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CREATING THE INSTITUTE OF THE 21ST CENTURY (1/3)

**Regional Convocation of the
Brothers of the Christian Schools
of the USA/Toronto Region
14 August 1990**

Brothers, the theme of this Convocation is now well known to all of us: «In Lasallian Association for Christian Education in the 21st Century.» My contribution to development of the general theme is a presentation on our life as Brothers within the context of Lasallian Association for Christian Education.

I welcome the opportunity to reflect with you on our consecrated life and mission. Ironically, however, convinced that we cannot grasp and appreciate our own identity and mission without a sound understanding of the role of the laity in the Church today, I am going to devote considerable time to the vocation of lay Christians, with whom our mission will be shared in the 21st century.

My intention is to articulate what I think the Institute ought to look like in the future and to propose some lines of action that can help us to realize that vision. But the vision and lines of action I am going to propose will not surprise you. Their elements are already evident in Church and Institute orientations of the past twenty-five years.

The Title

«Creating the Institute of the 21st Century.» I am happy with this title because the accent is on "creating", and, consequently, on "doing". Gabriel Moran wrote more than twenty years ago that what we need is vision together with tactics for realizing that vision. We have to be men who ACT, men who participate in the creation of our future. If we fail to act, if we limit ourselves to REACTING, we forfeit the possibility of shaping our future. Our future will indeed be created, but without our collaboration.

In this process of creating our future, we have to avoid, on the one hand, longing nostalgically for the «good old days» and, on the other, day-dreaming romantically of an idealized future, all the while neglecting to live fully in the present. We must avoid also falling into the deadly "self-fulfilling prophecy" trap: predicting the future with apparent absolute certainty, then indicating with insistence what, in consequence of this "certain" future, must be changed today.

Then, too, to participate constructively in the creation of our future, we need to recognize the complex of feelings we have about the past. During the evolution of the Institute these twenty-five difficult years, some of us have experienced hurt, disillusionment, betrayal, anger, and even bitterness. Awareness of such feelings is the first step towards liberation from them. We need to be conscious also of a tendency to shield ourselves against further hurt by adopting a posture of indifference, fatalism, or a kind of *Waiting for Godot* passivity.

My Story

Last Friday we were asked to tell our stories to one another. Brother Luke Salm traced our evolving understanding of the Lasallian charism. He helped us, I am sure, to understand better our experience during all or part of the past thirty-five years. Permit me, Brothers, to share with you some of my own experiences and to use them as points of departure for reflection.

In the year 2000, first year of the new millennium, I shall, God willing, begin my fiftieth year as a Brother of the Christian Schools. It is particularly interesting for me, therefore, to reflect on my own life as a Brother, a period which parallels to a large extent the period which has been in focus throughout this convocation.

As a grade school youngster I began to take seriously the recurrent thought that God was calling me to serve him in a special way. But as I knew nothing whatsoever about the Brothers, I was considering the priesthood. At the same time, however, I was already aware of a keen interest in teaching and in working with youth.

When I met the Brothers for the first time in the year 1947, I found exactly what I was looking for: the opportunity to give my life to God and to serve him by teaching and working with youth. My conviction that God was calling me to be a Brother grew and deepened during my four years of high school. I entered the postulancy in June, 1951, with a clear idea of what I was looking for.

I mention that initial motivation, Brothers, because it has stayed with me and has sustained me over the past thirty-nine years. I have no reason to think that motivation will have changed by the time I begin my fiftieth year in the year 2000. The vocation of the Brothers is for me a life of consecration to God, a life of educational and pastoral service of youth, and a life lived together and by association. These essential dimensions so beautifully described in the *Declaration* and in the *Rule* have been the constants of my thirty-nine years. Nevertheless, I am certainly aware that something has changed. What has changed is the manner in which I have lived these dimensions.

It is not my purpose, Brothers, to dwell in a comprehensive manner on the changes I have experienced in my lifetime. What I want to do is to focus on one change, the change which will impact significantly the shape of the Institute of the 21st century. That change is the new way of understanding the Church and consequently the vocation of the lay Christian. This change in ecclesiology is compelling us, Brothers of the Christian Schools, to rethink our vocation in the context of the call to all baptized Christians to holiness and to apostolic service.

