

Pastoral Letter

The Challenge: Live Today Our Founding Story

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John Baptist de La Salle was led to found a community of men who were enlightened by God to have a share in his plan of salvation. They associated together to respond to the needs of young people who were poor and far from salvation.

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Rule, 47

1 January 2000
Feast of Mary, Mother of God
World Day of Peace

Dear Brothers,

From Paul, by the will of God an apostle of Christ Jesus, to our faithful brothers in Christ. Grace and peace to you from God our Father. (Col 1:1-2)

Convinced that like Paul I am an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, I greet you as "faithful Brothers" in Christ. Grateful for the encouragement you have given me over the years and, in a particular way in your recent birthday, Christmas, and New Year greetings, I assure you of my prayers that God bless you abundantly on this first day of the new millennium.

We celebrate today the beginning of what Pope John Paul II has called the *Year of the Great*

Jubilee. It is a significant year for everyone. Yet for Brothers and all other Lasallians the year 2000 has particular importance. On 1 May we open the 43rd General Chapter, and, by happy coincidence, we celebrate two highly significant events during the Chapter: on 15 May, the 50th anniversary of Pope Pius XII's proclamation of St. John Baptist de La Salle as Patron of all Educators of Children and Youth; and on 24 May, the 100th anniversary of the canonization of St. De la Salle by Pope Leo XIII. We look forward also to the participation of thousands of Lasallian young people in the celebration of *World Youth Day* in Rome during August.

Faith, love, and hope

Paul thanks God for the "faith, love, and hope" of the Colossians. They are men and women inspired by the Gospel that is "bearing fruit and spreading throughout the world." (1:4-6) We are all apostles of Christ by the will of God. It is God who has called us to make the loving and saving presence of Christ a living and effective reality among young people throughout the world. The beginning of this important year is an appropriate moment to thank God for the grace of our beautiful vocation as Brothers of the Christian Schools. It is a moment for thanking God for a truly extraordinary gift to the world: the charism of John Baptist de La Salle, a charism shared today in diverse ways by thousands of Lasallians.

This day is also an appropriate moment for thanking God for the gift of faith, love, and

hope. Exegetes note that Paul frequently lists the virtues we call today “theological” in the order of faith, love, and hope. He seems to consider hope as the fruit of firm faith and ardent love. If our hope is not what we would like it to be, perhaps we need to examine whether or not we recognize God in every event and in every individual, whether we “see everything with the eyes of faith,” and whether we focus lovingly on others rather than on ourselves. Dag Hammarskjöld describes his discovery of hope and meaning in this way: “Once I answered YES to Someone or Something. And from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, has a goal.” (*Markings*)

Paul prays that the Colossians live their faith and love wholeheartedly and that, fortified by God’s strength, they “persevere and endure always.” (Col 1:11) Brothers, I pray today that each of us and all other Lasallians believe and love with all our hearts, and experience the hope we need to “persevere and endure” even in difficulty.

Our canonizations

Those words of Paul are especially appropriate as we praise and thank God for the faith, love, and hope that our recently canonized community of Turón and Brother Jaime Hilario demonstrated in remarkable and inspiring ways. During his homily the Pope said that these courageous Brothers “faced their tragic destiny as an authentic testimony of faith, giving the last lesson of their life by martyrdom. May their example and intercession touch the entire De La Salle family and the whole Church.”

These Brothers were young. Four of them were under the age of twenty-six. Another four were between twenty-seven and thirty-seven years of age. And the Director of the community of Turón was only forty-six. They are witnesses of faith for us today, witnesses in an age which often treats religion as trivial and private. These Brothers had interiorized their faith. They had *become* men of faith. Their faith was at the

heart of their identity as human persons. They had found what so many young people are searching for today: meaning, moral direction, happiness, peace. It is possible and even probable that some youth will not understand the decisions and actions of these martyrs. Nevertheless, their supreme sacrifice will surprise, puzzle, shock, and challenge them. That provocation is already a fundamental stage of evangelization.

