
PASTORAL LETTER – JANUARY 1987

**PEACE – IDENTITY–
CONVERSION**

1 January 1987
Feast of Mary, Mother of God
World Day of Peace

Dear Brothers:

"May God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ send you grace and peace." (1 Cor 1: 3)

I begin this letter with the prayer some past Superiors General have used to introduce their letters and circulars. My decision to follow their example and, of course, that of St. Paul is not a gesture of blind fidelity to tradition, but is rather an expression of my deep desire and earnest prayer that the Lord send you grace and peace, particularly NOW at this present moment I write these words.

Part I: PEACE

Peace can be defined in many ways. I am thinking at this moment not so much of that peace which is the absence of conflict, violence, and the absence even of tension, difficulties,

and problems. I am thinking rather of that interior state of mind and heart that enables us to live with meaning and tranquility, regardless of the turmoil that exists around us. I am thinking of that internal peace Paul had in mind when he wrote:

"If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble do it, or hardship or persecution or hunger or poverty or danger or death? No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who saved us! For I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly *Rulers* or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below—there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:31, 35–39)

Brothers, my "deep desire and earnest prayer" that you experience the peace of Christ throughout this new year is far from,, a routine greeting appropriate for the season. It is on the contrary a conscious and concrete response to that absence of profound peace which, I sense, a certain number of us experience today.

If my judgment is correct, some of us are fearful, fearful of what is today and what might be tomorrow; others of us are discouraged, even to the point of an almost passive resignation to trends and situations that are negative in character. Still others seem to me to be disillusioned, or angry; a few of us, I sense, harbor a bitterness that gnaws at us constantly and surfaces periodically in comments or behavior that are far from helpful or constructive.

All of this reveals an absence of peace. Brothers, when I pray that the Lord bless you with his grace and peace, I am praying that the Lord fill you with an awareness in faith of his loving and abiding presence, with a profound conviction that the Lord is with us, with the gift of being able to "walk with the Lord" and "to live in fellowship with him." God is with us, Brothers: He has not abandoned the Institute. To be men of hope and peace is to live

with that conviction. It is to believe that the Institute and its revitalization is God's work, not ours. That belief is not an invitation to complacency or to a naive blindness to the problems that exist, a naive blindness that often masquerades as optimism or even as Christian hope.

Men of Hope and Peace

If we are men of hope and peace, we live in the "real world," the only world that exists. It is a world that has experienced and is experiencing dramatic change: in society, in the life of the Church, in the role of religious men and women, in the role of the laity. If we Brothers are men of hope and peace, we live in this world calmly but energetically. Calmly, because we are convinced that the profound changes that have occurred in the evolution of the Institute, that are occurring today, and that will occur tomorrow, are all part of God's plan, whether or not we understand clearly what is happening. Energetically, because we are convinced that the Lord wants us, as Augustine said, "to pray as if all depended on him and to work as if all depended on us."

What the Lord wants of us, Brothers, is that we live as men convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ; men who say YES to what is rather than dream nostalgically of what was or fantasize on what could be; as men who prefer "to light a candle rather than curse the darkness," that is to say, as men who are prepared to ACT, men who are prepared to DO SOMETHING and to do it creatively, concretely, and constructively. In this way our Institute can serve the Lord—today and tomorrow—more authentically and more effectively.

Part II: IDENTITY: OUR NEW RULE

In Circular 423 we informed you that we had received, in a remarkably short time, the initial observations and comments of the Congregation for Religious on the text of the Rule voted by the capitulants of the 41st General Chapter.

In that circular we quoted the first paragraph of the letter of Archbishop Vincenzo Fagiolo, Secretary of the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, a letter dated July 22, 1986. Because I think this paragraph has considerable significance, I want to repeat it:

“The consultors greatly appreciated the ecclesial spirit and the Will to be faithful to the Holy Founder which is evident in the project of the Constitutions. The accent is very happily placed on the educative mission of the Institute, adapted to the conditions and exigencies of the world today in a concern for evangelization and the promotion of human dignity. The writers deserve to be congratulated for the spiritual principles contained in the text.”

As I mentioned in Circular 423 there followed a series of observations, nearly all of which were of a juridical nature, concerning a number of articles. Some asked us to make more explicit what is now implicit. In only a few instances were substantive changes requested. Approximately half of the comments were requests to transfer material from the statutes to the constitutions.

After the return of the councillors in early September the Superior and General Council, aided by Brother Felix, Procurator General, and Brother Maurice Hermans, former Procurator General, formulated their response to the observations of the Congregation. This was submitted to the Congregation on October 10, 1986.

