

THE IDENTITY OF THE RELIGIOUS AND OF THE LAY PERSON IN THE SHARED MISSION

The basic question

For some time now, there has been much thinking, and much has been said and written about our "shared mission" with the lay people who work with us in the ministry of Christian education.

On various occasions I have heard a difficulty brought up and a question put that deserves a very serious and judicious response if we are not to run the risk of changing the nature of the identity of the persons (religious and lay) who exercise this ministry, especially where the identity of the religious is concerned.

This question can be phrased in various ways, but it can be summarised as follows: "If it is true that the lay person working with us in our school accomplishes the same mission as the Brothers and fulfils the same ministry with the same professional and apostolic efficiency (and even better) why is there still a need for the Brothers? So what is now the meaning of his vocation and his consecration?"

The conclusions we draw will depend on the answer we give to this question: either the vocation of the Brother of the Christian Schools is no longer necessary for the Church since lay people can do as much; or his vocation and life still have now as before a special significance.

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1. "Our shared mission"

– What mission are we talking about?

We are talking about the mission that God confided to the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools through the foundation made by St. John Baptist de La Salle which was later recognised and confirmed by the Church which gave it its approbation. It is the mission which consists in evangelising children and young people by means of Christian education given in schools.

– Who is the depositary of this mission?

The Institute as a body, as a religious family established and recognised by the Church.

Consequently, all the Brothers collectively, and each one of them as a member of the Institute, are the depositary of this ecclesial mission.

– How is this mission of evangelisation by means of Christian education accomplished?

By means of work which is transformed into an apostolic ministry because it is directed to the accomplishment of the apostolic mission.

It cannot be said that all work accomplished by a Christian is a "ministry", given that such a characteristic derives from a "mandate" or an ecclesial "sending" for an apostolic end.

On the other hand, the Brother is an "envoy", an "apostle", a "missionary". His whole life, his whole existence consist in being an envoy, apostle and missionary. Consequently, his whole being, his whole person is permeated by "his ministry", by "his work", including the time when he is not actually actively pursuing them.

– With whom is this mission shared?

The Institute, the depositary of the mission, and the Brothers who form it offer the lay people who work with them in the work of Christian education the possibility of "taking part", of participating in their ecclesial mission.

The lay people who "work" with the Institute can "share" this mission. Where this is so their "work" likewise is transformed into an "apostolic ministry" because it is directed to the mission.

Logically speaking, if the Institute did not exist it could not be the depositary of a mission; and a non-existent mission could not be shared with anyone. This of course does not exclude the possibility of the Church recognising other groups of the faithful exercising a similar mission. But in that case, it would not be "the mission of our Institute".

– What conditions are required for sharing the mission?

It is necessary first of all to be related to the Institute.

Next, it is necessary to accept and be willing to collaborate in pursuing the apostolic aims of the Institute.

In addition, it is necessary to accomplish the work in question with the aim of achieving these aims: Christian education.

It seems logical to state that simply the fact of materially working in a Christian educational establishment does not necessarily mean that a person shares in the mission or exercises an apostolic mission. It is obvious that some people look upon their work as a means of earning their living and nothing more, leaving aside all transcendental or religious motivation. In a case such as this, it would be difficult to say that such a person shared in an apostolic mission or exercised an apostolic "ministry".

– What means make it possible to share an apostolic ministry?

Before all, to know this mission and be conscious of it. Hence the necessity to think carefully about this mission in the light of the Word of God, and to assess systematically one's response to it.

Secondly, one has to commit one's life for, since a mission of evangelisation is involved here, one has to carry the message of the Gospel within oneself and try to live according to it.

Thirdly, one has to exercise the ministry in communion with the Institute, as a response to the mandate received from it.

Finally, one must become a part of the "educational community" responsible for the implementation in a specific

place of the educational plan corresponding to the mission. Educators at a Christian school form a "community". No one can work on his own, for his own ends, nor can he dissociate himself from the others or the common plan.

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2. The same ministry but a distinct identity

1. From what has been said, one can conclude that in practice lay people can exercise the same apostolic ministry as the Brother. A ministry which derives from a mission.

2. It should be noted that the Brother is the depositary of this mission. As for the lay person, he shares in the mission of the Brother.

3. Both **commit** themselves to Christian education through schools, as a mission from the Church, but **the nature of their commitment is different.**

● The lay person commits his work, his strength, his enthusiasm and his zeal to ensure that the school achieves its aims.

However, his life, because he is a lay person, imposes on him other obligations and other forms of devotedness, for example, with regards to his family and whatever concerns the future of his children.

● The Brother, for his part, commits his whole existence, with all that this implies:

*TO MAINTAIN THE SCHOOLS
TOGETHER AND BY ASSOCIATION
WITH THE OTHER BROTHERS.*

* This commitment presupposes

CONSECRATION TO GOD

* with the acceptance of

A SPECIFIC WAY

OF LIVING THE GOSPEL, that is to say,

– **adopting consecrated celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom**

by giving up the possibility of having a family
by consecrating all his strength and love
(fraternity: love for children, for Brothers and the adults
with whom he comes into contact)
for the sake of spreading the Gospel.

– **practising consecrated poverty, which presupposes**

working gratuitously without reward;
putting all his personal wealth
(talents, time, etc.)
at the disposal of others;
not having personal material goods
and sharing with others what he has;
living modestly.

– **sacrificing his own will**

by accepting all destinations and jobs
which the Institute considers opportune
in the pursuit of the aims of the mission.

4. The Brother is, consequently, a person who has chosen "**to consecrate himself**" to God

by vows of consecrated celibacy, poverty and obedience

in order to commit himself to the maintenance of the Christian schools

together and by association with the other Brothers.

These elements, expressed clearly in the Brothers' formula of vows, confer on us an identity which is different from that of lay people who exercise the same ministry. Our commitment to maintain the Christian Schools is of a different order. It is also more radical, more profound. It embraces very important aspects of our life, which is not so in the case of the lay person: celibacy, acquisition and use of goods, willingness to go anywhere and take on any employment, community life, stability in an associated commitment, responsibility in the apostolic mission of the Institute.

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I think that what makes religious different from lay people is not that they make public profession of living the Gospel fully, radically and consistently. All Christians in fact should do so and should of course live the Gospel publicly as it is and without restrictions. There is only one Gospel, and it is the same Gospel for all of us. It is by living the Gospel according to our own situation that we respond to our vocation to holiness. This is common to all the faithful, whether religious or lay.

What makes us different basically is that in order to achieve some precise aims relating to the extension of the Kingdom of God, in our particular case, the maintenance of the Christian schools, we have chosen an appropriate way of living the Gospel: living together and by association, in consecrated celibacy, poverty and obedience.

Our road to sanctity consists in being consistent with the way of living the Gospel which we have chosen: consecrated by vows to God to fulfil a mission which he has entrusted to us. In the same way, for the lay person, the road to sanctity consists in being consistent with the way of living the Gospel required by his lifestyle.

In summary: whether we are Brothers or lay people, we can exercise the same apostolic ministry by responding to the ministry of Christian education. Both Brothers and lay people can sanctify themselves by exercising this ministry but by different ways of living the Gospel, because of their different commitments with regard to the mission of maintaining the Christian schools. These differences of commitment confer on them a distinct identity: the Brother has added to his state as a believer the choice of consecration for the Kingdom for the service of a mission.

If there were no Brothers, there would be no Institute. If there were no Institute, its mission would not exist either. If a lay person has the possibility of sharing the mission, it is therefore because the Brother exists as a person who possesses a specific identity: that of a consecrated man.

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