

## THE CALL TO SHARE MINISTRY

**Rita Maloney**

I have read over many times the Message of Shared Ministry from the 42nd General Chapter and I want to commend you on the inclusivity of your language. At a time when the Church is so torn in struggles between men and women, hierarchy and laity, liberals and conservatives, you speak a language which calls to religious, priests and laity, men and women, people of the Christian faith, those of other religious traditions and humanists. While many are receding into their separate corners of fundamentalist right and radical left, you dare to step forward with the intention of sharing with the entire Lasallian family, and beyond, the charism of your holy founder, John Baptist De La Salle. In his book, *The Work is Yours*, Brother Luke Salm writes about the period in De La Salle's life when he felt a calling to involve himself more fully in the lives of the poor.

Bro. Luke writes: *"The decision to go through with his resolution to invite the teachers to his table would also have profound consequences for Father De La Salle, deep within the very core of his being. It was a bold and significant first step that would bring him personally face-to-face with the world of the poor. There he would experience within himself the cry of the poor in need....In that cry, the young priest would hear the voice of God, challenging him to begin the work of his own conversion to live the Gospel. It was the beginning of a process that would bring him along a road that he had neither the intention, the desire nor the courage to travel by himself."*

The poverty of the people with whom you choose to share your ministry today may not be the extreme economic poverty of the teachers and the students with whom De La Salle worked. Rather, there is the spiritual poverty of our times. For it is an extreme spiritual poverty that cries out through our society and our world. In his book, *The Care of the Soul*, a modern day psychotherapist who had been a monk for eleven years writes that «as individuals and as a society, we are suffering from "loss of soul"». Some of the symptoms of this, he tells us, are emptiness, meaninglessness, vague depression, disillusionment about marriage, family and relationships, a loss of values, yearning for personal fulfillment, and a hunger for spirituality. Are these not the signs of our times? Is it possible that we, like your founder in the past,

are being called to hear the cry of people in their loss of soul?

Shared ministry will include the youth of our Lasallian family - the students whom we teach. In an interview with Matthew Fox, one reporter asked him what changes he would make if he were Pope. Among a list of changes, Fox said that he would address the despair of our adolescents today. Without even referring to updated statistics on the plight of adolescents, may I share with you just four of the many experiences which I have had with students? A few years ago, I was assigned as the leader of eight seniors on one of our weekend retreats. Four of the eight students in my group admitted that they had attempted suicide - not considered - but actually attempted suicide. On another occasion, I was teaching a class when a generally depressed student kept her head down on her desk. Having approached her and getting no response, I asked her to step outside. As she reached the hall, she burst out sobbing. When she left her home that morning - two hours earlier - her father had her mother up against a wall with a knife to her throat and warned this student that by the time she returned home from school, her mother and her younger brother would be dead.

On still another occasion, I was teaching a student who was responding with great hostility. I wondered what it would be like dealing with such an angry and disrespectful person for the next few months. After doing some follow-up work, I discovered that this young student had just returned to school, having missed the last semester. Six months before, she had an argument with her mother who pulled out a gun and shot her in the head, leaving her in a coma.

Finally, we had a young student who was killed on his way home from school for the gold caps on his teeth. When the young killer was asked at the police station if he realized that he had just killed a 17-year old boy, his answer was, "So what?" Indeed, the loss of soul is screaming out to us.

These are not stories from some horrendous and exaggerated work of fiction, and I am sorry to say that they are not so rare as we would like to believe. These are the lives of our own students and their families - members of the Lasallian family. Most of us don't want to get into the muddiness of all of this. It is easier to teach content, mark papers and hand in grades. But our students are crying out to us. Can we claim to believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the mission of John Baptist de La Salle and close our ears to them? Is it possible that opening our hearts to these cries may have profound consequences on us, deep within Father de La Salle? Could it be that in these cries we too will hear the voice of God, challenging us to begin the work of living out the Gospel, not alone but together?

There are two ways which we can respond to the crisis of loss of soul in our teenagers. We can say, "This is too overwhelming. We cannot look at it. So let us just teach. They'll have to take care of their own personal problems." Or, we can say that the Brothers of the Christian Schools have the timely and powerful charism to train teachers and to train the laity to join you in your work of mission, in our work of mission - one step at a time - so that your work is enhanced and the kingdom of God is spread without anyone burning out.