On November 17, 1986, Archbishop Fagiolo wrote the following:

"I am happy to inform you that the Congresso of the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, in its session of November 8, 1986, pronounced in favor of the approbation of the Constitutions of your Institute, provided that certain modifications indicated below are made.

"The members of the Congresso have appreciated the manner in which the Constitutions present the vocation and the mission of

the Brothers. As you will see, their observations concern especially the passage to the Constitutions of various Canonical points, and the questions which you posed following the remarks of the consultors."

After some observations of a technical nature concerning the references to be contained in the margins, the Archbishop concludes by inviting us to submit two copies of the document, duly modified, in view of the Decree of Approbation.

In general we were pleased with the response of the Congresso to our report of October 10. On all the substantive issues raised by the consultors, the Congresso accepted our responses and withdrew the request for change. Some of our responses concerning the wording of certain articles were accepted, others not accepted. Some new requests were made by the Congresso, but none were in direct conflict with the mind and spirit of the Chapter.

The transfer of articles from statutes to constitutions is quite another matter, however. Although we had argued against the transfer in a number of instances, the Congresso maintained the position of the consultors and even made new requests for transfer. While the placement of articles is certainly not a matter of consequence for most Brothers, I know that some capitulants will be disappointed. Nevertheless, we have had to admit that the Congresso was consistent in applying its criteria.

In justifying these requests for transfer, Archbishop Fagiolo called to our attention Canon 587, §1, which indicates that the constitutions (and not the statutes) must contain not only the spiritual elements characteristic of the Institute and the other elements which constitute its heritage, but also the "fundamental norms about the governance of the Institute and the discipline of its members, the incorporation and formation of members, and the proper object of sacred bonds."

It is this Canon, therefore, that the Congregation uses in establishing its criteria for determining which articles must be

expressed as constitutions, as opposed to statutes. I think it is safe to say that the criteria used by the capitulants were not the same. If I am correct, the prevailing view in the Chapter was to limit the Constitutions to matters of considerable importance or to expressions of general principles and major orientations. The hope of a number of capitulants was to keep the number of constitutions to a reasonable minimum. Clearly the criteria of the Congregation are not the same.

We have completed our responses to the requests of the Congresso. The text, as we have revised it, complete with references in the margin, is in the final stages of preparation as I write these words and will soon be presented to the Congregation. While I am confident that most of our responses will be accepted, there will likely be some last minute matters for discussion. But I think it is safe to say that our new Rule, fully approved, will be in the hands of the Brothers before the end of 1987.

Brothers, we have every reason to be proud of our new Rule. The judgment of the Congregation for Religious on its substance, as is evident in the quotations from Archbishop Fagiolo cited above, gives authoritative support to my own appreciation of our text and that of numerous Brothers who have expressed their opinions. The Rule is a superb expression of "the nature, purpose, spirit and character of the Institute." (Canon 578) As attested by Archbishop Fagiolo on behalf of the Congregation for Religious, the Rule is at one and the same time an expression of "fidelity to the present moment of history and fidelity to the Founder." (*Declaration 6*)

To understand the significance of what has accomplished, it is helpful to reflect on a paragraph of paramount importance in the Declaration:

"St. John Baptist de La Salle founded a living community of Brothers with whom he shared his apostolic ideal and who in turn passed on this ideal to their successors. Fidelity to the specific intentions of the Founder and to

the tradition of the Institute is confided to us as living men. It is we who carry on the task of discovering how fidelity to his charism can be lived in the present time.”

(Declaration 7)

For some twenty-five years, "we" have been engaged in this task of discovering what fidelity to the intentions of the Founder means for us today. Literally thousands of Brothers have participated actively in this prayerful search and in the progressive expressions of who we believe the lord wants us to be and what it is he wants us to do. But certain Brothers have worked competently and devotedly in a more direct manner in the production of our new Rule. At a later date we shall express our gratitude to them in an appropriate way. For now I limit myself to a simple but sincere "THANK YOU!" to all those who played a part in this great community effort.

BUT...

...having made all these explanatory and laudatory comments concerning our new Rule, and without any intention of diluting what I have said, I must now ask the question, "So what?" Yes, we have a beautiful text. But it is no more or no less than a text. As Brother Charles Henry said in his introduction to the Declaration:

"A document of the Chapter, or even the General Chapter itself, must not be confused with the adapted renewal of the Institute. This renewal is something yet to be realized, and its effective realization is confided to the common effort of all the members of the Institute."

The capitulants of the 41st General Chapter were keenly aware of the truth of those words. It was that awareness that led them to call the Institute to CONVERSION.

Part III: THE MESSAGE: A CALL TO CONVERSION

"As the Body of the Institute, we your Brother Capitulants, send out an urgent CALL TO CONVERSION—a conversion which will come about through both personal spiritual renewal and through a refounding of our mission."

