishops of our Church and parents of children lead the young people of our society into a warmer and a gentler world. We remain committed to this work in the schools because it is our experience that the need for this ministry in the Church continues to be very great.

Brother William Mann