

**Brothers among themselves.
Materials for starting formation in
community life.**

Brother Josep Canal

**2. FRATERNAL LIFE ACCORDING TO
DE LA SALLE AND THE INSTITUTE**

**TO UNITE MYSELF, AND TO REMAIN IN SOCIETY,
WITH THE BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS.**

In order to speak about the type and form of community life throughout the history of the Institute, we could divide it into two stages:

1. From the time of the Founder until the Second Vatican Council.
2. From the Second Vatican Council until today.

**1. FROM THE ORIGIN OF THE INSTITUTE
UNTIL THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL.**

Before beginning our study of this topic it would be appropriate to clarify how the Founder uses the word "Community".

If we look at the study made by Brothers Toribio Gutiérrez and Alain Houry in *Lasallian Themes 3*, we can see how John Baptist de La Salle uses the words "Community", "Society", "Institute" throughout its genesis and evolution.

1679-1694: The Community of the Christian Schools.

1694-1705: The Society of the Christian Schools (the vow formula of 6 June 1694).

1705-...: The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (Common Rule).

However, during the third stage, sometimes he uses the word "Society" (50 times) or the word "Community" (6 times). Cf. Circular 410, page 49.

We can find an example of this in the letter of May 12, 1710 to Brother Gabriel Drolin, referring to the tonsure: "*You know, of course, that that is contrary to our Community practice*" (Letter 28, line 24).

When speaking of the local community the Founder uses words such as "house" and "community." For example, referring to the rosary: "*If some Brother is prevented from praying it with the community, he will pray it at some other time*" (Common Rule, 1718, chapter IV, 11). "*Those who are in charge of the governance of each house shall be called directors*" (Common Rule, 1718, chapter XII, 1).

After this brief introduction, how did John Baptist de La Salle understand the life of the Community?

In the Explanation for the Method of making Mental Prayer, without referring explicitly to the community, De La Salle, explaining the second way of putting oneself in the presence of God, invites us to discover it in the midst of those who are gathered together in his name, God present in the midst of the Brothers:

- to give them the Holy Spirit;
- to remain united among themselves;
- to teach the virtues and maxims of the Gospel and to practice them uniformly in his Institute;

– to direct its actions to Christ. United to Him as shoots to the vine.

And so it is the presence of God, the Holy Spirit, which constitutes the Community.

De La Salle wanted there to be authentic union among the Brothers in the communities, the same as is mentioned in Acts 4:32: "*They were of one heart and soul*". The Founder urges the Brothers to live out this union. "*Since God has given you the grace of calling you to live in community, there is nothing that you should more earnestly ask of him than this union of heart and mind with your Brothers. Only by means of this union will you acquire that peace which ought to be all the joy of your life*" (Meditation 39.3).

This is a valuable paragraph in which De La Salle allows each Brother to catch a glimpse of the God so that his vocation is not lived out alone, but in community, sharing the lifestyle that the Brothers have chosen. Communities are not chosen but they are presented by God, by his grace. De La Salle advocates the happiness of the Brothers and from this the union in community life is born.

What means does the Founder propose for community life?

a. Throughout an attentive reading of the Common Rules and of the Rule of the Brother Director, the Founder presents a lifestyle which is very minutely structured with a whole series of rules, instructions and events which the Brothers must observe. Much importance is given to regularity. "*Regularity is the first support of the Communities*" (Common Rule XVI, 3). To the controversial Brother Matthias he says: "*You must be faithful to the Rule and ready to obey*" (Letter 63.7). "*Make serious efforts to become faithful to the Rule*" (Meditation 72.1).

b. Charity is one of the main elements that should exist in all communities. Meditation 65 offers a wonderful reflection on this virtue.

c. One essential element of De La Salle, as a binding element and fundamental of the community is obedience. Renunciation of self and seeing to it that obedience is the "*characteristic of persons*" (Meditation 7.3). "*Obedience is the most necessary of virtues required for life in a community*" (Meditation 7.2).

