

ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE INSTITUTE (4/4)

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• Possible action for the Present

In view of the restrictive definition of membership in the Code of Canon Law now in force, it might be premature at this time to open up membership in the FSC Institute to persons who are not vowed, not only because of the canonical restrictions but also in view of the complex nature of such a move. As a step toward future possibilities, the Brothers individually or the District Chapter might want to urge the General Chapter at least to begin to study the possibility of creating a structure of Lasallian Associates, differing from any of the present alternatives: Signum Fidei, third order, Lasallian associations, and volunteers. Such a proposal would demand much study and discussion. There would be needed well-defined criteria for membership (such as participation in Lasallian formation programs, association in the specifically educational Lasallian mission, and long-term commitment expressed in some form of consecration.) There would be needed also well-defined agreement on practical matters such as participation by associates in the life of the local community, the District and the Institute; voice and vote on matters that affect the associates; the extent to which spiritual and especially material resources are shared; extent and limits of availability for mission; matters restricted to the Brothers alone and freedom for associates to pursue their options and responsibilities as lay persons, married or single.

On the District level, it might be advantageous, for those interested in such a proposal to take some preliminary steps such as the following:

- 1) Initiate a serious survey to determine how many persons in a given District might be interested in joining such an associate program; why their interest cannot be satisfied within existing structures, e.g. Signum Fidei, Volunteer Programs etc.; what their expectations might be if such a program were to be implemented.
- 2) Undertake a detailed survey of the way such programs have functioned in other institutes, especially institutes of lay religious men with a specific educational mission, if there be any such beyond the FSC.
- 3) Undertake a survey, after adequate preparation, to determine how much support there would be among the Brothers of a given District for the Institute to establish such a program; survey, as well, other sectors of the Institute to determine whether existing Lasallian associations are adequate to respond to the needs of the lay partners or whether a widespread demand for a closer relationship has emerged.
- 4) In the meantime, try to involve lay partners as much as possible in the decision-making process at the local level, in-

cluding finding a way around the legal restrictions on voting by non-delegates in the District Chapter.

Quite independently of the outcome of any such proposals, the Brothers, individually and in communities, will be forced to realize that in these new situations of wider sharing the perception of their identity as Brothers will depend largely on themselves. No longer will it be possible for a Brother to hide his inadequacies under the corporate and comfortable cover as being «one of the Brothers.» Each Brother will be challenged as never before, either alone or with one or two confreres, to bear witness to the reality of his total consecration, his commitment to his students and colleagues in the educational mission, his positive contribution to the quality of community life. Identity will depend more and more on intrinsic factors rather than on collective and juridical categories.

V. WIDER HORIZONS

Over the years, Brother John Johnston, SG, in his pastoral letters has been urging the Brothers to move from being reactive to become pro-active in the face of today's challenges within and from outside our religious life. The question now is to what extent the Institute is prepared to become pro-active within the wider church community to make it possible to seize new opportunities for effective religious living and apostolic mission that are being offered by a rediscovery of Gospel values, the Founder's charism and the signs of the times. Pro-activity demands a willingness to change or abandon traditional structures, something that at the moment, in view of the operative policy among Roman authorities, is all but impossible not only for religious life but for almost every other aspect of church life.

But this situation need not be forever. There have been moments of discontinuity in church life before and there is reason to suppose, if the guarantee of the creative gift of the Spirit means anything, that there will be such again. The question is whether a worldwide institute incarnated in a variety of cultural situations and engaged in a specifically educational mission has the flexibility and the common will to re-examine its structure in the light of the challenges and options that loom on the horizon. More concretely, the question is to what extent the Brothers, who after all are the Institute, are prepared at least to consider for the future certain ideological and structural revisions such as those listed below.

- 1) Can we shift the discussion on the nature and survival of «religious life» in apostolic institutes to a discussion of «future possibilities for structured religious living»? This would mean abandoning the definition of religious life as a fixed state, in gender homogeneous communities, identified by profession of the perpetual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Religious communities based on other premises already exist. As a fruit of the 1994 Synod on Religious Life, the Apostolic Constitution *Vita consecrata*, under the heading «New Forms of Evangelical Life» notes their existence in these words:

The originality of the new communities often consists in the fact that they are composed of mixed groups of men and women, of clerics and lay persons, of married couples and celibates, all of whom pursue a particular style of life. These communities are sometimes inspired by one or another traditional form adapted to the needs of society. Their commitment to the evangelical life also takes on different forms, while, as a general rule, they are all characterized by an intense aspiration to community life, poverty and prayer. Both clerics and lay persons share in the duties of governing

according to the responsibilities assigned to them, and the apostolate focuses on the demands of the new evangelization (62).

For traditional religious institutes such as the FSC, a variety of options present themselves. The Institute, as has been mentioned, already encourages such groups that take their inspiration from De La Salle and are dedicated to the Lasallian educational mission. But if the vitality and pro-activity is found largely in these new forms of religious living, then the question arises whether the Institute is prepared to consider more open ways of defining religious life itself and membership in it. There is also the question of what structures to retain (some structure surely is needed) to preserve the Institute's identity and missionary focus for transmission to future generations. Such considerations imply lobbying to revise and open up the present restrictions in the Code of Canon Law and in the policies of the Roman Curia.