The nine-page Message of the Chapter to the Brothers, the heart of which is the passage cited above, was published in Circular 422 shortly after the end of the Chapter. Some regions and Districts have circulated their own publications of this important document. I hope you are already familiar with it. More than that, I hope you are making it a frequent source of reflection, evaluation, and resolution in both your personal and community life.

It is not my purpose to analyze the document or to comment on all its aspects. It is rather my intent to reflect with you on the context in which it was composed and on some of its major themes.

As I have meditated on the Message and discussed it with many communities of the Brothers, particularly during our recent visit to five countries in Africa, I have become increasingly aware that in formulating this statement, the capitulants were following, consciously or unconsciously, the "itinerary" of St. John Baptist de La Salle.

We know very well the origins of our Institute. We know how De La. Salle responded positively to a request for help in organizing a free Christian school for the children of the poor and of artisans. This request was followed by another, then another. Very early De La Salle became convinced that if the schools were to be effective in realizing their objectives, the teachers had to be "certain kinds of persons." He began the process of forming them, a process which led, imperceptibly but surely, to the foundation of our Institute.

Our founder was profoundly convinced of the link between the finality of the Institute and the spirit of its members. Reflections on this dynamic relationship permeate his writings. This passage from the Collection is typical of many in his meditations:

"Since the object of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is to educate children in the spirit of Christianity, and to endeavor to procure them that spirit, it is of the utmost importance that the Brothers be so imbued, and so abundantly filled, with the spirit of faith, that they shall regard the sentiments and maxims of faith as Rule of their actions and of their whole conduct, and the spirit of faith as the spirit of their Institute."

He captured this link in the early Rule. He began with a chapter on the nature and purpose of the Institute and followed it with the chapter on the spirit of the Institute. But De La Salle did far more than link finality and spirit in texts and documents. The major decisions and orientations of the early institute, as well as De La Salle's direction of the Brothers, reveal in unambiguous fashion that De La Salle was a pioneer in developing what we call today apostolic spirituality. He anticipated by over two hundred and fifty years this important teaching of Vatican II:

"In such communities (those devoted to various aspects of the apostolate) the very nature of the religious life requires apostolic action and services . . . Hence the entire religious life of the members . . . should be penetrated by an apostolic spirit, as their entire apostolic activity should be animated by a religious spirit. Therefore, in order that members may above all respond to their vocation of following Christ and may serve Christ himself in his members, their apostolic activity should result from an intimate union with him. In this way it will happen that love for God and neighbor will itself be nurtured." (*Perfectate Caritatis* §8)

I think the capitulants to the 41st General Chapter arrived at the Chapter with the conviction that they had to do more than produce the new Rule, however important that task may be. From the very first days of the Chapter, it was evident that the capitulants were uneasy, disturbed even, about the state of the

Institute. They were not blind to the immense amount of good being done and of the quality of life of many Brothers; but they were keenly aware also that despite the Rule of 1967, the Declaration, the Rule of 1976, the letters and circulars of Superiors General and Councils, the "adapted renewal" of which Brother Charles Henry spoke is far from being realized.

During the first week of the Chapter, during which small groups reflected on the major issues facing the Institute and on the responses the Chapter should make; it became clear that a strong consensus was emerging: that consensus was that in addition to articulating clearly and unambiguously who it is we are called to be and what it is we are called to do (the Rule), this chapter had to challenge the Brothers to BE the people God wants us to be; the chapter had to call the Brothers to CONVERSION, to a spiritual transformation.

This conversion, this spiritual transformation, must take place in and in relation to what I called earlier the "real world." Certainly there are many positive things we can say about our world today, but these positive things coexist with what can only be described as evil and sin: the loss of a religious sense, the majority of the world's population living in poverty, and often destitution; hungry and starving people and the lack of resolve to remedy the situation; homeless people not only in poor countries but also in affluent countries such as my own; the threat of nuclear annihilation; the arms race and arms sales; the debt crisis; crime; drugs and drug trafficking; rampant consumerism; the ever increasing divorce rate; racism; abortion; sexual permissiveness; political corruption; sectarian violence; war.

The Message calls us to BE Brothers of the Christian Schools in and in relation to this world. It calls us to let go of whatever is holding us back and to follow Christ without reserve and without looking back. The Chapter Message is therefore rooted in the biblical notion of conversion.

"Jesus began to preach his message: 'Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!' (Matthew 4:17)

A contemporary author (Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*) suggests that conversion begins with repentance, which he defines as facing our sins honestly and turning away from them. It involves "letting go" of certain old habits and values. Conversion, however, involves a second decisive step: that of "turning around" and moving off in another direction, a new direction. It involves a radical change of heart, a decision to leave our "nets, our boats and our fathers" and to follow Christ (Matthew 4: 18–21) without compromise, wherever he goes (Luke 9:57–62).