Message for World Peace Day

In his annual message John Paul II, like the apostle Paul, wishes grace and peace to all men and women and calls upon them to contribute efficaciously to the construction of peace.

For the Catholic faithful, the commitment to build peace and justice is not secondary but essential. It is to be undertaken in openness toward their brothers and sisters of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, toward the followers of other religions, and toward all men and women of good will, with whom they share the same concern for peace and communion. (20)

The Pope recalls the tragic and bloody conflicts that have unfortunately characterized the last years of the second millennium. He again condemns war and all forms of violence as instruments for resolving differences. He speaks of the peace that touches every aspect of life: development, economy, human rights, safeguarding of creation. The Pope urges everyone to work for the elimination of misery and for the integral development of all. He insists that living together in peace is possible for men and women, whatever their race, ethnic heritage, nationality, religion, language, and political, social and economic situations. It is possible, he says, because God wills peace.

John Paul II addresses youth directly: “May you, young people of the Year 2000, see in others, and help them to see, the faces of brothers and sisters, the faces of friends.” (22)

How appropriate these words are for us and for our partners. To help our young people learn to live together as brothers and sisters and to become brothers and sisters to and for others are essential and urgent dimensions of Lasallian mission.

This letter

In 1976 the Preparatory Commission of the 40th General Chapter invited me to give the third of three conferences during the early days of the Chapter. The commission informed me that in contrast to the first two speakers—Brothers Michel Salvage and Maurice Hermans—I was to speak not as a specialist, but as a Brother “actively engaged in a major way in the apostolate of the Institute and as one who had reflected deeply on the meaning of the Founder for our times.” The commission assigned the topic: *The Challenge of St. John Baptist de La Salle to the Brothers Today*. The title intrigued me, but I confess that I was unable to find a way to speak of *the* challenge. I decided to speak about eight sub-challenges. Today, twenty-four years later, I return to the topic. This time, however, I have found what I think is a valid way to express *the* challenge of John Baptist de La Salle for today: *Live Today our Founding Story*.

My appreciation of the chapter of the *Declaration* entitled “Fidelity to the Founder” increases with the years. In it we read that fidelity to the Founder does not mean that we look to him for answers to our problems today. It is rather to be faithful now to the needs of youth, poor youth especially, faithful in a way that is consistent with the charisma that God bestowed upon John Baptist de La Salle. To be faithful both to the Founder and to contemporary needs demands discernment, prudence, and boldness. Such fidelity, the *Declaration* says, can exist only as the result of a search undertaken in a “filial spirit.” 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 goals of the Founder and to the tradition

of the Institute is confided to us as the living persons that we are.” (*Decl.* 6, 7)

This search is not confided to us as individuals. It is entrusted to the Institute, that is to say, to the community of persons who constitute it.

A living community in dialogue is the locus *par excellence* for the presence and the action of the Holy Spirit. The General Chapter, above all, is the occasion when the Institute as a body, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can become aware of itself and declare to itself what it really is.

(*Decl.* 7)

The 43rd General Chapter, “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit,” must help the Institute to *live today our founding story*.

I. OUR STORY

What I am calling *story* throughout this letter, scholars would probably call *myth*. Nevertheless, I prefer to reduce the possibility of ambiguity and confusion by using the readily understood word “story.” According to Richard Cote, OMI, *myth*, in fact, means word or narrative and is basically a story,

the story of how a people came to *be* and *think* of themselves as a distinct people: its origins, its *founding* aspirations, the goals it initially set for itself and pursues, and the way all this eventually unfolds as the sacred history of that people. . . . This venture is experienced and perceived as something so utterly original and therefore different that it gives a people its unquestionable sense of being quite *distinct* from all other peoples.

(*Re-Visioning Mission*, p. 110)

The Jewish people have maintained their sense of identity over the centuries by telling and retelling the story of God’s action in their history and, in a particular way, the story of the

exodus from Egypt. Ritual celebrations of God's actions make the events in some way present again. Practices and prescriptions accompany these celebrations. The stories, rites, and laws constitute the sacred story of the Jewish people. When Jews live that story faithfully, they express and nourish simultaneously their sense of identity.