The church is now seeing the effects of grasping on to things as they have been instead of welcoming in people who are willing to do the work, who were baptized to do the work. Somewhere along the way, the institutional church made cultural accretions a precedence over the gospels.

But you have a founder who dared, with great courage, to stand up against a system that did not live out the gospels. And you continue to do that and I admire you for it. It is so clear that old paradigms are not working. The spirit needs to pour new wine into the church but we insist on holding onto our old wineskins which are bursting at the seams. We must have the courage to create new vision and then to live it out. I think it is time to involve more the parents of our students. One day I was eating lunch with a few younger colleagues. I heard them discussing the parents of some of our students - uninterested, not returning phone calls, not involved enough with their children's education. While I was listening to them, I realized that I was relating more to the parents. A large percentage of our parents are raising children alone - trying to be both mother and father to them - working, cooking, cleaning, financially and emotionally strained - not able to give much more than they do, yet knowing that their children are not getting all that they need. As a teacher I say, "There is only so much I can do. I cannot do it all." Yet, I said the same as a parent, hoping desperately that my children would encounter some teachers who would love them and encourage them when I was so tired - hoping that the children would have good programs at school that would allow them to express themselves and share their pain about our broken family.

Could we not have annual retreat programs for the parents of our students? Offering the opportunity for nurturing their souls would contribute to the healing of the environment in which our students live. Can we discover the Real Needs of the parents of our students and bring in excellent speakers to address them? Topics like: Learning to Communicate With Our Adolescent Children; Teenagers and Drugs; Effective Discipline; The Facts About AIDS; or other topics of interest could be a vital service to them. Nurtured themselves, the parents become a source of nurturing others.

When I was in Chicago, I met Bro. Thomas Brown from St. Raymond's in the Bronx. He told me that he works as a Family Intervention Counselor there. When students are having difficulties, he gets involved with both the student and the family, doing individual as well as family counselling. Then he goes to the teachers of that student and tells them that this particular student is going through very rough times and is under a great deal of stress. How is that for shared ministry? The family is being supported, the student is being assisted, both are being taught better, more effective means of communication, the teacher has some knowledge of why the student is behaving the way he is and so the teacher's heart is called to greater compassion. Now that's pretty powerful shared ministry within the school, isn't it? It seems to me to be a very natural response to hearing the cry of the student and extending beyond to the parent as well. Bro.

Thomas said that if we attend effectively to the woundedness of our students that academics will fall into place.

As a teacher I find the prospect of shared ministry to be an interesting and exciting one. I am always interested in learning how I can be a more effective teacher. Most of all, I would like to learn how I can better teach Religion to adolescents. I need the networking of shared ministry. Should I take courses, are there workshops available? What shall I read? How can I better approach my topics?

Regarding my own personal life, I am at an interesting crossroads. My children are grown and more on their own. I am beginning to consider the possibility of some kind of community. I would like to be with people with whom I can be genuine, share myself and be present to others sharing themselves. I would like to share some prayer with others and perhaps some meals. And yet, I wouldn't really consider moving out into community, I don't think, because I still want to be there for my children when they come home and perhaps for grandchildren one day and so I'm juggling all of these possibilities in my own life. I do not find that the local parishes offer the kind of community I seek. It's a strange time - one of those periods of transition when I'm uncertain of what's coming or where I am going.

Shared ministry comes at a time when many of us are saying we cannot do it alone. Our students and their parents are crying out that they cannot do it alone. You Brothers seem to be saying that you cannot do it alone. Teachers feel the same way. Perhaps this is the way it is meant to be - none of us doing it alone. Shared ministry is an attempt to build bridges with one another and into the future. My friend Tony DeMello used to say, "*We must be faithful to the church - the church of the future.*"

I would like to close with a quote from Joseph Campbell, the renowned mythologist. The interviewer asks if we must go beyond our traditional concepts and Campbell says: "*Indeed we must....because life is different from the way it was and the rules of the past are restrictive of the life processes. The moment the life process stops, it starts drying up. We must find the courage to follow the process. In order to have something new, something old must be broken. And if you're too heavily fixed on the old, you're going to get stuck. That's what hell is, the place of people who could not yield their ego system to allow the grace of a transpersonal power to move them.*"

"*Domine opus tuum*" - The work, O Lord, is yours. And to Your call for shared ministry, we say "Yes." ●

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