Conversion in the scriptures involves a "change of lords," a turning away from false gods and a turning around to the one true God. The biblical call to conversion impels us to confront honestly the question: who or what are our gods? What are the things that are most important to us, that motivate us, that determine our priorities? Are there values and habits we must abandon if we are to follow the Lord with the fidelity our public consecration demands of us ?

With this background, Brothers, let us reflect briefly on some of the elements involved in the conversion the Chapter asks of us. It is not my purpose at this time to develop any of these elements in depth, but rather to focus on one or two dimensions only.

The Call to Be Men of Faith

We have to ask ourselves, Brothers, if we are really "men of God," if we have a sense of God about us, if we live in relation to the Father who loves us and calls us in the here and now to BE Brothers, to the Son who asks us to be his loving and saving presence to youth, to the Spirit whose guidance enables us to live as men of faith.

If we are men of faith, we see things as God sees them, we judge in the light of the gospel, we live as the men of God we profess to be. I find it necessary to ask myself if I am a man of God or a man of the "world." We cannot serve both God and mammon. I am increasingly struck by our Founder's parting

words, his plea that we guard against becoming men of the world: there is the danger that we "shall acquire rich tastes and shall no longer be able to refrain from applauding the language of the rich, however pernicious it may be." Do we "applaud the language of the rich, the powerful, the prestigious? Are we perhaps too much "at home" in the world? We are called to be Brothers in the world and in relation to the world. But to be "at home" in that world, to be "worldly" is quite another matter.

The most fundamental question we have to ask ourselves is, are we really "religious" people? It is our vocation as consecrated men to bear witness in the contemporary, secularized world to the absolute primacy of the Kingdom of God over every other value (John Futrell). Do we bear such witness? Are there not things we ought to turn away from? Do we not have to turn around and move in a new direction?

The Call to Be Men of Prayer

The Message encourages us to renew our practice of personal prayer, of meditative prayer. De La Salle insisted that meditative prayer is the first and most important of our daily exercises. We have already recalled his preamble to the chapter on the Spirit of the Institute in the *Collection*, in which he reminds us that since we are called to educate children in the spirit of Christianity, it is of the utmost importance that we be abundantly filled with that spirit ourselves. For De La Salle, daily contact with the Lord in meditative prayer is the key for growing in faith.

Meditative prayer for De La Salle is contact with the Lord: the presence of God is at the heart of his spiritual teaching. It is loving conversation with the Lord, with many, few, or no thoughts or words at all—as we wish. It is "being with," far more than "thinking about." He insisted that the Brothers resist the temptation to reason excessively during their prayer. To help them learn to converse with the Lord, he taught them to express themselves in acts of affection. Furthermore he insisted that their prayer be linked with daily reality, bringing to the Lord the

problems they experienced in their ministry, leaving their prayer with a firm resolution to serve the Lord with greater love and fidelity.

Is there not need for conversion in this regard? Is personal contact, with the Lord in daily prayer a value for me? Do I need to "turn around" and move in a new direction?

And what of our community Eucharist and prayer? Is it substantive, both as regards to quantity and quality? Is our Eucharist and community prayer a communal encounter with the Lord? Is it linked to our daily life? Is it the occasion for a sharing of our faith, through petitions, reflections on the Word of God, or praying aloud?

Our new Rule says that "ordinarily the Brothers give to God at least two hours of each day in meditative prayer, the Eucharist, community vocal prayer, personal prayer and spiritual reading." That is not asking too much. If we are to bear witness to the primacy of the Kingdom of God and to evangelize our young people by word and example, we have to be men of prayer.

The Call to Be Men of Zeal

Our call is to total commitment to announcing the gospel to the young—always by example, to the extent possible by word—especially to the young who are poor, helping them to find meaning and significance in their faith and to commit themselves to the Lord as Christians

The message insists on our role as evangelizers, which is far more than our role as good professionals. It insists also that the school be a place of evangelization. The message states with equal force that we must move more decisively towards the direct service of the poor, at home as well as abroad, reminding us that "commitment to the missions is an essential element of our vocation as Brothers."

There is no doubt that considerable progress has been made in many sectors of the Institute in recent years in strengthening the Christian dimension of our schools: their "tone," the quality of their catechetical programs, the quality of their pastoral service of youth. Furthermore there has been an ever-increasing sensitivity to our call to serve the poor by preference. Many creative and effective initiatives have been taken. Programs that are both available to the poor and adapted to their particular needs continue to appear each year.