d. De La Salle proposes an intense community life, where the Brothers do all things in common: sleeping, meals, recreation, exercises...including even warming themselves up around the same stove (Cf. Common Rule, chapter III).

e. Fraternal correction, as it was called in those days, the advertisement of defects, was a practice held on every Friday (Common Rule, chapter V, 9). De La Salle considers this as one of the exterior supports of the Institute (Common Rule, chapter XVI, 8).

f. Accompaniment on the part of the Brother Director, now present in the thought of John Baptist de La Salle, took priority over any other exercise, except prayer. The meeting with the Brother Director was held weekly. (Cf. Common Rule, chapter V, 14-15; Rule of the Brother Director 32).

g. De La Salle is plainly conscious of the fact that communities are made up of human persons; and that living together is full of friction among persons and that one must know how to live with charity and respect towards the Brothers. "*It is impossible for several persons living together not to have to suffer from one another. One will have a touchy disposition, another will have a contrary spirit, another bad manners, another will be disagreeable, another will be too prone to give in, another will say what he thinks too quickly, another will be too reserved and secretive, another will be too critical. It is rare that all these various dispositions and all these different spirits do not cause difficulties among the Brothers. The way to maintain union in a community in spite of all these different personalities is to bear up charitably with the defects of each other, to be ready to make allowances for others just as we want others to make allowances for us*" (Meditation 74.1). "*It is not possible for two people to live together without causing suffering to one another in some way or other*" (Meditation 73.2).

Throughout all of Meditation 76 he presents us with a complete list of the possible attitudes of Brothers.

h. De La Salle opted to call members of this Institute by

the name of Brother (Common Rule I, 1) and he did not want there to be differences of any kind between them. *"The first reason why there is sometimes little union in a community is that some wish to place themselves above others on the basis of some human reasoning...Our Lord says that the one who believes himself to be the greatest among you, or who really is, must even consider himself and look upon himself as the least of all"* (Meditation 91.2).

De La Salle proposes the Brother Director as the one responsible for the life of the Community (Common Rule XII, 1); it is in him that the Brothers are to discover the will of God (Common Rule XII, 3; Meditation 91.1) and direct themselves to him in this regard (Common Rule MI from 4-14).

On the other hand he writes a Rule containing 79 points for the Brother Director. The Brother Director has as part of his responsibility the life of the Community and the school entrusted to him. His duty to his Brothers is to *"make progress in virtue"* (Rule of the Brother Director 1).

1. De La Salle also is solicitous of the young persons in the community. To Brother Denis, referring to recreation, he comments: *"It seems that you spend the time of recreation with Brother Claude while you leave the two young Brothers to make theirs together by themselves. This is very bad"* (Letter 3.17).

So then, to conclude this section let us recall what De La Salle tells us in Meditation 91.2. This occurs during the final two days of the year when he proposes that the Brothers review their lives with regard to the Superiors, Brothers and students: ***"Union in community is a precious gem"***

2. FROM THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL UNTIL TODAY.

With the Second Vatican Council the Church puts forward a "bringing up-to-date", an "aggiornamento". Religious Life also is to receive a new breath of life. Our Institute, in its 39th General Chapter of 1966, revised the Rule; the Rule of 1947 was abrogated, based as it was primarily on the very one which the Founder wrote.

With the new Rule, the definitive version coming in 1987, and with the "Declaration of the Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today", the lifestyle in the Brothers' communities underwent a change.

The Declaration fostered a renewal in the Brother's life in all aspects, including fraternal life, a topic which we would like to develop, a renewal which ought to be based faithfully on the charism of the Founder, and one which is always attentive to the signs of the times.

Left behind was a type of fraternal life based on the blind observance of regularity suggested by the previous Rule. The Declaration suggests that community ought to be the space where *"the Brother can find his personal fulfillment according to the divine plan"* (D 20.2).