We recognize this pattern in our lives as Christians. We listen to, meditate upon, tell, and celebrate the story of Christ's passage from death to life for our redemption. Sacraments make this sacred event present and enable us to participate in it. We live this precious story year after year, expressing and nourishing, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, our identity as Christians.

In like manner we Brothers of the Christian Schools need to listen to, meditate upon, tell, and celebrate our founding story, the story of how we came to be and how we began to experience and perceive ourselves as original, different, and distinct. Article 47 of the *Rule* captures the essence of what I am saying:

John Baptist de La Salle was led to found a community of men who were enlightened by God to have a share in his plan of salvation. They associated together to respond to the needs of young people who were poor and far from salvation. *Even today, each of the Brothers' communities finds in this historical event a fundamental source of inspiration.*

"This historical event"

To keep the memory of our founding story in our hearts and minds is not necessarily to dwell upon all the historical details. It is to recall the major events in De La Salle's itinerary as founder, and by meditation on the story allow it to act upon us. We are blessed with an inspiring story of foundation, and equally blessed to have our Founder's reflections upon it.

"This historical event" begins with the story of a twenty-eight-year-old French priest,

newly ordained, responsible for a large family, Canon of the Cathedral, financially secure, doctoral student. He meets Adrian Nyel—a meeting that changes his life. He responds effectively to Nyel's requests for help in establishing schools for poor children in Rheims. De La Salle quickly recognizes, however, that it is not enough to find space for a school. He sees that what really matters is the quality of the teachers. Consequently he brings the teachers together, first in a rented house, then, progressively, into his own family home. Together De La Salle and the first teachers reflect upon their experience and strive to understand with the eyes of faith what is happening in their lives. They search for a pedagogy that responds to their children "as they are" and is truly efficacious.

More schools open, within and outside Rheims. De La Salle finds himself increasingly involved. He moves with the teachers to a rented house. Some decide to form with him a permanent community. They adopt a distinctive habit to express and nurture their emerging and distinct identity. They call themselves "brothers" to express fraternal relationship among themselves and to serve as a reminder that God is calling them to be "older brothers" to their pupils. De La Salle resigns his canonry, shares his wealth with the poor, and enters their world. He and some of his followers consecrate themselves to God and vow obedience for a year. Eight years or so later De La Salle and twelve Brothers pronounce perpetual vows of association to keep together gratuitous schools, obedience, and stability. The Brothers elect John Baptist de La Salle Superior. In effect this "act of association" on Trinity Sunday, 1694, constitutes the "Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools." (*Circular 406*, p. 54)

And . . . the founding story continues. . . .

De La Salle's "reading" of the "historical events"

De La Salle prayerfully seeks to discern God's will in the surprising series of events that characterize his life. A study of what he wrote as the

story unfolds helps us to grasp his understanding of the “Brother of the Christian Schools.” Progressively he describes the vocation of the Brother in strikingly mystical and incarnational language. His vision of the Brother as minister, ambassador, representative of Jesus Christ is truly exalted, but it is at the same time a vision of Jesus Christ incarnated in the concrete world and everyday realities of the poor youth of his day. We could meditate on many of his writings, including the two *Memoires* with their pertinent revelations. Yet I limit myself to the formula of vows that he and twelve Brothers use in the “act of association” of 1694 and to passages from the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*.

Employing what I prefer to describe as the formula of “consecration” rather than “vows,” the Founder and his disciples consecrate themselves entirely to the “Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” to procure God’s glory as far as they are able and as far as God requires of them. “For this purpose” they promise and vow to unite themselves and live in society with other men experiencing a similar call from God. They thus state the precise manner they believe God is calling them to live this total consecration. They say with no ambiguity that their purpose in coming together is to “keep together and by association gratuitous schools.” By pledging to persevere even if obliged to beg and live on bread alone and to do anything the Society asks them to do in the Society, they reveal that their commitment touches the very core of their being. “Wherefore,” that is to say, in view of this total consecration to God as Brothers—they vow association, obedience, and stability.