Nevertheless much remains to be done. The Message declares that authentic renewal of the Institute involves a "genuine return to our origins." We were founded, the Message says, to respond to precise needs, the needs of youth, poor youth especially, for a human and Christian education. Returning to our origins, therefore, requires us to intensify our efforts to render our school or other apostolic activity truly effective in responding to the needs of contemporary youth for a human and Christian education. This requires us to meet young people where they are and to create catechetical, pastoral, and educational programs that are effective. It requires us to do all within our power to render our service available to youth who are poor.

Returning to our origins, says the Message, "calls for a transformation and conversion of our works. We as a Chapter recognize this fact. In a prophetic yet realistic way, we must draw the necessary conclusions."

Prophetic yet realistic.

Prophetic in the sense of authenticity and decisiveness. Realistic in the sense that the way we choose must take into account the actual situation in precise countries and precise Districts and sectors. The message says that "we" must draw the necessary conclusions. That "we" refers to the Brothers on the level of the region and District. It is imperative that every region and District clarify its apostolic objectives and determine its own priorities. It is the Districts and sectors which must decide which institutions

to maintain and strengthen, which to turn over to others, what new projects to undertake, etc. It is the Districts and sectors which must make concrete decisions with regard to the most effective use of personnel.

I do not exaggerate the importance, urgency even, of District planning and District decision-making. In too many instances, Districts and sectors are existing on decisions taken years ago. Many of those decisions were dynamic and courageous when they were made. Our times today demand the same level of faith, courage, creativity, and dynamism. I am not suggesting recklessness. Realism, prudence, and Christian charity must guide us. But I am suggesting decisive action. I am suggesting an end to the paralysis that has stricken a certain number of regions and Districts and an end to a conscious or unconscious commitment to the "status quo" as a haven of security.

The Districts and other sectors must have clear goals and objectives and precise programs by which to pursue those goals and to realize those objectives. As said above, the Districts and other sectors must determine the most effective deployment of the Brothers .

Apostolic obedience

But such planning is totally dependent on the availability of the Brothers to respond where needed. It is dependent on apostolic obedience. The heart of obedience in an apostolic institute is availability for mission. De La Salle and the early Brothers were keenly aware of this truth, which is why they incorporated in their formula of consecration the promise to go wherever they may be sent and to do whatever they may be assigned by the body of the Institute or by its Superiors.

We have made the same profession—and we renew it each time we renew our consecration. Do we really mean it? Without intending to be sarcastic, I must say that I have the impression at times that some of us have turned that commitment completely around. Instead of being .at the disposition of the Institute—to go

wherever and to do whatever the mission of the Institute requires—we suppose that the Institute is at our disposition, permitting us to go wherever we wish (which often means remaining permanently where we are!) and doing whatever we wish. Where such an inversion has occurred, CONVERSION, in the sense of turning around and moving in a new direction, is clearly called for.

We have agreed, Brothers, to live as members of an international body. We have agreed to work together and by association. In practice this means we agree to implement, in a structured and coordinated manner, a District plan which we make our own. Certainly we have the right and even the duty to make known our interests, preferences, and judgment relative to our suitability for specific tasks. Certainly also we can and should bring initiatives for new possibilities to the Visitor and District Council. What matters is that we are available, available to be challenged and to consider seriously the needs of the District and even the Institute internationally. The bottom line is that the Visitor has the last word, which is far more than a formalistic rubber stamp. The Visitor must, of course, exercise his responsibility with extraordinary sensitivity, concern and with utmost respect for the human person. There must be extensive dialogue and a mutual search for God's will. But the Visitor, in the name of the Institute which ends the Brother on his mission, makes the final decision.

The call to be men of zeal means, therefore, Brothers, that we make "our own" Chapter 2 of our new Rule: "The Mission of the Institute." More than that it means that we make ourselves available for the realization of that mission which the Lord has confided to our Institute

The Call to Association and Interdependence

Brothers, the living of our spirit of zeal is rooted in our commitment to "work together and by association." This commitment to one another has been made freely. It is built on

mutual trust and self-sacrifice. Our association as persons lovingly and freely committed to the same ideal enables us to serve the Lord and his Church with power—legitimate power—a power to do really worthwhile and significant things.

During the lifetime of the Founder, our Brothers made vows of association, stability, and obedience. The vow of association, professed not as an end in itself but in view of maintaining together gratuitous schools can be called, in a sense, a “vow of identity.” It expressed to the Brothers themselves, as well" as to others, who they were: men totally consecrated to God, procuring his glory by uniting themselves, and remaining so, working together to maintain by association the gratuitous schools.

