

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

Regional Convocation of the
Brothers of the Christian Schools
of the USA/Toronto Region
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2. We must be BROTHERS

To be BROTHERS is our vocation: brothers to one another, brothers to those with whom we are associated, older brothers to the youth confided to our care. (*Rule*, 53) To be brothers we have to live interdependently. The great enemy of authentic brotherhood is individualism. In shaking loose from the patterns of dependence in our past, many of us stumbled into a spirit of independence. Our own goals of self-interest and self-fulfillment have taken precedence over all other loyalties. In the most recent issue of *Review for Religious* Brother William Mann writes: "The future of our Institute will rise or fall on the question of interdependence. Too many of us are trapped in an overly individualistic and independent life stance." (*Review for Religious*, May-June 1990, p. 376). I agree.

3. We must "be attentive"... we must "be moved"

Several times the Rule refers to a characteristic of the Founder that we Brothers urgently need as we prepare for the 21st century (*Rule*, 1, 11, 19). *De La Salle*, by God's grace, became "aware" (rendu attentif à) of the human and spiritual distress of the children of the artisan and the poor. He was "seized by" (saisi par) the way in which the children of the artisans and of the poor were abandoned and left to themselves. This experience led him to change the direction of his life. (Because it is difficult to translate the word *saisi* literally, the translators of the Rule rendered the expression "deeply moved.")

Brothers, as we think of creating the Institute of the 21st century, we must be aware of the needs of our own day. We must be free enough, loving enough, creative enough to respond: «The Institute establishes, renews, and diversifies its works according to what the Kingdom of God requires.» (*Rule*, 11)

Six years ago I spoke of the danger of living off the creativity and boldness of our predecessors. That danger is enhanced by the fact that our numbers are declining. The tendency is to retreat and consolidate. But when this tendency becomes the governing policy, we have a formula for slow death. As paradoxical as it may seem, we need new initiatives. Of course, this policy means that we must turn over to others some of the work we are doing, either by reducing the numbers of Brothers in some schools or by withdrawing them altogether. As threatening as this sounds, it is precisely what the Church and the Institute have asked us to do. Twice the Rule makes reference to the Vatican II invitation to religious institutes to turn over some of the things they are doing and to respond to those whose needs are not being met. (*Rule*, 19a, 40a)

Brothers, we are exposed through television to so much human suffering. But are we really attentive? Does this constant exposure lead us to awareness? Or do we perhaps

shield ourselves psychologically from really "seeing"? Do we protect ourselves from the "threat" we perceive to the *status quo* with which we have become quite secure and comfortable? Do we have the faith and courage to allow ourselves to be moved to the point of responding in one way or another, perhaps even by a willingness to change the current patterns of our life?

The number and quality of Brothers of the region serving the poor both at home and abroad is significant. But I think that all will agree that we have to do more. We have to be more generous with our resources. We need to continue to develop new and creative approaches to the educational needs of poor youth within the United States and Canada. In addition we need to provide Brothers for the human and Christian education of young people in poor areas of the world. The *Rule* insists that missionary activity is integral to our mission in the Church.

For this reason, Brothers, I encourage you to give serious consideration to a missionary commitment in any of the many areas served by the region. In a particular way I ask you to think of the new Delegation of East Africa, as well as of Ethiopia where the need for personnel is critical at the present time. I ask you to consider also service at Bethlehem University, where, unfortunately in my opinion, the number of Brothers from the United States has decreased in recent years. If there are Brothers willing to serve in other communities in the Holy Land, I can assure you that they will be welcomed.

4. We must continue the process of renewing our schools

The attention the region has given in recent years to the characteristics of Lasallian Schools has had an enormous impact. There is interest everywhere in clarifying and promoting the Catholic and Lasallian identity of our primary and high schools, of our colleges and universities, and of our specialized institutions.

Brothers, our Lasallian schools must be different – otherwise, they have no reason to exist. Our *Rule* says correctly that our schools are themselves a message. (*Rule*, 3) What is the message they communicate? How do people read them? I hope that they are perceived as unambiguously Catholic. I hope that it is clear to all that our religion, youth ministry, and service programs enjoy high priority – in choice of faculty, scheduling, and budgeting.

I am happy that a significant number of young Brothers are preparing themselves at the Master's level for the teaching of religion and that a number of other Brothers, who for one reason or another, stopped teaching religion years ago have returned to the religion class or are preparing themselves to return.

But even if we decide that teaching religion explicitly is not feasible for us, we can, with creativity and generosity, find concrete ways to make significant contributions to the religious growth of our young people. There are many possibilities: leading school prayers, participation in school liturgies, animating retreats, working with Lasallian youth groups, etc.

Brother Joseph Hendron and I were very impressed by your Christian service programs. They are effectively helping your young people to grow in sensitivity to injustice and poverty and to their responsibility to work constructively for a better society. Such programs are in no way marginal to the work of the Lasallian school: they are integral. (*Rule*, 14, 40)

5. We must share our Lasallian spirituality

So much has happened, Brothers, since the Convocation of 1984! The shift from Brothers' schools to Lasallian schools is occurring. The many initiatives you have taken to intro-

duce your lay colleagues to our Lasallian heritage are having an impact. You yourselves have been pleasantly surprised at the positive response of a significant percentage of lay members of your faculties. What has been accomplished is admirable. We have to continue to give this movement high priority.