De La Salle’s meditations, composed years later, reveal clearly that the Brothers consecrate themselves not to a distant or abstract Holy Trinity, but to the Father who chooses and calls them because of his love for abandoned children; to the Son who asks them to make his loving and saving presence a reality in the world of youth, poor youth particularly; to the Holy Spirit who sanctifies them and enables

them to touch the hearts of the children God confides to their care. They freely enter an *association for mission* which embraces their entire existence. They commit themselves to total availability for service and to perseverance, whatever the cost.

In the meditations that the Founder prepared for the Brothers to use during their retreat, he describes poignantly the children that God loves with infinite love and wants to come to knowledge of truth and be saved. In remarkably bold language De La Salle says that God cannot truly want this without providing teachers as the means. Therefore, God, in his Providence—that is to say, in love and concern for such children—illuminates the hearts of certain persons, calling them to respond to the children’s need for education.

Since De La Salle probably spoke these words to the Brothers long before he put them into writing, we can imagine him turning to the Brothers gathered in retreat and declaring: “Brothers, you are such persons. God has destined you to announce his word to children. It is God who is calling you. God is confiding to your care the children you have in your schools. Jesus Christ wants you to touch their hearts as his ambassador and representative. To become the persons God is calling you to be, you must give yourselves entirely to the Spirit to act in your work only under his influence. This Holy Spirit then will come upon your young people enabling them to possess fully the Christian spirit.” (Based on *Med.* 193, 194, 195)

Our founding story . . . a remarkable and beautiful story. Brothers, we are blessed to have this precious heritage. But it is not enough to admire it. We have to make it our own. We have to *live it today*. That is **the** challenge.

II. LIVING OUR STORY TODAY

Meditative reading of the “historical events”

For centuries Christians have nourished their faith and identity by meditation on the Word of God. The Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, have had an indispensable role in our own tradition. That tradition is more evident, perhaps, to the “veterans” among us: carrying the New Testament on our person; reading from it on our knees at the beginning of evening spiritual exercises; giving the Scriptures a central place in mental prayer; calling to mind scriptural passages to help us remember the presence of God and perform all our actions with the spirit of faith; memorizing the Sunday gospels and even entire books of the Bible.

The various methods of *lectio divina* are as valid today as they ever have been: invoking the Holy Spirit; reading the text slowly several times; searching in the text for answers to such questions as who, what, where, when, why; meditating on the text “as it is,” without imposing meanings; underlining certain words or phrases; examining prayerfully key words: verbs, nouns, adjectives; allowing thoughts, meanings, feelings to emerge; permitting the text to confront and challenge us.

Brothers, if we want to live our founding story faithfully today, we need to meditate in a similar way on the origin of the Institute and on the writings of St. De La Salle. We have to bring that story to our personal prayer and to shared prayer with our Brothers. We can read, for example, the three meditations I used above, asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten us; reading the text several times, searching for the meaning of every word, phrase, paragraph; reflecting carefully on key words: *God, Providence, chosen, called, vagabonds, abandoned, entrusted to your care, announce, ministry, ministers, ambassadors, representing Jesus Christ, give yourself often to the Spirit, zeal*. . . .

We need to allow the power of our founding story and De La Salle’s interpretation of it to

form, challenge, and inspire us. Renewed vision, commitment, and dynamism will emerge from such meditation. We will come to understand the meaning of creative fidelity and make it a reality.