This association was not just an informal and loosely structured group. It had “teeth.” To render its implications more explicit and unambiguous, the Brothers professed a vow of obedience, expressing their willingness, as we have seen, to go anywhere and to do whatever they were asked, in accord with their *Rules*. In addition they made a vow of stability, indicating their determination to persevere, no matter what. The intent of the vow of stability is indicated dramatically in the heroic vow of De La Salle, Nicolas Vuyart, and Gabriel Drolin to be faithful even if obliged to subsist on bread and alms. (See "History of the Vows" Circular 406, pp. 53–73)

Our Fourth Vow

To attempt to capture, at least partially, the spirit of the original vow of association, the 23 capitulants to the 41st General Chapter renamed our fourth vow (called since 1967 "the vow of service of the poor through education"). It is now called the vow of "association for the service of the poor through education." (See Chapter 3 of the new Rule) In rendering this fundamental notion of association more explicit, the Chapter wanted to contribute to a strengthening and deepening of our self-understanding and of our commitment as consecrated men associated for mission.

Interdependence

Furthermore, the Chapter introduced into our Institute vocabulary the word "interdependence." The meaning is immediately clear, which perhaps explains why the term was so quickly accepted by the capitulants. We are not a "federation" of either independent or dependent units. We are Brothers in association, living in relation to one another. I use that word "living" deliberately. Interdependence is the lived expression of association. It involves far more than "carrying a membership card." It is a mutual commitment, requiring us to know one another and to be disposed to live as brothers, sharing our personnel, our finances, and even to make ourselves available for service in areas with special needs.

The Region

Association and interdependence are lived on the level of the region and on the level of the District. We are still learning what it means to live as a region. Experiences vary considerably because of markedly different circumstances. Nevertheless, Brothers are gradually coming to appreciate the value of working in coordination and collaboration and are beginning to experience the "unity of heart and mind" and the "added vitality" that come "from acting together." (*Rule*, Chapter 9)

The District

Association and interdependence are lived on the level of the District, Sub-District, and Delegation. I have spoken already of the necessity of planning, which process is a manifestation of working "together and by association." Our Rule expresses beautifully the spirit of our association on the level of the District:

As the ordinary expression of communion among the communities and the Brothers who compose it, the District is more than a structure of government. It manifests and fosters the fraternal union which enables all, communities and Brothers

alike, to assist each other in sharing their common responsibility for their life and their apostolic work. (*Rule*, Chapter 9)

Our Community Life

It is obviously on the level of community that our association is lived most intensely. Although community life is implied throughout the Message, and you will find some explicit references to it, there is no development of the notion of community. Nevertheless, because I am convinced that we must reflect on our community life in the context of our call to conversion, I offer these paragraphs.

From everything that has been said so far, it is clear that our communities must be at one and the same time communities of evangelizers and evangelizing communities. Both dimensions are essential. The new Rule develops the two aspects very successfully, in my opinion. I would also call your attention to Part 2 of Circular 415, entitled "The Brothers' Community Life."

Our life together

I shall limit myself to one thought: our call is to create communities of evangelizers and evangelizing communities; our call is to create real communities.

The FSC community is far more than a "task force" or "work team." It is a community with a mission. At the same time it is far more than a "refueling stop!" I must admit that I have the impression that at times some of us perceive our communities as "service stations" along the "highway" of our daily life—stations at which our needs for food, shelter, and clothing are satisfied. Forgive me if that sounds sarcastic. I don't mean it as such and I know the remark is exaggerated. Nevertheless, I think that all too often, many of our communities fail to give life together real priority.

"The community is for the Brothers their home. It is there they live together. It is there that they experience each day anew the

friendship, the esteem, the trust and the respect that they have for one another. . . . They enjoy sharing their meals, their periods of recreations, and the various services that are called for by a life together. By their active presence and by their sensitivity to one another's needs, the Brothers assure the solidarity of the community. " (New Rule, Chapter 4)

We need to ask ourselves, Brothers, if we are really living community life. The key to living well our life of community and apostolic activities is balance. The Founder and early Brothers labored many years to create a Rule which provided proper balance in the life of the early Brothers. It is not surprising to see the emphasis the Founder placed on regularity. It was through exact observance of the Rule that the Brother maintained the proper balance among all the various demands made upon him. Given the international character of the Institute today and the diversity of work, no such uniform program and timetable is feasible or even desirable. The prescriptions of the Rule are clear, however, and provide the necessary guidelines and orientations for the community to establish its own community program.

