

Thirty Years of Evolution in the Service of the Poor

Bro. Augustine Loes

In 1967 the United States' delegates to the General Chapter adopted a position paper stating that at this time in history we must emphasize service of the poor. Such a position was based on the teaching of Vatican II, and in particular, the emphasis of the opening message of the Council to the whole world inspired by Pope John XXIII, and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). It also originated in the renewed study of the charisma of the Founder, but at the time it was a somewhat revolutionary position.

The *Declaration on the Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today* promulgated by the Chapter in 1967 expressed this position. It stated that «it is the poor to whom we [Brothers] are sent by preference,» and ends its chapter on the service of the poor with the statement:

All the organs of government, of decision making, or of dialogue in the Institute are equally obligated to enter into the conversion to the poor in such a way that all the decisions taken and the structures put in place will reflect in fact the truth of our «return to the poor.»

The idea of returning to the poor was not inappropriate. The fifth and final draft for study of the Rule presented to the General Chapter showed the need for a return. The chapter on The Religious Consecration of the Brother, for example, still speaks of the vow of gratuity, which had become an embarrassment because of all the legalisms it had created. In the chapter on gratuity it does state that «the Brothers shall always aim at giving preference to underprivileged youth, so that their ministry may appear to men as a messianic sign of the evangelization of the poor, and that through them the Church may appear before the world as the servant of the poor.» The emphasis, however, seems to be more on sign and appearance than on the actual service of the poor: five of the six articles in the chapter are about not accepting anything from the students and preserving the spirit of disinterestedness; there is practically nothing about serving the poor.

Brother Luke Salm in his story of «*A Religious Institute in Transition*» mentions (p. 132) that there were many notes sent to the Chapter urging that these vows [gratuity and stability] be suppressed as anachronistic and unnecessary. In the end they were kept because of their part in the origin of the Institute. But they were given new names, fidelity to the Institute and service of the poor through education, and they were combined in one chapter.

The Rule was left unchanged by the General Chapter in 1976, but recommendations were made by the different committees and these were passed on to a committee that was designated to prepare a revised Rule for the Chapter in 1986. It was in this Rule, adopted by the Chapter and approved by the Church, that the names of the vows were again changed to «Association for the Service of the Poor Through Education,» and «Stability in the Institute.»

There was a significant evolution from the Rule of 1976 to the Rule of 1986. First there was the insertion of association as essential to the vow to serve the poor. This, of course, was a return to the original vow written by the Founder in which the key words were: «to unite myself (association) and to remain (stability) in society with the brothers of the Christian Schools,» and «to conduct together and by association schools for the service of the poor.» The Rule then expands on serving the poor in eleven paragraphs, as compared with four in the Rule of 1976. These paragraphs are full of details that describe the various kinds of poverty to be served by the Brothers. It also speaks of a solidarity among all Brothers in this service; the Rule makes the distinction between direct and indirect service, the indirect service being the teaching of social justice and charity to «students from families that are more or less well off.» It makes the statement borrowed from Medellín that the Brothers have a «preferential option in favor of the poor.» It also adds practical directives:

The District and the Regions establish a plan for the development of their apostolic works which will make the direct service of the poor more and more their effective priority.

Such a plan includes ways to recruit and train replacements and so permits Brothers to be released for such service.

Over the past 30 years most Districts and Regions have responded with plans to increase direct service of the poor, but it is a significant fact that practically any move to increase service to the poor has been largely the result of initiative from individual Brothers. Even Districts Chapters are moved by individuals making proposals and/or responding to proposals. Gerald Arbuckle, SM, in his talk to the Chapter of 1986 said that «contemporary management studies and applied anthropology tell us that individuals, not groups or organizations or cultures, innovate.» He added, with reference to some ideas of John Henry Newman, that «nothing will happen unless individuals with drive and vision act and invite others to join them.» Arbuckle calls these innovative people «change agents» and «rebounders» of the religious orders. He says they are «pained to see the yawning gap between the world and the Gospel message... and perceive revolutionary new ways to bridge the gap.»

A recent event in the United States illustrates this social phenomenon. It was a gathering of 37 Brothers and 21 of their collaborators, men and women, salaried and volunteers, all working together in direct service for the poor. Most of these persons have been innovators in their Districts. It was the first such national meeting focusing entirely on direct service of the economically disadvantaged and marginalized.

It was not organized by the Region or any District but by a Brother who is the Director of the Highbridge Community Life Center in the South Bronx area of New York City, possibly the poorest urban section in the United States. For more than 20 years Brother Edward Phelan has created numerous programs to empower the poor children and adults in this inner city neighborhood. He has been an innovator

and change agent for most of his forty years as a Brother. He initiated the meeting by inviting Brothers and their partners across the country whom he knew were working in direct service of the poor.