Four Significant Decades

Nearly all of my teachers at Christian Brothers High School, Memphis, were Brothers. The exceptions were specialists in sports and in music. As a Brother myself I began teaching in the year 1955 in St. Joseph, Missouri. There were eleven Brothers and one lay teacher at the service of 340 high school boys. After three years I was transferred to De La Salle, Chicago, a high school for 1200 boys, conducted by nearly thirty-five Brothers and perhaps twenty or so lay men and women.

These three schools were truly "Brothers' Schools," that is to say, schools animated by the Brothers of the Christian Schools, with an important but secondary level of collaboration of a certain number of lay associates.

In the late fifties and early sixties, however, the situation changed rapidly. The demand for Catholic education was intense. Numbers of students increased significantly in existing schools and an extraordinary number of new schools were constructed, particularly in the old St. Louis District. Because of this demand for Catholic education, both the Church and the Institute began to look more favorably upon the presence of lay teachers. By the mid-sixties the percentage of lay teachers in the schools had increased dramatically. Nevertheless, our schools were still perceived as "Brothers' Schools".

Similar changes were occurring in varying degrees in other countries as well. By the time of the General Chapter of 1966-67, the percentage of lay teachers, both male and female, was very high. Nevertheless, a study of the documents of the Chapter, generally of very high quality, reveals that Brothers were still operating out of a "Brothers' School" model. The work of Lasallian education was the work of the Brothers. The lay collaborators were responsible for important tasks in the schools, but neither they nor the Brothers questioned seriously the fact that the schools were Brothers' schools.

Years of confusion and frustration

But then the years of confusion and frustration began. An extraordinary number of men left us and the numbers of new members dropped significantly and rapidly. Among the many vivid memories I have of my service as Visitor of the St. Louis District from 1971 to 1976 was that of visiting schools and finding Brothers confused, discouraged, frustrated, and even angry. Many, of course, were disturbed by what had happened generally in the Institute and District in

less than ten years. But a particular and very important focus of a rather widespread discouragement was the school. «This school is called a Brothers' School,» they said to me, «but where are the Brothers? We are six Brothers teaching with forty-five lay teachers. How can this school be called a Brothers' school?»

But the questioning was not limited to the Brothers. Lay teachers also, a number of whom were already occupying secondary positions in administration, raised similar queries.

What these Brothers and their lay colleagues were coming to realize was that the model of "Brothers' School" – that is to say, a school animated by the Brothers with a secondary level of collaboration of the laity – no longer made any sense. That model was no longer helpful in understanding the nature of the school or in shaping its character. But no other way of conceptualizing a school in the tradition of John Baptist de La Salle was available. I personally remain convinced that this crisis of identity and consequent crisis of confidence has had a profound and negative impact on the pastoral ministry of vocations.

From Brothers' Schools to Lasallian Schools

At the convocation in 1984 I described this model of Brothers' schools as a triangular model, with the Brothers at the top and their lay colleagues at the base and said that it was collapsing everywhere. This model has continued to collapse in the six years that have passed. It is gradually being replaced by a new model, that is to say, a new way of understanding Lasallian education. This model can be visualized as a circle that is parallel to the ground. On points of the circumference of the circle are the Brothers, lay associates, priests, members of other religious institutes, parents, former students themselves. This model is the "Lasallian School" model, that is to say, a school that is animated not primarily by the brothers with others in a secondary role, but by the educational community, in which the brothers make their specific contribution.

This model of Lasallian School is described vividly in the *Rule*:

«The Brothers' community is ever mindful that its apostolic activity takes place within an educational community in which all the functions, including positions of responsibility, are shared... the Brothers make known to the rest of the educational community the essential elements of the Lasallian tradition. The Brothers offer to those who desire it, a more intensified sharing of Lasallian spirituality, encouraging such persons to make a more specific apostolic commitment.» (*Rule, 17a, 17c*)

I believe that these articles express the most significant change in our life as Brothers since the fundamental changes of 1966-67. What is implied in these articles is a new way of understanding our role as Brothers, that is to say, the manner in which we exercise our ministry. These articles express clearly the shift from a model of "Brothers' Schools" to a model of "Lasallian Schools".

**Bro. John Johnston,
Superior General**