Creative Fidelity

Vita Consecrata, Pope John Paul’s document following the synod on consecrated life, is an unambiguous invitation to creative fidelity:

Institutes of Consecrated Life are invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity, and holiness of their founders in response to the signs of the time emerging in today’s world. This invitation is first a call to perseverance on the path of holiness in the midst of the material and spiritual difficulties of daily life. But it is also a call to pursue competence in personal work and to develop a dynamic fidelity to their mission, adapting forms, if need be, to new situations and different needs, in complete openness to God’s inspiration . . . all must be convinced that the quest for ever greater conformity to the Lord is the guarantee of any renewal which seeks to remain faithful to an Institute’s original inspiration. (*VC*, 37)

In issuing this urgent call, the Pope reflects the position of the 1994 synod on consecrated life. Creative fidelity was a major theme and, for that reason, pervades the post-synod document. For us the invitation is a call to make the initiative, creativity, and holiness of John Baptist de La Salle a reality in the life of every Brother, every community, every District or Delegation, and the Institute itself. It is a call that touches every aspect of our life: religious consecration, mission, community. We can achieve creative fidelity only by the quest for ever greater conformity with Jesus Christ. It demands perseverance on the path of holiness and a dynamic approach to mission.

These orientations are, of course, not new to us. Thirty-five years ago the delegates of the 39th General Chapter expressed them clearly in the *Declaration*. I have already referred to the dynamic and creative stance that prophetic document takes to fidelity to the Founder. Participants of the 41st General Chapter reaffirmed these orientations in the last and very moving section of the *Rule*, “Vitality of the Institute.” We need to read and meditate upon that chapter frequently. Its last article captures beautifully the essence of this pastoral letter:

The life of an Institute is a continual challenge to be creative while remaining faithful to its origins. It can sometimes call for difficult commitments, as John Baptist de La Salle discovered at various points of 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.
(*Rule*, 149)

Religious institutes and the laity

One of the most striking and “creative” dimensions of *Vita Consecrata* is its treatment of the relationship between members of religious institutes and the laity. The Pope recognizes that many institutes have concluded that they can share the charism of their founders with the laity. They are inviting lay women and men to participate more intensely in their spirituality and mission. Our own Institute clearly fits this description. During the past few decades we have fostered this movement with conviction, determination, creativity, and prudence. The Pope’s personal assessment of initiatives of this kind is strongly positive and affirming: “We may say that a new chapter, rich in hope, has begun in the history of relations between consecrated persons and the laity.” These new experiences merit our encouragement, he says: “They can in fact give rise to the spread of a fruitful spirituality beyond the confines of the Institute.” (*VC*, 54–55) Our *Rule* expresses the

same thought in similar language: “The spiritual gifts which the Church has received in St. John Baptist de La Salle go beyond the confines of the Institute which he founded.” (146)

John Paul II continues with expressions that I think confirm our own experience:

The participation of the laity often brings unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of the charism, leading to a more spiritual interpretation of it and helping to draw from it directions for new activities in the apostolate. (*VC*, 55)

Charism and charisms

In my pastoral letters of 1994 and 1995, I reflected at length on the notion of “charism.” The use of the word in reference to religious life has a short history. The first to use it in an official ecclesial document was Paul VI in 1971. Many participants in Vatican II employed the word, but not in reference to religious life. The same is true for the Council documents. It is interesting, therefore, that we often find in the *Declaration* and the *Rule*, documents composed in 1967, expressions such as *the living charism of the Founder* and *fidelity to the charism proper to the Institute*. Some years later, the Congregation for Consecrated Life formally recognized our new *Rule* as a *faithful expression of the charism of St. John Baptist de La Salle*. Finally, in his remarks to the capitulants in 1993, John Paul II spoke of the *Lasallian charism*.

I am proposing the word *charism* for reflection because I find it a very helpful way of understanding and fostering the participation of the laity in the Lasallian tradition. I am suggesting that we distinguish between the Lasallian charism—the charism of St. John Baptist de La Salle—and specific ways of living that charism, ways that are gifts of the Spirit and can also be called charisms. One way of living the Lasallian charism is as Brothers of the Christian Schools. Nevertheless, there are also other ways, some of which we are going to consider.

