

CREATING THE INSTITUTE OF THE 21ST CENTURY (2/3)

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A new understanding of Church

It is important for all of us – Brothers of the Institute and those who join us in constituting the Lasallian Family – to see our own remarkable evolution of recent years in the context of the evolution of the Church itself.

The Church today describes itself as the People of God, as the communion of all those who have been incorporated in Christ through baptism. All Christians are equal in terms of their dignity as sons and daughters of God. All are called to holiness and to participation in the mission of evangelizing the world. In the document which followed the *Synod on the Laity*, John Paul II insists that

«Everyone in the Church... shares in the common vocation to holiness... On equal par with all other members of the Church, the lay faithful are called to holiness.

The call (to the mission of evangelization) is a concern not only of pastors, clergy, and men and women religious. The call is addressed to everyone... Jesus wants... all his disciples to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.» (*Christifideles Laici: 16, 2, 3*)

There are, of course, different charisms, ministries, and functions among the faithful. What is of great importance is the quality of relationships that exist among the lay faithful, religious men and women, and ordained ministers. As Brothers, we are particularly concerned about the quality of our relationships with our lay colleagues. Claretian Father Jose Garcia Paredes, editor of an important publication in Spain on religious life, describes four possible relationships between religious and lay faithful:

1. The laity in schools or hospitals are considered "necessary evils", to be tolerated only when there is no alternative. Lay people are "used" as needs arise.

I think that we have to admit that these words are a just description of the relationship which often existed between Brothers and their colleagues thirty-five or more years ago. I hope that the description is no longer applicable to any school in the Institute.

2. The laity participate substantially in the life of the institutions, but primarily because they have become so numerous. Their presence is still perceived by many religious as a threat and is, therefore, resented. There is no accepted model which permits the religious and the laity to function together meaningfully and constructively.

I suggest that this is a fair description of what existed in the sixties and seventies. Unfortunately, I am obliged to say that this attitude is far from dead among the Brothers.

3. The charismatic potential of the laity is recognized, acknowledged, and encouraged. But the religious do not really "let go": they remain "in charge". They feel, perhaps unconsciously, that shaping and controlling the participation of the laity in the Church belongs by right to them. They fall into the trap of paternalism, victims of an unrecognized superiority complex.

I think that paternalism is indeed a problem among us, but I am neither surprised nor discouraged by this fact. I think that with the passage of time, this difficulty will be corrected. The important thing is that we be sensitive to this tendency and work together with our lay colleagues to eradicate it.

4. Religious and the lay faithful stress first "what is common"; they see themselves in terms of equality, fellowship, and authentic mutual relations. Religious demand no special privileges nor recognition; they welcome the laity without any sense of superiority. The laity understand and accept the specific contribution religious are called to make in the institution.

While I readily acknowledge that we have a significant distance to travel before we can say that that paragraph is a valid description of our reality, I am very encouraged at the evident progress that has taken place in recent years.

But there is a difficulty which cannot be ignored: that of finding language that satisfactorily expresses relationships among Christians in the Church today. I am pleased that a number of participants at the synod in 1987 questioned our manner of describing the members of the Church as clergy, religious, and laity. These words of Bishop Fernando Sebastian, Secretary of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, are particularly appropriate:

«Calling normal Christians "lay people" strikes me as using a subtly clerical language... It is better to speak simply of Christian. They are the common members of the People of God and of the Church... Priestly ordination or religious profession is what differentiates some Christians. These are the vocations which must be explained in relation to the whole Christian community rather than the other way around.» (*In The Laity and the Religious*, pp. 72)

This problem of language admits of no easy solution. I shall continue this morning to employ the words "laity" and "lay", but I wished to share with you my discomfort.

Summary: Communion Ecclesiology

Brothers, the following words of Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, President of the Pontifical Council on the Laity, summarize beautifully what I have been saying about mutual relations among Christians:

«...when we speak of "communion ecclesiology", we simply mean the Church as the People of God, among whom there are various ministries, various charisms, and various functions. What seems very important to me is to know that we are all disciples of Christ... we need to overcome this separation of the Church into sectors such as the clergy, religious, and the laity, and to replace this with a more communitarian ecclesiological vision where the various charisms and ministries are integrated in the one communion of the People of God and the unique evangelizing mission of the Church.» (*In The Laity and the Religious*, pp. 104-105)

The Role of Religious

This understanding of the role of the laity is effectively forcing members of religious institutes, such as our own, to

reflect seriously and profoundly on their own particular role. Certainly it is clear, as Jose Garcia Paredes says, that religious have no "monopoly" on the Christian vocation, holiness, or mission:

«What is happening is that religious life is re-situating itself within the ecclesial organism. Instead of being "a single or outstanding voice", it is becoming an important voice within the symphonic choir which also includes other important voices. It is rediscovering itself as a "charism" within a Church "community of charisms".» (In *The Laity and the Religious*, p. 2)