Community discernment is the means by which all members of a community are responsible for its functioning. *"In community the Brothers gather together to listen to God. They help each other to be attentive to the challenges that the Lord addresses to them"* (D 20.5). The meeting and sharing among the Brothers is something that will from now on be posed with more and more insistence. *"Community dialogue in all its forms emerges as a privileged instrument of individual conversion and fraternal union"* (D 20.8).

Before, the Rule was that which gave structure to community life; now we find a new element: the community program (Article 128 of the Book of Government). In April, 1979, the General Council drew up Circular 410 in which it presented a study of community life within the Institute. In the Circular there is information about the topic presented in the 1976 General Chapter, where it was seen how the Institute had undergone a change in lifestyle some ten years after the renewal initiated by the Second Vatican Council.

In summary, in this period it is seen that there is a new way of living in community; and there is a change in the life of prayer. All change brings with it its successes (better relationships among the Brothers) and its faults (some -without wishing to generalize- lifestyles a bit solitary; a decline in the level of prayer...) The Circular makes a complete commen-

tary about this capitular information, emphasizing a desire to creatively renew the prayer of the Brothers and offer a stimulus concerning community meetings, the Community Annual Program. (It even presents various models).

So, the Institute advances until 1986 arrives. Twenty years after the appearance of the new Rule, the Chapter draws up some definitive rules, where community life has a vital importance. The entire fourth chapter is devoted to this. An attentive reading of this chapter shows us the authentic and pleasant definition of how the Brothers' community life should be: the life of prayer, fraternal life, apostolic finality, organization of the community life...

And it presents a new element: "The Personal Program". With this program, the Brother "in order to respond in faith" will determine *"the decisions to be taken in response to questions concerning either the life of the community or its mission"* (Rule 58) according to *"his own spiritual growth, as well as the needs of the community and the programs of the District"* (Rule 58b).

The Rule also invites the Brother to share his Personal Program with others, so that in community all might be helped.

In 1992 Brother Superior General John Johnston, in his pastoral letter at the beginning of the year "Our Community Life", thoroughly discusses community life, on the eve of the 42nd General Chapter.

In this letter, faced with the new challenge of shared mission, the Superior shows us that the community must be prepared. Religious community, within all the levels that make up the educational community, has to *"at all costs avoid a confusion of identity and roles. What we need today is (...) to develop and foster a variety of structural forms whereby the laity can participate actively in our Lasallian educational mission"* (Superior's pastoral letter of January, 1992, page 21).

The role of the community has also changed in the past 20 years, in terms of the apostolate. The Superior reminds us that even in the Declaration we can read that the Brothers' community is the *"soul of the school institution"*, quoted by the Superior on page 30. Now we have passed to *"the community sharing in the animation of the institutions in which it is involved"* (Rule 51a). So now we can find communities of Brothers connected to Institutions which depend on the District, communities of Brothers that collaborate with other institutions, and communities of retired Brothers who also have their ministry: *"they exercise their apostolic mission primarily through prayer and suffering"* (Superior's Jan. '92 letter, page 30).

In that letter, Brother John invites the Brothers to be "proactive" members of their communities. Each Brother is responsible for the good running of the community. In a community made up of human persons there are many problems that can occur, but one must know how to accept them normally and with maturity, *"that is to say, to elegantly adapt oneself to the inevitable"* (Letter, page 40) and be proactive.

Citing an American author, Stephen Covey, Brother Superior helps us to see the parallel between being proactive and the Founder's Meditation number 65.

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| Proactive persons make love a verb. Love is something you do, (...) Proactive people subordinate feelings to values. (Stephen Covey, the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People). | A Community without charity and union is hell...the only remedy for all these disorders is union and charity (Meditation 65). |
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We can conclude this section remembering some points from our Rule:

* The distinctive character of the Brothers' community is to be a community where the experience of God is shared (Rule 48).

* The visibility of the community ought to constitute one aspect of their witness to the Gospel (Rule 51b).

* *The Brothers are determined with one spirit to be brothers among themselves, brothers to the adults they deal with, and older brothers to the young people confided to their care* (Rule 53). •