Fidelity to the community program

When that program has been established, the Brothers of the community must make it their own:

"Once the program is agreed upon and submitted to the Brother Visitor for approval, the Brothers are then committed to it. It serves during the year as the basis for both personal and community evaluation . . ." (New Rule, Chapter 4)

Brothers, I think many of us "do not find time for community" because of lack of personal discipline. Despite good intentions,

". . . we sometimes lack the organization and strength to order our day in such a way as to satisfy the requirements both of our community life and of our apostolic responsibilities. In effect, we have too great a facility for rationalization, thus justifying our

absence from community activities." (Circular 415, p. 38)

Related to the question of organization and personal discipline is that of overwork. At times overwork can be necessary and justified. But frequent overwork is an indication that certain tasks must be delegated or simply eliminated. The starting point in correcting the habit of overwork, particularly when it is used to justify lack of regular participation in community life and activities, is to admit that it is a vice, not a virtue. As long as we continue thinking in our "heart of hearts" that overwork is a virtue and therefore praiseworthy, we are deceiving ourselves. Overwork is a vice, not a virtue.

Brothers, to summarize, I would say that we must give high priority (which is not the same, of course, as absolute priority) to presence to our Brothers in community and to creative participation in all community activities.

A new, understanding of association

Our discussion of association so far is very incomplete. "A further, insistent call comes to us from the Lasallian Family." (The Message)

The evolution of the "Lasallian Family" is one of the most important developments in the Institute today, one that demands our closest attention. For this reason the Chapter has asked the Superior and General Council to help foster and nurture its growth. The work of the Council has already begun in earnest. Brother Genaro, Vicar General, has been given special responsibilities in this regard. Your District or sector has been invited to participate in this work. The results of the reports from the Districts as well as our reflections, recommendations, and proposals will be published in due time.

A new model of FSC /lay collaboration

For the moment, I limit myself to one idea, an idea I believe is essential, an idea that calls for conversion: that is to say, a

"turning away from something" and a "turning around towards a new direction."

As I have said elsewhere, the Brothers themselves, for some three hundred years, received, lived, and passed on the Lasallian ideal, aided for a number of those years by men and women collaborators in important but secondary roles.

This traditional model of FSC-lay collaboration has virtually collapsed everywhere. It neither can nor should continue to exist. It is not a question merely of the diminished number of Brothers. It is more the call to full apostolic participation of all Christians, and the willingness of so many highly motivated men and women to respond positively to the challenge.

As the percentage of lay teachers has increased, many of us have experienced frustration, demoralization even, that Brothers' schools, as we once knew them, are things of the past. But many lay teachers have also experienced similar frustration because they have not experienced themselves as full partners in the creation of Lasallian schools. Lay teachers—as well as others associated with us—are expressing more and more their desire to participate actively in the Lasallian mission. You know, at least in a general way, what is happening in this regard throughout the Institute.

Work of the Holy Spirit

It is important, Brothers, to understand this movement—and to accept it. I say that because I am convinced that this extraordinary development, which is not limited to our Institute, is the work of the Holy Spirit, a gift of the Holy Spirit in our day. The older model of FSC-lay collaboration—a triangular model, if you will—is yielding to a circular model. On points of the circumference of this circle are the Brothers, the administrators, teachers, staff members, parents, former students, board members, friends, benefactors, students themselves.

The day, Brothers, when the clergy and members of religious institutes directed and staffed, at least substantially, Catholic schools and hospitals, and filled nearly all major ministerial positions in the Church, is gone. We have to "turn around" and move in a new direction. We have to grasp our new role and exercise it.

Our new role

What is that role? I think that while our new role is still evolving, there are certain things we can say at this time:

1. Our role is to live our religious consecration authentically and in the process "bear witness to the contemporary, secularized world of the absolute primacy of the Kingdom of God over every other value. (John Futrell, *Human Development*, Fall '86) Our lives should speak "God" to all we contact. That is a major contribution.

2. We can and must exercise a role of animation, sharing the fruits of our formation with our lay colleagues. The nature of our contribution will depend on their past formation. Certainly we can help, at least when circumstances permit, by sharing our own history and traditions and by creating with our colleagues structures that will enable them to incorporate Lasallian values.

But I hasten to add a caution. At all costs we must avoid a spirit of paternalism, condescension, and control (however subtle). To avoid this very dangerous pitfall, open and frank dialogue between the Brothers and those associated with them is essential.

3. We can turn over certain works and certain activities to our lay colleagues and undertake creative responses to needs that are unmet, both at home and abroad, needs our freedom and flexibility as Brothers permit us to meet.

Conclusion

Brothers this New Year Letter is much longer than I originally intended. Nevertheless, despite its length, it is in no way a comprehensive treatment of our vocation. There are many essential elements—celibacy and poverty, for example!—that I have not developed. I have taken as a point of departure the Message of the Chapter to the Brothers—which was not intended to be a comprehensive document.

I close these reflections with one last reference to the Message. That reference is to the fostering of vocations:

"Faced with the many needs of countless young people, a greater effort for the fostering of vocations to our Institute is vital. All of must make greater efforts in the encouraging and accompanying of those young people who wish to commit themselves to follow Christ."