The gathering represented some 20 programs throughout the United States, all one form or another of education for the economically disadvantaged and the marginalized: inner city San Miguel schools in Chicago, Illinois, Providence, Rhode Island, and Camden, New Jersey, a San Miguel remedial reading program in St. Paul, Minnesota, individual Brothers working in programs for the poor in Chicago, Kansas City, Montana, the Martin De Porres school of special education in Springfield Gardens, New York, the multi-service programs of Highbridge in the South Bronx, La Salle School in Albany, New York, Ocean Tides in Narragansett, and many others. Most of the programs have been developed during the last 25 years.

The Brothers and their partners were invited in order to share their experiences in service of the poor, to reflect together on the spirituality of St. La Salle, to pool their knowledge of the process for establishing new programs, for fundraising, for volunteering, for recruitment of collaborators, and to plan how they might continue their support of one another in the future. All this activity was called building «social capital,» i.e., the knowledge, trust, and power to serve others better. «FSC» became a framework of Faith, Service, and Community for the deliberations of the group.

The first day focused on the personal stories of each one's experience in working with the poor. Sharing their stories in the small groups, the participants said that their commitment to direct service of the poor came from their experience with persons suffering from poverty. One Brother said that «once you meet a poor person face to face, you cannot just walk away.» It was observed that such was the experience of St. La Salle himself, who was led by a series of commitments, each one out of kindness (toward Adrien Nyel, Madame L'Évêque, the teachers, the children, the Brothers), that ended up with the total gift of himself to create the Institute.

Another agreement among the participants was their feeling of the absolute necessity of community life to maintain the stamina needed to continue their work. Practically everyone at the meeting is living in a Brothers' community. In some cases they are «mixed» communities that have existed for several years, and many felt that this is part of the wave of the future. It was observed that the work is often so demanding that a special effort must be made to balance the work with absence from it. In at least one new program it was decided that all work must absolutely stop by 9:00 P.M. so that communal and personal prayer and rest can be guaranteed.

The meaning of community was examined. It was agreed that community for the Brothers and their partners in the work of serving the poor is rightly called a Lasallian community because all the members identify with the spirit of St. La Salle. This spirit is the spirit of faith, with its supplement, zeal, which implies a spirit of compassion and desire for justice. Faith for St. La Salle was seen as largely

trust in the Providence of God, an indispensable requirement for those who identify with the poor and strive to empower them and learn from them. Both faith and compassion were seen as gifts that can be received and increased by asking for them in prayer. A sense of justice was seen as indispensable to a balanced understanding of compassion.

One day was given to an examination of the spiritual journey of those who wish to be «a living expression of the Gospel.» Three aspects of this challenge were studied: how we must strive to make all of our lives possess a coherence with our service of the poor, the costs that this kind of discipleship charges on us, and what energizes us and enables us to stay with programs of service despite the difficulties encountered.

At one general discussion it was observed that the Rule makes it clear that «work with students from families that are more or less well off» is an authentic part of the Lasallian vocation, that the Rule distinguishes between direct and indirect service of the poor. It was added that the Rule also states that «The District and Regions establish a plan for the development of their apostolic works which will make the direct service of the poor more and more their effective priority.»

The third day focused on the future. It was agreed that a network would be established, including a directory of all the direct services in the U.S., a newsletter to keep everyone aware of developments in the work being done across the country, and an openness to similar programs in other countries, especially in the Americas. It was also agreed to pool knowledge and efforts at fundraising, such as sharing the names of foundations that have helped, and consolidating requests when possible; one example of this could be the establishment of a San Miguel Corporation that would unite in fundraising for similar inner city middle schools.

Plans for future meetings included a spiritual retreat next year at Sangre de Cristo, or similar site, sponsored by the National Office if possible, and a Huether Workshop, which is an annual national educational Lasallian event; in 1999 it will focus on service of the poor and social justice. Periodic meetings will also be held that will include similar representatives from other countries.

Other plans for the future include an effort to make sure we are included in the restructuring of the National Office; to integrate the direct services of the poor in a District with all the work for the poor of our Districts by extending personal invitations to all the other programs of the District to visit the programs of direct service, and, in turn, to visit ourselves the other programs; to share informative publications with the whole District; and to make it clear to everyone that all our direct services of the poor are educational programs.

An executive committee of seven participants was chosen to see that the plans for the future will be carried out. A name has been adopted for this group: Lasallian Partnership for the Economically Poor. This is quite possibly part of an authentic move to refound the Institute of St. La Salle. •