

THE IDENTITY OF THE BROTHER... Why?

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Life is a process, not a goal. Each existence, each person has to make his individual journey within the group to which he belongs: parents, family, profession, religious community...

And each member will influence the way the group or community has "more life" or "less life": vitality or lethargy. Which is my current role?

A plant's vitality primarily depends on its roots. Without good roots, the best conditions of temperature, the fertility of the soil, light and water are useless.

In the same way that a deeply rooted tree raises its green top and produces much fruit, the Brother's existence will be fertile in the measure that it is rooted in the fertile soil of the charism of the holy Founder.

A tree is known by its fruit (Luke 6:44) and as Brother Superior wrote in his 1991 pastoral letter: "...Our fundamental identity has not changed. Nor has our essential mission: that mission is to make Christ's loving and saving presence a visible and effective reality among the young". (Cf. Brother John Johnston, "Irrevocably Committed" to follow Christ yesterday, today, tomorrow", 1991).

The Second Vatican Council has told us that current religious life includes:

- the continual return to the sources of Christian life and to the first and original inspiration of the Institutes;
- the adaptation of these sources to the new circumstances of the present time (cf. PC 2).

The Council also adds that this renewal will be under the impulse of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church.

Religious life, basically, is a work of the Holy Spirit and not of humankind. This statement, whether taken seriously or as a joke, is full of consequences; good ones, in the former's case and bad ones in the latter.

In 1993 Father Marcello Azevedo, SJ, published a noteworthy book entitled "The Consecrated Life: Routes and Crossroads". In it he explains his thesis that the eagerly awaited guiding compass has not yet been found. On page 59 he points out what is, perhaps, the key to the problem: "Institutes should first deepen and define their apostolic inspiration, the preeminent character of their own vocation".

This is a task which is never fully completed, since future generations cannot get hold of the wealth of the foundational charism and new members will need years and years to assimilate the essence of those sources.

The Second Vatican Council generation members certainly were at fault for not having seriously studied, as they should

have, the documents which came from such an important assembly and particularly those from the General Chapter as well. In general the innovations were simple changes and they were essentially external ones which did not have the corresponding spiritual renewal. Even today, the roots of the Institute and of the District suffer from those mistakes because they were lacking in the essential fertilizer: "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1).

According to St. John Baptist de La Salle, the majority do not assimilate their charism or they stop along the way: "although there are a great number of persons enter them (communities), only a few remain faithful to the grace of their vocation, and take on the spirit (charism) of their state, or remain faithful after being committed to it" (Meditation 72.1).

Therefore it is important to follow the advice of St. Paul: "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters" (1 Corinthians 1:26). This is to say that we should examine ourselves concerning who we are and what we should be.

In one of his recent letters, Brother Superior insisted that it is necessary to fill the gap between our real identity and our ideal identity: he spoke of "filling the void".

In the measure that we succeed in doing this, we will constitute significant communities for the believers and we will again gather fruit in the apostolate, helping Christians both young and old in their journey towards God as they choose to become a part of us.

John Paul II says: "Each vocation is a gift from God which should be nourished by prayer and offered with the witness of one's life",

According to St. Francis of Assisi, the promotion of vocations is a proof that the Lord is watching over the Institute, giving it companions that share the same ideal. And if there are few vocations? "Each healthy being tends to multiply", says Camus (1).

If there are no candidates and in the case of many leaving, let us not look for easy and exonerating psychological explanations; let us have the courage to look at ourselves in the mirror of the writings of the holy Founder, in the lives of the Brother saints, in the rich doctrine of the Church on the consecrated life and above all in Holy Scripture, in the Gospels which is our first Rule. "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Matthew 3:9).

It will become immediately evident that our spiritual physiognomy is far from having the well-defined traits that should characterize it.

Rollo-May forcefully warns: "Our survival depends on our own values...and if we know how to live them out in practice" (2).

From here the insistence of the Holy Founder follows concerning the exercise of mental prayer or meditation which should be considered as the first and principal of the daily exercises (Rule of 1718, 4.1). Why? "Because it is the one most capable of drawing down God's blessings on all the others" (cf. Rule, 69).

The eminent author Erich Fromm writes: "The task of self-analysis is ongoing and continues until the day we die. We can better practice self-analysis if it is the first thing we do in the morning...The most important thing is to distance ourselves from life's hustle and bustle and to concentrate on ourselves, stop the constant reacting to external stimuli and empty ourselves, so that we can become active in our own intimacy" (3).

The religious does not engage in simple introspection, but engages in this self-analysis under God's guidance: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24).

Modern psychology affirms the wisdom of the secular teachings of spiritual authors and of the age-old practice in religious houses, a practice which has diminished in recent decades, with serious damage to the quality of life of its members and to the number of aspirants. The demagnetized metal loses its force of attraction...Due to a faulty connection with the source of energy, the battery weakens and therefore generates little light.

