

ECUMENICAL FORMATION AND THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

Bro. Jeffrey Gros

Among the commitments the Brothers make their own from the Vatican Council in **A Declaration: The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today** is a willingness to *«join actively the life of the Church and to make his own 'the enterprises and objectives of the Church in such fields as these: the scripture, liturgical, doctrinal, pastoral, ecumenical, missionary and social.'»* (#3) As renewal of the liturgical life and biblical piety have become central to the Brothers community life and educational apostolate, so too has the ecumenical vision of the Council. The renewal of the school in light of its ecumenical commitment, where it has been effective, is one of the most dramatic changes since the Council. The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools has a unique challenge to take leadership in restoring the unity of the Church (1). The Lasallian schools were founded in the heat of the Counter-Reformation, and De La Salle himself was called upon to provide the schools to preserve the Catholic faith against inroads of French Protestantism. To make them centers of reconciliation takes the same zeal as was manifest in their first foundation.

The journey toward the full visible unity of the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches becomes an essential dimension of Roman Catholic identity, the Brothers spiritual life, and the educational mission of the Christian school. Like liturgy, social and missionary commitments in Christian spirituality, a thoroughgoing ecumenical formation is needed both for the religious who would serve the Christian school (2), and those who would be formed in a contemporary understanding of what the Gospel demands of a Catholic Christian.

While in many contexts interfaith outreach is important for the Christian, there is a clear distinction between Christian ecumenism where the basis is the real, if imperfect, communion that exists among follo-

wers of Christ oriented toward full sacramental unity, and the outreach beyond Christianity in interfaith collaboration and dialogue.

The first element to be considered is conversion - conversion of the Christian person and conversion of the Christian school, to the ecumenical vision of the Roman Catholic Church. In the first instance conversion entails recognition that Christ wills the full visible unity of the Church and that the Christian is called to serve that unity. However, an authentic Catholic spirituality also entails some specific dimensions to conversion, even before speaking of ecumenical education. These elements are: 1) an ecumenical spirituality, praying with others and for the unity of all Christians; 2) a receptive spirituality, open to and zealous for deepening the bonds of communion among all who confess faith in Christ, 3) a zeal to learn about other Christians and their spiritual gifts, and 4) a readiness to foster those developments among the churches that promote common witness and deepened experiences of communion.

The Christian school is the center for ecumenical formation, especially in places where other Christian churches are few. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is well established in Christian schools. In the school this week each year provides the opportunity for ecumenical hospitality to other Christian leaders and groups, and for reviewing for young people, according to their age, the Catholic principles of ecumenism and the progress of ecumenical dialogue since the Council.

In many Catholic schools, Eucharistic hospitality is possible for non-Catholic Christians, according to the guidelines of the various dioceses. While communion for Syrian Orthodox and Polish National Catholic students from the United States is normal, and the Catholic Church opens its Eucharist to other Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Christians - their discipline does not allow them to communicate, normally; the guidelines for students from the Reformation churches is more nuanced. The newly published **Directory** is a useful resource, synthesizing Catholic guidelines on sacramental sharing, ecumenical formation, common witness and other important dimensions of Catholic ecumenical life (3). It is important that both Catholics and other Christian students understand the conditions and the reasons behind Roman Catholic practices on sacramental sharing. The experience without the requisite understanding is incomplete education.

Among the occasions for sacramental sharing for which particular preparation is important is the inter-church marriage. While not encouraged, in some contexts the majority of the graduates of the Christian school will live out their married life with a spouse whose Christian faith they share, but who are loyal to their still divided churches. The Christian schools will enable their graduates to see these families as an

impulse to the unity of the churches, and as an opportunity for ecumenical growth (4).

