

HOMILY TO DE LA SALLE BROTHERS

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We want to thank the Lord for the gift of the Brothers to Kenya indeed to the whole of Africa. The shape and texture of your life and mission is determined by two main factors; the Lasallian patrimony handed on and cherished by the community, the needs and challenges of the times and place in which you find yourselves. I wish to say a few words about your contribution to Africa today.

The challenges facing Africa today are great, and these are the challenges which face us religious too. There are signs of hope and new life in some places. South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Malawi. But overall the picture remains bleak. The march towards democracy has slowed down in many countries, the constant threat of hunger and violence haunts the majority of our people. Grinding poverty and neglect of basic human rights is commonplace. Good people feel helpless to effect any real change and even courageous church leaders find that their calls for change make little impact. The young are promised a better future but their experience is one of disappointment and hopelessness.

More and more people are moving into the cities and large towns where the traditional ties of family and clan are no longer there to give support and direction to the young. The values once cherished by the ancestors no longer have the same hold on people. It is a time of confusion and much pain.

It is in this context that our young religious are called to service. Unlike many western countries, Africa is still a deeply religious continent where people live close to God and are aware of his presence. This is a strong source of hope to people who often feel that they have nowhere to turn in their sorrows. The religious of Africa come from a world and culture where people know struggle, pain and difficulty. They belong to a people who, despite their hardships, have learned to laugh and dance, to sing and celebrate. They are members of a young church centred on the Word of God and that values life in community. They have lived in close contact with people of different religious traditions and faiths. Their own Christian faith and commitment is nourished on colourful celebration and quiet prayer, and on service to others in the community. Their familiarity with suffering and hardship gives them a unique perspective on the Gospel of Jesus.

God has given a great gift to Africa through the charism of your religious life. That gift is given in response to the prayers of people who seek light in their darkness, and who long for a sign of hope to overcome their temptation to despair. Your charism will bear abundant fruit in Africa to the extent that you find ways of bringing your special gift to those suffering people, and of helping to create true community where people feel welcome and loved. Your commitment to the risen Lord will lead to an action to remove the sources of suffering and sin, and to promote the dignity of the children of God. Your commitment to God's people can help them to know that they have not been abandoned in their struggles and that the Risen Lord is close to them.

The situation of the young is particularly precarious. 50% of the population is under 17 years, and almost 50% of primary school children have fallen out of the system because their parents cannot pay the fees. Without education they will remain on the fringes of political and social life, unable to cope with increasing complexity and demands of a developing society. They will be closed off from whatever benefits may come from a growing economy. The young are promised a better future but their experience is one of disappointment and frustration. Unemployment is destroying the morale of the young who are becoming restless and aimless. More and more of the young people are living in the big towns and cities where the traditional bonds of family and clan are disappearing. The values of family and community life which guided people in the past no longer have a strong hold on the young. Families are falling apart and there is an increasing number of single parent families and of abandoned street children in our

towns and cities. These are particularly vulnerable to the evils of drug and alcohol abuse and we cannot forget the scourge of Aids. Education remains one of the most urgent needs of young people. This will give them a start in their search for employment and strengthen their sense of personal well being. Without a proper education young people will find it difficult to develop the necessary self-discipline for mature adult living. Many religious congregations were founded originally to provide free education for the poorest children. That need is still one of the most pressing in Africa. The combined resources of the many religious congregations together with help from the local church can enable us to take up this challenge in a creative way.

Education in Africa has always been a sensitive and critical political issue. In colonial times education was feared by the establishment who thought that an educated black population would resist the rule of colonials. Part of the rationale for the continuance of colonial rule was that the African was uneducated and so unable to run things himself. This same argument is used by some African leaders today to justify their holding on to power. Indeed we see from history that it was the educated elite who became the great nationalist leaders of Africa in the early sixties. They were empowered by education to question the status quo, to challenge the rule of the foreigners, and to win independence for their countries. Theirs is the story of education leading to liberation. Political leaders still fear an educated public and can connive in the maintenance of ignorance. Lack of education is a cause of ignorance and fear, robbing people of self-confidence and leading to over dependence on patronising leaders. Domination politics thrives on such a climate.

Today education for the second liberation is essential for Africa. There is some light but it is threatened by a spreading darkness. Just read our newspapers these days where freedom of speech and freedom of association are once again denied. Education is needed to keep the darkness at bay and to spread the light of hope and new opportunity. Education will enable people to see the reality of their situation and to understand its true causes. It will enable them to work together to respond to their problems and to find good and workable solutions. This kind of education for change will give young people a sense of well being, building up confidence and personal maturity. The role of the educator is vital. For education is not to be imparted as a privilege, a gift from a gracious benefactor but as a way of recognising and affirming the dignity of the young person. The form of education should not reinforce the sense of dependence but should engage the initiative and creativity of the young so that they come to discover and value their own inner worth and gifts. This will be a true Christian education which encourages the young to seek in order to find, to take the initiative and to search for themselves, to read the signs of the times, to be creative and to take responsibility for their own learning. They will experience the joy of enlightenment. They can learn the benefits of working together with others and to be concerned for the welfare of the whole community. This will be an education not for servitude but for leadership, an education not for individual gain but for the good of all, an education not to maintain the status quo but to create a better tomorrow. •