We know very well that the reasons for the decline in the number of vocations today are multiple. Some of the reasons are external to us: decline in religious sensitivity, or at least ecclesial sensitivity; assumption by governments of tasks previously undertaken by religious institutes; increasing role of the laity; lessening of appreciation of celibacy; decline in the number of children, etc. While there are responses to these elements in the vocational situation, what we can do is limited.

But I think there is another major explanation—perhaps it is the major explanation: ourselves. I think we are "our own worst enemy." I think furthermore that the three major themes I have developed in this letter contain the elements of an appropriate response to this problem: 1) Peace; 2) Identity 3) Conversion.

1) Peace:

If we Brothers are not men of peace—if we communicate directly or indirectly to the young that we are ill-at-ease in our vocation, confused, agitated, fearful, or discouraged, we cannot expect

that the young will be interested in following us. Furthermore, "if religious living together are clearly unhappy, hostile, unforgiving, or in need of healing, this group will attract no one." (Futrell)

On the contrary, if we radiate deep peace and happiness in our vocation (which is not the same as freedom from problems, trials, and difficulties), these words of John Futrell are relevant: ". . . young persons called by God to the religious life will respond to this vocation if we who are already called successfully communicate the excitement of being religious today."

2) Identity:

I am convinced that many of us are not enthusiastic about inviting young people to follow us because we are confused concerning ourselves concerning our role today. I have already reflected on this question twice in these pages. It is because our need for a clear sense of identity is so urgent that our new Rule is so important: it is a statement of identity, of who we believe the Lord wants us to be and what we believe he wants us to do with our lives.

3) Conversion:

That the delegates arrived at a consensus concerning our identity and succeeded in formulating that consensus is remarkable. Remarkable but not enough. What is important is that the Brothers of the Institute make that Rule their own by meditating on it, by assenting to it, but above all, by living it. We must have common meaning and shared values:

"Community is an achievement of common meaning and value. It is a potential achievement when a group of people share a common field of experience, when they have something to think and talk about . . . they need to think and talk about their experience and reach some measure of common understanding and agreement . . . they must also act in common, and to do that they must be committed to common values and to common

goals. The achievement of meaning and value, the production of community, is the result of common experiences, common understandings, common judgments, and common commitments.” (Bernard Lonergan, *SEDOS Bulletin* 86/269)

In other words, Brothers, we, as individuals and as a group, have to know who we are and what we are all about. Furthermore, we have to be enthusiastic about what we are doing, convinced that it is really significant. (That implies, of course, that what we are doing is in fact significant enough to be enthusiastic about—and points to the necessity of ongoing evaluation together with the willingness to adapt or change what we are doing when such is required.

If we are secure in our identity, we shall communicate that security. When we communicate it, we can be sure that the young will “catch” it. Those the Lord is calling will be more open to responding positively.

Our three themes

The three themes of this letter—Peace, Identity, Conversion—are, therefore, not only of fundamental importance in the living of our vocation, but they are directly relevant to the fostering of vocation to our Institute.

I close this long meditation of Peace, Identity, and Conversion with these passages from Chapter 10 of our new Rule, “Vitality of the Institute,” passages I find pertinent and inspiring:

“The words of St. John Baptist de La Salle are still true: ‘The need for this Institute is very great.’ The young, the poor, the Church, and world need the ministry of the Brothers . . . The vitality of the institute depends on the quality and fidelity of each of its members. . . . Each Brother, regardless of his age, has a role to play in the vitality of the Institute . . .

“The life of an Institute is an ever new and unending exercise in fidelity. It can sometimes call for difficult commitments, as St.

John Baptist de La Salle discovered at various points in his life. Today, as in the past, he challenges the Brothers, not only as the one who established the Institute, but as the Founder who continues to inspire and to sustain it.

"Filled with the spirit which he left them as their legacy, the Brothers grow in the living tradition of the Institute. In communion with those who have gone before them they continue to respond with ardent zeal to the appeals of the Lord, the Church and the world in order to procure the Glory of God."

Fraternally in St. De La Salle,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Brother John Johnston". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'B' and 'J'.

Brother John Johnston, FSC
Superior General

Afterword

Brothers, before closing this letter, I want to take advantage of this opportunity to express my sincere thanks and appreciation for the many letters and cards of Christmas and New Year greetings. At the same time I wish to thank the countless Brothers who, over the four year of my mother's illness, as well as at the time of her death, have expressed their solidarity and their prayers. My father, brothers, and other loved ones have been deeply touched —as I have—by the loving concern and support of so many Brothers around the world. I thank you sincerely.