I thank God that the *Lasallian Volunteer Movement* has made great progress. This movement has tremendous potential for good in the Church today. It has been a joy for me to meet a number of volunteers, living and working with the Brothers "together and by association." It is my hope that this program will soon be truly regional in scope and that what you are accomplishing here will be a model for other regions.

I am encouraged also by the steadily growing interest in the *Lasallian Youth Movement*. We need to provide structures which will permit young people to live their faith in small communities. Boys and girls (and young men and women) who are serious about their faith need to be able to gather regularly and frequently to reflect on the Word of God, to pray together, to share apostolic experiences, and to plan future apostolic activities. The structured religion programs of the school are essential. So are the pastoral activities of the youth ministry programs. But more is necessary. Young people who really believe and are serious about living their faith need close association with other young people who are committed.

Furthermore, our world-wide experience indicates that young people are finding in the story of John Baptist de La Salle inspiration and motivation. The *Lasallian Youth Movement* is very alive in many sectors of the Institute and, thanks be to God, growing rapidly. We should make its development on local, national, international, and intercontinental levels a high priority.

Conclusion

Brothers, at the meeting of the Visitors of the United States/Toronto Region last April, I expressed my appreciation of the many signs of vitality which Brother Joseph and I found during our visits. In his presentation to the LCWR/CMSM Assembly a year ago, Brother Charles Reutemann suggests that «after a careful critique of our congregational group, there might be cause to have a major celebration, a convocation or something similar, where the message would be: "We are on the right track; let us continue, though we might want to give some special consideration to such and such a strand."»

I don't know whether or not Charlie had this convocation in mind, but here we are. Brothers, I can say to you in complete honesty that I think you are indeed on the right track and I can urge you to continue. During the twelve year interval between my visit to the region as Vicar and my visit as Superior, there was evident progress in a number of areas: the personal renewal of the Brothers, the strengthening of prayer and Eucharist, the intense interest in the Founder, a number of new and well-conceived community and apostolic initiatives, the growing commitment to educational service in Africa, the concern for the Catholic dimension in your schools at all levels, the striking renewal of the religion and pastoral programs in the schools, the acceptance of the Lasallian School model, the programs for Lasallian education of your colleagues, the Lasallian Volunteer and Lasallian Youth Movements...

An area of disappointment

There is one major area, however, that is disappointing: the meager numbers in formation. On the other hand I am encouraged by the quality of the vocation and formation

programs, the quantity and quality of the Brothers assigned to vocations and formation, and the quality of the candidates and young Brothers themselves. I am encouraged also by the attitude of hope and the persevering effort that is so evident. Without in any way closing my eyes to the long list of explanations of the decline in vocations, I remain convinced that one of the most important factors has been and still is our own crisis of confidence in who we are and what we are about. I am convinced that if we can "get our own act together," we shall once again radiate confidence, inner peace, and pride, sentiments that will attract young people and stimulate them to ask themselves if God might be calling them to be Brothers of the Christian Schools.

There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that the evident progress in so many areas of our life and mission in the united States/Toronto Region is a strong and positive reflection on the priority the region has given over many years to developing and supporting outstanding programs of continuing formation and education. I won't attempt a list of the many programs that have been available to the Brothers during the past twenty-five years, but I do want to mention and praise one of the latest, the Buttimer Institute.

Brother Charles suggests that «we might want to give special consideration to such and such a strand.» That's what I have tried to do this morning. I am very well aware, however, that there are a number of other strands that I didn't consider. I think, for example, that we might very profitably give explicit attention to the nature and obligations of each of our five vows.

Brothers, in my reflections on "Creating the Institute of the 21st Century," I have expressed my conviction that we have to understand what being a consecrated religious and being a Brother of the Christian Schools means in an age when the Church declares that all Christians are called to holiness and to participation in the mission of evangelization. I have insisted that we do indeed have a role to play but one that is different from what we knew in the past. I can't find a better summary of this new way of viewing ourselves and our mission than article 17a:

«The Brothers' community is ever mindful that its apostolic activity takes place within an educational community in which all the functions, including positions of responsibilities, are shared.»

Communion generates communion

This reference to the Brothers' community in relation to the entire educational community is a reminder of the mutual relations which must characterize all communities in the Church. Relations must be such that true communion is formed. "Communion generates communion," the Pope says in *Christifideles Laici*. That simple but profound sentence expresses succinctly but accurately a truth which is at the very heart of the mission which God through his Church has confided to our Lasallian Family today. We, members of the Institute together with all who join us in Lasallian Association, are called to communion – communion which in turn will generate communion.

When a journalist asked Cardinal Pironio what he expected from the Synod on the Laity, he responded: «Simply this: that we may learn to walk together in the Church.» My prayer is that we members of the Lasallian Family learn to walk together – walk together with the Lord and with one another. My prayer is that our life as Lasallians be really and truly an experience of communion, communion which in turn generates communion.

Bro. John Johnston, Superior General