Although neither the *Rule* nor *Vita Consecrata* speaks explicitly of a distinction between the founding charism and specific expressions of it, the distinction seems to me consistent with their content. The Pope refers to a “new chapter” in relations between consecrated persons and the laity and to “the spread of a fruitful spirituality beyond the confines of the Institute.” If lay women and men are living Lasallian spirituality “beyond the confines of the Institute,” is it not logical to distinguish their “charism” from the “charism” of the Brothers? Can we not recognize and acknowledge that what we are experiencing in this important moment of our history is one of the “unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of the charism”? The Institute *Bulletin* of 1995 is entitled: *Three Manifestations of the Charism of De La Salle*. They are the two institutes of Sisters and the Union of Catechists. I am suggesting, however, that other manifestations are emerging and that we should encourage and foster them.

Article 20 of the *Rule* states that “The Spirit of God has given to the Church, in the person of St. John Baptist de La Salle, a charism which even today inspires the Brothers and many other educators.” There is one fundamental charism, but different ways of living it. Above I cited the opening sentence of article 146, which speaks of the gifts De La Salle received as going “beyond the confines of the Institute which he founded.” The article continues as follows:

The Institute sees the existence of the various Lasallian movements as a grace from God renewing its own vitality. The Institute can associate with itself lay people who want to lead the life of perfection that the Gospel demands, by living according to the spirit of the Institute and by participating in its mission. The Institute helps them achieve their proper autonomy. At the same time it creates appropriate ties with them and evaluates the authenticity of their Lasallian character.

I propose for your reflection several ways of living the Lasallian charism. The following list is consistent with the General Chapter list of persons and groups constituting the Lasallian Family. (*Circ. 435*, p. 37) I do not consider this formulation as anything more than tentative. Nevertheless, it will serve the purposes of this letter.

1. Brothers of the Christian Schools
2. Lasallian Religious Sisters and Union of Catechists
3. Lasallian Partners
4. Lasallian Associates
5. Lasallian Volunteers
6. Lasallian Youth
7. Affiliated Members and Benefactors

III. CHARISM AND CHARISMS: UNITY IN DIVERSITY

1. Brothers of the Christian Schools

John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* articulates not only his personal opinions, but also those expressed in the final synod propositions. Indirectly the document conveys views of many conferences of women and men religious throughout the world. It also reflects the congress on religious life that the *Union of Superiors General* organized one year before the synod. Moreover, it reflects the interventions of religious bishops, priests, sisters, and brothers during the synod itself. The document is, I believe, an indispensable resource for anyone writing and thinking on consecrated life today and, in a particular way, for formators. I encourage every Brother to become familiar with it.

It is satisfying to find in its pages what I think is probably the strongest affirmation of the vocation of religious Brothers that the Holy See has ever issued. The Pope conveys the “great esteem” of the synod participants for the vocation and repeats Vatican II’s assertion that it is “complete” without the priesthood. Vatican II also said that General Chapters of Institutes

of Religious Brothers can decide to introduce the priesthood, provided that the lay character of the institute remain unchanged. Nevertheless, the Pope gives an interesting interpretation of this statement: he says that the Council does not explicitly encourage its introduction “because it wishes Institutes of Religious Brothers to remain faithful to their vocation and mission.” (VC, 60) This issue does not preoccupy most of us. We have learned to live with the misconceptions that both clergy and lay Catholics often have about us. However, for younger sections of the Institute, where the vocation of Brothers has a relatively short history, this strong affirmation is helpful.

In words closely paralleling art. 53 of the *Rule*, the Pope asserts that the term “brother” suggests a “rich spirituality.” God calls members of such institutes to be brothers of Christ; brothers to one another; brothers to everyone, especially those most in need; brothers for a greater brotherhood and sisterhood in the Church. Moreover, the Brothers “proclaim to everyone the Lord’s words: *And you are all brothers and sisters.*” (Mt. 23:8)

John Paul II addresses also the question that some Brothers raise concerning *identity* or, often more accurately, *role*, given the participation of lay partners in Lasallian mission. He says that although religious Brothers perform many works in common with the lay faithful, they do so as *consecrated men*. They “thereby express the spirit of total self-giving to Christ and the Church, in accordance with their specific charism.” (VC, 60)

Identity

Earlier in this letter I reflected on the formula of consecration used by John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers. I also offered thoughts on passages from the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* that I think help us understand more profoundly the meaning of the act of consecration of the Brother of the Christian Schools.

