

THE AGE OF THE BAPTIZED

Brother Theodore Drahmann

This felicitous phrase - **Age of the Baptized** - was used by Bishop John G. Vlazny of Winona, Minnesota, in addressing the annual gathering of educators from the schools, colleges, and welfare centers sponsored by the De La Salle Christian Brothers in the United States and English-speaking Canada, held in Chicago, November 10 - 12, 1994.

These administrators - Brothers, clergy, Sisters, lay men and women - came from the one hundred elementary, secondary, and higher education institutions which have been or presently are connected to the work of the Christian Brothers in North America. For the 23rd year, they gathered to explore the common inspiration which comes from the Founder of the Brothers, St. John Baptist de La Salle, and the project for the Christian and human education of the young, especially the disadvantaged, which he began three hundred years ago in Paris and other cities of France.

Bishop Vlazny's opening words were heartening as he expanded on the common evangelizing mission of all Christians - religious and lay alike. The theme of the workshop this year was **Shared Mission**, the concept which describes this mutual responsibility. The participants probed the special family tradition of the Christian Brothers in education, as well as the needs of the present. The fact that the North American schools and colleges are staffed by 414 Brothers, along with 174 clergy and women religious, and 3,546 lay educators, is a stark indication that "sharing the mission" is an absolute necessity if the Lasallian tradition in Catholic education is to endure.

The mood was upbeat and optimistic. Like other religious orders in the Church today, there has been a pervading concern that the magnificent heritage of the past may decline drastically and even disappear, due to the reduced number of vowed religious. As Brother Pierre Josse, General Councilor from the Brothers' Roman headquarters, pointed out, the movement for religious and lay to work in close solidarity, is continuing to ad-

vance in the eighty-two countries in which Christian Brothers are to be found.

The educators came from institutions, ranging from Rhode Island and Toronto to Los Angeles. They gathered at the Chicago landmark hotel, the Bismarck, as they have done for the past twenty-three years. The delegates discussed and critiqued a plan for "shared mission" drawn up by a nationally representative committee of Sisters, Brothers, and lay colleagues last summer. This plan is a comprehensive strategy for use in the various institutions to develop in both partners and Brothers a deeper understanding of the Lasallian approach to Catholic education, one which has thousands of Brothers' Boys (and more recently, Brothers' Girls) living throughout the land and gratefully acknowledging the education and formation which they received. In fact, the conference was held just across the street from the Chicago City Hall where a De La Salle Institute graduate, Richard M. Daley, presides as Mayor of the city of Chicago.

In the minds of many religious today, there lurks the fear that the educational works so successfully and solidly established will pass into other hands, with altered purpose and effect. This seems to be inevitable as numbers continue to decline, unless a cadre of true Lasallians will take the helm and work with the Brothers to keep this valuable tradition alive in the service of the Church and of society.

The plan to **share the mission** is intended to do just that. The Chicago delegates returned home with the elements of a plan for thorough formation in the Lasallian tradition for all members of the staff. In this plan the Brothers retain an essential role, as "the heart, the memory, and the guarantor" of the basic spirit and philosophy. Their partners in the educational enterprise will share the responsibility of ensuring that the institutions are alive and successful and that all collaborators in the work have committed themselves to the mission of a Lasallian school.

How do we define a "Lasallian school"? Most simply, it is a **quality** Catholic educational institution with all that such a definition implies. But it is unique in that it is organized around a special family tradition, begun by St. John Baptist de La Salle. His story, his writings, his spiritual doctrine as the unifying force in the philosophy of these schools, will be the focus for continuing formation of all personnel, so that a purposeful commitment to the life and work of the school can be made.

Two groups present in Chicago gave dynamic hope for the future of the Brothers' tradition.

Lasallian Volunteers, college graduates who give one or more years to working in the Lasallian institutions which serve the disadvantaged here and abroad, were present to tell their story. A choir of Lasallian Youth

from various Chicago schools provided music for the closing liturgy, giving evidence of these active groups of secondary school students who give of themselves to faith development, community-building, and service to the community in small groups reminiscent of the Jo-cist Catholic Action movement of the 1950's.

The most striking evidence of life and collaboration in Lasallian institutions was provided by the recognition of a Distinguished Lasallian Educator from each of the nine provinces which comprise the English-speaking North American sector of the Christian Brothers international congregation. Each province annually selects an educator from its schools and institutions, someone who in an outstanding manner exemplifies the ideal of the Lasallian tradition. This year, three lay women, three lay men, and three Brothers were honored, a numerical symmetry not planned, since each is chosen independently in each location.

The lay awardees evidently have not waited for the Age of the Baptized to exercise great zeal in their educational work. One was a veteran teacher in a Toronto school, still retaining the burr of his native Scotland. Another recipient was a Brother who has labored for almost half a century in the oldest Christian Brothers school in the United States, Calvert Hall High School in Baltimore; though deprived of speech by a recent stroke, he still spreads the sunshine of encouragement

daily in the school by the two remaining words he is able to articulate: "Very good!"

A dynamic woman administrator was honored for her vigorous leadership in ensuring the survival of a venerable school in the South, while a puckish campus minister was recognized for more than the Mickey-Mouse theme ties that he customarily wears. And there was the Brother in the upper Midwest who gathers interested faculty for a weekly discussion of the Scripture passages for the following Sunday, as well as for regular community-building faculty bowling sessions.

These, and the others who were honored, were examples in "living color" of the dedication and effectiveness which can be attained by those who strive to live and work in the tradition of St. John Baptist de La Salle.

The term "a new Pentecost" may be a bit pretentious to describe what occurred at the Bismarck Hotel in early November. However, it may well be the impetus of a new surge of unity, vision, and energy in the works of the Christian Brothers in America. To see how the "Baptized" can work together to plan for the future of this tradition - for the many young who are served - is cause to hope that the life and work of a valiant French priest three centuries ago will continue and flourish in our land. •