

36 - 13 - C - 145

**NEW WORLD  
IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION**

**Bro. Theodore Drahmann**

It was 1718, and St. John Baptist de la Salle was upset! He had just recently resigned the leadership of the society of teachers which he had founded. Now, a year before his death, he learned that his successor had promised to send four Christian Brothers to North America. His objections were voiced so strongly that the plan was canceled. It took more than a century for the Brothers to cross the Atlantic and begin to work in the New World.

But now, almost three hundred years later, he could not be more pleased to witness the gathering of his Brothers and their colleagues in Catholic education, in North America in Chicago, November 18-20, 1993 to grow in an understanding of the mission and philosophy he had begun in France.

Sixty schools and colleges sponsored by the Brothers of the Christian Schools sent 130 delegates to this annual meeting, known as the Huether Workshop. Together they plumbed the implications of the mission of a Catholic educator in the tradition of the Founder of the Brothers.

St. De La Salle would have marveled at the diversity of the group which gathered under his banner in the Windy City. For example, a second grade teacher, a woman, from New York was at an adjoining table to that of an English professor from an Illinois university, a layman.

The Brothers, who were a minority of 40% at the conference rubbed shoulders with religious women and lay men and women, including a Protestant women minister from one of the state funded child care institutions managed by the Brothers.

Campus ministers, religion teachers and school administrators were there to explore the conference theme "Called to be Light for the World".

The geographical diversity - ranging from Toronto to El Paso, from Maine to San Francisco, brought a rich diversity for sharing. Yet, all were united by a common desire to be guided in their work today by the charism of the Patron of all teachers, St. John Baptist de la Salle, so designated by Pope Pius XII.

What are the common traits of the concept which is coming to be known as the "Lasallian Family", the term used to denote all those who are engaged in education under the sponsorship of the followers of St De La Salle?

The lineaments became clear, as the program moved from challenging general sessions to small workshops, from common prayer to the closing liturgy for the Feast of Christ the King, from the opening get-acquainted social, (sponsored by the Toronto Brothers as an occasion for all to toast their city's World Series Championship!) to informal conversations and even shopping excursions in the pre-Christmas atmosphere of the Chicago Loop.

This variety of activities built up to what one delegate from Canada eventually termed a remarkable spiritual experience - a conversion.

Conversion to what? Primarily to a belief in the dignity and responsibility of the teacher as a minister of grace, as a visible guardian angel, as the older brother or sister who guides and accompanies students of all ages in their quest for growth. The awesome stature of the teacher is one of the strongest features in the traits of those who are Catholic educators in the Lasallian tradition.

**Good** teachers in every sense of that term, this was the reason why De La Salle began his educational group in 16th century France when the need was so evident. There is still that need today.

If one were to look deeply into the eyes and soul of a "good" teacher, we would find the twin virtues of Faith and Zeal: **faith** to see that education is a God given call which must include the aim of bringing students closer to God; **zeal** which impels the teacher to spend self generously for the complete human and spiritual growth of those whom one seeks to educate.

The traditional closing event of the conference was a banquet to recognize the Distinguished Lasallian Educators from each of the nine provinces of the North American Region of the Christian Brothers. Each geographic division had chosen its outstanding representative from the ranks of all those working in their school and colleges.

As each honoree came forward to receive the medal of his or her award, accompanying citations were read to summarize the rationale for being selected.

These men (and one woman) coming from New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Texas, Oregon, Minnesota, Missouri, and Ontario were described with well-deserved encomiums, (which could stand them in good stead if they are ever proposed for canonization!)

For example, a Brother in his Golden Jubilee year and still active as a guidance counselor in New York, was dubbed a veritable "hound of heaven" for his dogged insistence to college applicants to complete their paperwork.

Oxford-educated, an English teacher from Minnesota, who is also a columnist in a major metropolitan paper, had personally set up a faculty fund to aid needy students in unexpected financial crises.

"Never a bad word to say to or about anyone" was the tribute given to a Texas teacher and coach. A Missouri high school religion teacher was recognized for developing social justice concern in his students, even by personally leading student groups to Guatemala to see Third World poverty firsthand.

Nationally recognized for leadership in the Boy Scout movement, a Jersey City science teacher was characterized by fellow faculty members as an innovative school leader who always encouraged spiritual growth in his students.

The University English professor from Illinois was not only said to see his teaching as a vocation, but was known as a peacemaker in what can often be prickly campus politics. And the New York second grade teacher, who delights in preparing her charges for First Communion, keeps fellow faculty alert with her tricks at Halloween, and other times.

In his difficult twin roles of athletic director and school disciplinarian, an Oregon secondary educator

still manages to maintain his belief in the ultimate goodness of students as children of God

Finally, from across the border, a young Toronto computer science teacher was hailed as one who lives his teaching vocation as a ministry in the service of others.

Eight lay folk, one religious: the proportion of educators in most Catholic schools today. Not to worry! The Chicago experience indicates that the sense of an apostolic teaching ministry is not the sole province of religious and clergy. This spirit has been "caught" by women and men everywhere.

St. John Baptist de la Salle, along with the founders of the many other teaching orders in the Church, can only be pleased to see that their vision for service to God and humanity is being carried on, not only by their vowed followers, but also by a multitude of dedicated lay men and women.

This may indeed be a "New World", but it is one which opens rich potential for the growth of God's kingdom in the hearts and minds of students everywhere.

St. John Baptist de la Salle - be not concerned. Your North American followers are faithful and true. •