The majority of people do not overcome mediocrity. The majority of religious, on the human level, are in the midway point. There are few who overcome this in spite of the fact that they have all the means to excel. We Brothers have an enviable wealth of opportunities and means. Do we take advantage of this privilege given by the Rule for our own spiritual growth? "Ordinarily the Brothers give to God at least two hours of each day in meditation, the Eucharist, community prayer, spiritual reading and personal prayer" (Rule, 73).

Why this amount of time and why so much? Experience has shown that it is necessary to recharge our spiritual and apostolic batteries in order to sufficiently magnetize our being. "In this way they nourish their life of faith and strengthen their religious and apostolic commitment" (Rule 73).

If we don't want to be like the foolish virgins who did not bring enough oil for their lamps, we need to continually fill them. How many times do we foolishly try to illuminate our surroundings and other hearts with lamps that have been extinguished in our hands!

Sooner or later, using another comparison, the solidity or fragility of the building which was built on Christ Jesus as its only foundation will become apparent; now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw--the work of each builder will become visible (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:11-13).

The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset wrote: "The principles on which the civilized world is supported do not exist for the ordinary person. Fundamental cultural values have no interest for him". Isn't this sharp observation by the author also valid for the average disciple or for the majority of the disciples of St. John Baptist de La Salle?

Ortega y Gasset continues: "The civilizations which have vanished have done so because of the lack of principles". I am convinced that this is also happening with us, having been reduced by half in less than twenty years. We are not drinking sufficiently or adequately of the sources of the marvelous charism of St. John Baptist de La Salle. There is much truth for us in the Prophet's affirmation: we went to "dig out cisterns for ourselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13). Or in another place, a very realistic message: "children have come to the birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth" (Isaiah 37:3). In a healthy organism gestation of new life and birth itself are needed equally.

My small book entitled "The identity of the Brothers of the Christian Schools" (4), newly edited, has as its objective to recall the great and vital principles of our charism, of the charism of our great pedagogue and saint from Rheims. It

attempts to present the general structure of our way of being "religious educators".

In the same way that the columns and girders of a building cannot be knocked down with impunity, it is also disastrous if the basic living elements of a charism are abandoned.

Brothers, it would be irresponsible to superficially keep on supporting the sustaining columns of the edifice of the vocation of the Brother of the Christian Schools and later realize, open-mouthed, that the building is threatening to collapse. I say "superficially" because if one meditated more on Sacred Scripture, the documents of the Church, the writings of holy Founders, our own in particular, it certainly would not happen that way.

It would be well to ponder the words of Nietzsche: "If you divest yourselves of your veils, of your approaches to problems, of your colors, of your initiatives, there would be little left to frighten away the birds" (5).

A quote from Gilbert Chesterton would fit in well here, in the chapter entitled "The suicide of thought", which should clarify what I have been saying: "Let us not run around like demagogues, inciting triangles to leave the prison of their three sides, because if a triangle ceases to have three sides, its life will come to a lamentable end" (6).

A German thinker says that the person is the one who can assimilate. From what springs do I drink? Which authors nourish me as I read and meditate on them? What space do I reserve for the writings of the holy Founder and for studies on his thought?

Let us maintain the solidity of the triangle of our charism! It is a matter of life - or more life or less - and also of depletion or death.

You, the reader, can be among those who fight with words and especially with your very living, in order to preserve and adapt the present world to the precious inheritance which our generation holds, and be responsible for delivering it in all its richness and not in any way weakened to the next generation. Above all let us not forget that only that which is acquired can be passed on...

Francisco Taborda, SJ, recalls that "a religious Institute is a work of the Spirit, a fruit of a charism, but only in so far as it continues to respond to existing situations in the Church and in mankind which are analogous to those which gave rise to its foundation" (7).

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- (1) Camus, A. *O Mito de Sisifo*. Rio de Janeiro, Edit. Guanabara, 1989.
 - (2) May, R. *The Hazards of AHP*, In Newsletter, October 1982. p. 17.
 - (3) Fromm, E. *Amor a Vida*. Rio de Janeiro. Zahar, 1986, p. 88.
 - (4) Justo, Henrique. *Identidade do Irmao das Escolas Cristas*. Niteroi, Graf. La Salle, 1994.
 - (5) Nietzsche, F. *Assim falava Zarathustra*. Guimaraes Edit. 1988, p. 133.
 - (6) Chesterton, G. K. *Ortodoxia*. Porto, Martiris, 1944, p. 53.
 - (7) Taborda, F. *Carisma e Instituicao*. Rio de Janeiro, CRB, 1990, p. 54.