In addition to the formation that provides students with faith in Christ's will for the unity of his Church and zeal to pursue this goal, a thorough education in the religious content of the ecumenical vision becomes central to Roman Catholic catechesis. The dimensions of Roman Catholic ecumenical commitments since the Vatican Council need to be known by all students from their earliest years: 1) the spiritual quest for unity, in prayer, common experience and outreach; 2) the dialogues underway toward full visible unity in faith, sacrament and mission; 3) the imperative to common witness in each local parish, school and neighborhood; and 4) the renewal of Roman Catholicism so that it may be receptive to the unity brought by the Holy Spirit.

Students, according to their age and ability, will be brought to know the history of the ecumenical movement, the other Christian churches - especially those with whom they are living, and the results of the officially sponsored dialogues - especially those in which the Roman Catholic Church is a sponsor. Fortunately these latter dialogues are available as documents which should enable publishers, educators and teachers in institutions of higher education to integrate their results into the catechetical program of the Church (5).

With our renewed understandings of the eleventh, sixteenth and subsequent century history; our agreements on issues of sacrament, grace, ethics, and authority; and the work that has been accomplished on the reconciliation of memories, both text books and styles of teaching are continually being renewed and rewritten in the light of Roman Catholic ecumenical commitments. While some preliminary study has been done on De La Salle's view of the Church, more interpretive work from a contemporary ecumenical perspective will be needed in order to focus what contribution it can make to the vision for the future (6).

De La Salle was a practical educator, adapting his methodologies to the experience of his students, the needs of the poor and the culture in which they would live. The Roman Catholic ecumenical commitments deal not only with the global, institutional unity of the Church, which can be experienced by young people as a remote abstraction. Rather it is a direct, personal and concrete mandate for understanding the faith of others, living as much communion as is now possible, developing concrete experiences and skills in common witness, and cultivating hopes for that reconciliation

that the Christian student may not see even in her or his own life time.

While the Christian school has particular responsibility for the intellectual component of the ecumenical education of youth, the experiential, active and spiritual dimension is not to be neglected, particularly in the formative years where these affective and communal components set the course of life long attitudes towards fellow Christians in other traditions. In this dimension, as in all dimensions of renewal both student and teacher are aware, as the **Declaration** notes, "*that it is the Holy Spirit who brings about the renovation of men and of institutions. There can be no renewal without a renewal of the life of prayer and without an effort to re-emphasize meditation and contemplation.*" ●

1. It is clearly the opinion of the Superior General that there is a challenge to do more than has been done: "*I think that in view of this complexity (of religions) we Brothers and our partners need more ongoing formation in religious education, as well as in areas of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. With regard to the latter, it is my impression that the official positions of the Holy See are far more 'advanced' than the positions held by many of us!*" (John Johnston, FSC, *Living Authentically in Christ Jesus*, 1 January, 1994, Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, p. 38.

2. Jeffrey Gros, "*The Ecumenical Vocation of Religious*," *Review for Religious*, 52:6, November-December, 1993, 849-864.

3. *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, Origins*, Vol. 23: No. 9. *Directorio para la aplicación de los Principios y Normas sobre el Ecumenismo*, Bogota: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 1993.

4. George Kilcourse, *Double Belonging: Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* (New York: Paulist 1992).

5. For example: English: Paulist Press, New York: *Doing the Truth in Charity, Toward Healing the Schism, Building Unity, Growth in Agreement, Growing Consensus*; Spanish: Adolfo Gonzalez Montes, *Enchiridion Oecumenicum*, Salamanca: Universidad Pontificia, 1993, Vols. I, II. ; Italian: Sever Voicu, Giovanni Cereti, eds., *Enchiridion Oecumenicum*, Bologna: Edizioni, 1986, Vols. I, II.

6. Cf. Michael McGinness, "*Église dans les écrits de Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*," *Thèmes Lasalliens*, I (Léon Lauraire, FSC, ed., Rome: Maison St. Jean-Baptiste De La Salle, 1993, Michel Sauvage, FSC, *Catéchèse et Laïcité*, Paris: Liget, 1962.