2) Perhaps it is time once for all to abandon the language and the mindset of «evangelical counsels,» the «life (or state) of perfection,» «the consecrated life,» and to speak no longer about «vocations» solely in terms of recruiting clerics and members for religious institutes. These exclusivist expressions imply the presence of an elite group in the Christian community, a sort of Christian version of «the chosen people.» It is salutary to recall that Israel and the first Jewish converts to Christianity, including «The Twelve» apostles, were unprepared to open up the Christian message to the gentiles until the apostle Paul, inspired by his encounter with the risen Christ and the power of the Spirit, forced the issue. There may be a lesson there for the contemporary Church, with its reluctance to adapt to American, African, Asian, and feminist preoccupations, a lesson as well for religious institutes reluctant to break loose from traditional and juridical concepts of membership.

Likewise, it is a mistake to limit consecration to those bound by the vows of religion as if they alone could say «I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I am able and as you will require of me.» The language of consecration as defining religious life was much employed at the time of the 1994 Synod on religious life, leaving aside for all practical purposes the undeniable consecratory element in Christian baptism. Thus José Cristo Rey addressing the 1993 General Chapter could differentiate the Brothers as consecrated lay Christians (*christifideles laici consecrati*) from laymen and women as secular lay Christians (*christifideles laici seculares*). (See BBCS, 239.)

Yet the cooption of consecration as the distinguishing mark of the members of religious institutes was already undermined in discussions on the reality of the lay vocation in the Church. The words consecration, sacrifice, and sacrament are all rooted in the Latin word *sacra*, which means «holy» or «other» related to the holiness of God who is totally «Other,» who alone is holy. Consecration implies separation from all that is not holy, but not separation from all that participates in the holiness of God in varying degrees. The theological basis for the role of the laity is precisely the consecration in baptism and the participation in the sacramental life of the Church. Therein is the root of the call to holiness, to mission, to a *vita consecrata*, a consecrated life of «otherness» as Christians. The difficult question to be faced, as the Consecration Commission in the Institute's 39th General Chapter already realized, is to determine what it is precisely that consecration by vows adds to the more fundamental consecration rooted in baptism and the sacramental Christian life. It is interesting to remind ourselves that John Baptist de La Salle considered as consecrated all of the members of his Institute at a time when vows were optional and when many Brothers had no vows. For him, religious consecration consisted in becoming «other» by leaving the world to join an apostolic

community. (See «Consecration» in *Lasallian Themes I*, 9.)

3) Since it is the consecration by vows that does in fact distinguish members of religious institutes from other consecrated Christians, it may be time to begin anew the discussion of what the traditional vows mean in practice and whether some alternate form might better distinguish the «otherness» that constitutes religious life.

This is not to deny that the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience do in fact address fundamental problem areas in human life about which the Gospel has something to say. There is a gospel way of looking at possessions, poverty and the poor, the use or abuse of the sexual function, and the use or abuse of power and authority. And the gospel message on possessions, sex and power is addressed to anyone who wants to be called Christian. That being so, as with consecration itself, it remains to determine how effectively the vows differentiate vowed religious from other Christians without implying either privileged status in or separation from the rest of the Christian community.

There are signs that the religious themselves, especially in apostolic institutes, are beginning to question whether it is the reality of poverty, chastity (as distinct from celibacy), and obedience, that constitute the self understanding of their consecration. It is mission in its gospel sense energized in a prayerful community that seems to be emerging as the focal point of dedication and self-definition. At the same time, it must be admitted that many religious still take the vows seriously and would probably, if asked, want to maintain them even if they are not of paramount concern in their daily religious living. There are those for whom being professed «religious» with the three vows has become part of their self-identity. It may not be altogether futile, however, at least to begin to think and to dialogue about how to adjust the vow structure to take into better account the needs of today's changing Church and multicultural world, the vocation crisis, the demands of the mission, and the experience of those engaged in new forms of religious life.

4) There is no question that even to consider such proposals entails a high element of risk, especially to the identity of the Brothers. In the presently unlikely possibility that such structures would fall into place, what would be the distinctive vocation and the distinctive role of the Brother? One possibility is that the Brother as a distinct entity in an Institute of mixed membership would effectively disappear, a loss that could only be justified if compensated by a wider community sharing, a more profound experience of religious life, and a more effective mission. Another possibility, one often suggested, might be to institutionalize different classes of membership with a core of Brothers (and Sisters?) opting for celibacy and a more permanent commitment to the community and mission. To this core might be entrusted the preservation and authenticity of the Lasallian character of the total enterprise, to be «the heart, the memory and the guarantors (but not the control) of the Lasallian charism,» to use the language of the 1993 message on shared mission (BCCS, 239). The least risky possibility would be to accept the status quo, to hope against all the evidence that the present trends will somehow be reversed. But that option might ultimately involve the greatest risk of all, the risk of increasing irrelevance and ineffectiveness, the risk of ultimate disappearance altogether.

John Baptist de La Salle lived with risk all his life and faced it with faith and creativity. In his meditation for June 11, he reminded the Brothers that they were like St. Barnabas setting out to sea without oars, relying on the Spirit to arrive at an as yet unknown destination. In the uncertainties before us, the Founder would remind us to address the Lord, as he did in the words of Habakkuk, *Domine, opus tuum, Lord, the work is yours.* •