But what exactly is the nature of this "voice" of consecrated religious men and women in the Church today. Brazilian Jesuit Marcello Azevedo says that "there is nothing in the Gospel that may be specific to the lay faithful, nor is there anything that may be seen in the evangelical counsels that must be realized by religious only." It seems clear also that the identity of religious men and women is not to be found in the particular services they render. After we exclude those ministries which are reserved to the ordained clergy, we can say that there is no ministry that is specific to and limited to members of religious institutes. In *Christifideles Laici* the Pope makes his own a synod proposition which "praises teachers and professors, now lay people for the most part, for their dedication to maintaining institutes of Catholic education." Nevertheless, he continues, "the simultaneous presence of clergy, the lay faithful, and men and women religious, offers students a vivid image of the Church." (CL 62)

It seems clear, therefore, that the nature of our identity and specificity in the Church is not to be found in the particular ministries which we perform. There is no educational service that is reserved to the members of religious institutes. What then is our identity and specificity in the Church? I think that it is essential that each of us be able to answer this question. But it is not enough to have a theoretical response to the question. The important thing is that on the level of our experience we "know" who we are and what we are all about. If our vocation makes sense to us, if we find meaning in it, if we are proud of it, if we want young people to join us, then it is clear that we "own" the answer to the question I posed. If, on the contrary, we are inordinately disturbed and confused, ambivalent about the value of our life, hesitant to speak of our vocation to others, afraid to invite youth to follow us, then it is clear that we have not yet interiorized the answer to the question.

Identity and Mission

As we begin to formulate our response, we can say with no ambiguity that while our role in the Church has changed – almost before our very eyes – our fundamental identity has not. Nor has our essential mission: that mission is to make Christ's loving and saving presence a visible and effective reality among the young.

In writing of religious life within the context of apostolic vocations in the Church, Marcello Azevedo says that

«...its distinctive character is not the vocation to holiness (common to all Christians), but the public profession – recognized, legitimized, and appreciated by the Church – of the will to live the Gospel fully, radically, and coherently as the primary objective of one's life.» (*Vocation for Mission*, pp. 8-9)

We have consecrated ourselves totally and publicly to God. We have made the following of Christ the primary objective of our life. By profession we are "public Christians". by our very life style, if we live it authentically, we "say", so to speak, to all who observe us, "We believe. We take Jesus Christ seriously." Our vowed commitment to chastity, pov-

erty, obedience, association for the service of the poor through education, and stability, lived in community, gives both form and visibility to our consecration.

Our vocation is apostolic in its very nature. But we evangelize first and foremost by being who we are supposed to be. As public followers of Jesus Christ, we make his loving and saving presence a visible and effective reality in the world of education. I am certainly not saying that what we do is unimportant. It is extremely important. But the specific work we do does not distinguish us. Nevertheless, it is obvious that we witness to Christ in and through the service which we render.

What is of fundamental significance is the quality of our lives. What kind of people are we? Are we earnestly striving to be the men we profess to be? We can be sure that – as individuals, as communities, and as Institute – we communicate a message. But what is that message? How do people read us? Our vocation is to be "messengers to the young to proclaim the truth that sets them free." (*Rule of 1967*, ch. 9) That is a succinct but accurate description of our call. How authentically are we living it?

The future

To prepare for the future, Brothers, we have to live the present as wholeheartedly as we can. We have to respond positively and enthusiastically to a certain number of challenges. The following are some of them. I say "some of them" because it is not possible to reflect on the entire *Rule*, all of which is pertinent to our discussion of the Institute of the 21st Century.

1. We must be men of faith

To be men of faith is to "walk with the Lord," that is to say, "to live in fellowship with him."

It is to live a relationship with the Father whose presence is real to us; a Father who loves us; a Father who has chosen us to be his sons and to be Brothers.

To be men of faith is to live a relationship with Christ – the Christ who has risen and is present to us in our everyday life; the Christ who is for us the WAY, revealing to us by his life and teaching what being human is all about; the Christ who is for us the TRUTH, revealing to us by his life and teaching who God is and what he is like; the Christ who is for us the LIFE, imbuing us with his Spirit, enabling us to live as sons of his Father and as his brother; the Christ who wants us to radiate his presence to youth.

To be men of faith is to live a relationship with the Holy Spirit, who leads us as he led Jesus and as he led our Founder; the Spirit whose gifts make it possible for us to manifest Christ to those confided to our care; the Spirit whose presence and gifts will enable us to touch hearts.

Brothers, we have made PUBLIC PROFESSION of our faith. If we are not believers, our life is a contradiction. De La Salle said that if we are not men of faith, we are dead members. There is nothing else distinctive about our life. Following Christ, making his presence a reality today – that's it. If that element is lacking, our life makes no sense and we have no reason to exist in the 21st century.

It is obvious then that we have to be men of daily personal prayer. Furthermore, we have to take very seriously the Rule when it tells us that "The distinctive character of the Brothers' community is to be a community of faith where the experience of God is shared."

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