What I have to say in these paragraphs presupposes what I have already written. I think

it essential that any discussion of the identity of the Brother respect *integrally* the dynamic revealed in the formula of consecration. At all costs we have to avoid thinking of our vocation first in terms of “religious life in general” and second in terms of “religious life in particular.” It has become commonplace today to assert, correctly, that “religious life in general” does not exist, that only particular institutes exist. Nevertheless, I sometimes hear Brothers, even formators, speak first of the classic triad of vows—celibate chastity, poverty, and obedience—and only later of the specific vows. To appreciate the meaning and significance of the vows, we need to see them in the context of our founding story, that is to say, in the light of the act of consecration that De La Salle and the early Brothers made to God.

Consecration and chastity

The consecration of the Brother of the Christian Schools is a response to the Father’s call to make the loving and saving presence of Jesus Christ a living and effective reality in the lives of the young, helping them “come to knowledge of truth and be saved.” An unambiguous “yes” on our part opens us to the transforming power of the Spirit, enabling us to become the “prolongation in history of a special presence of the Risen Lord.” (VC, 19)

Included in the act of consecration of the early members of the Institute is a commitment to celibate chastity. They professed no vow of chastity, but the *Common Rules* leave no doubt that celibate chastity was an essential dimension of their identity as Brothers. In the pertinent chapter the founder writes that the “first and principal obligation” of the Brothers “regarding their exterior will be to make chastity outshine all other virtues.” As Brother Jaime Pujol states, the chapter is “full of commandments, prohibitions, and warnings . . . he (De La Salle) was convinced that he needed to lay down these laws and so help the establishment of the Institute.” (*Lasallian Themes*, No. 68)

The formula of consecration reveals a commitment to God, the young, and one another that presupposes celibate chastity. That is why I like to link consecration and chastity. Consecrated chastity expresses and nourishes our commitment to base our whole existence on the gospel to follow Jesus Christ, striving to “deepen the rich meaning” of our baptism and to express it “by accepting the new demands” that are made upon us. (*Rule*, 22, 23)

Association and obedience

We follow our pioneers in promising to enter into profound union with our Brothers and, together and by association, conduct schools for the education of the poor. This commitment has “teeth” in it! We pledge total availability and perseverance, whatever the cost. When De La Salle used the word “association,” he clearly meant what sociologists today call “intentional community,” that is to say, the type of group which makes the most extensive demands on its individual members. In an intentional community, members live, work, and recreate together. They voluntarily surrender control over choices which are normally considered private for the sake of establishing a new way of life. The group’s transcendent mission or goal takes precedence over the needs of the individual members. (Patricia Wittberg, *Creating a Future for Religious Life*, pp. 3-4) It is in this sense that we understand our union as Brothers of the Christian Schools, our union as members of Districts or Delegations, and our union as members of communities.

We live in communities of faith, prayer, mission, mutual love and respect, communities that are welcoming to others. Convinced that each of us has the right to community life and that therefore each of us has the duty to contribute to it, we give high priority to active and creative presence in the community and at community functions. Together and by association we contribute to the mission, whatever our individual assignment. Those of us who are aged or suffer from ill-health contribute also by

our support, interest, prayer, and suffering. (*Rule*, 48, 50, 53, 16; *VC*, 44)

Because the word “association” is such an important part of our tradition, we must understand it as De La Salle intended, and not as sociologists define it today. For them “association” is fundamentally different from “intentional community.” “Association” describes groups which make fewer demands on their members. They invest a certain amount of their resources in the attainment of a common goal or objective, but they retain their personal autonomy. (Wittberg) This is not at all the meaning that De La Salle gave the word. Like our first Brothers, we promise by the vow of obedience “to go wherever” we may be sent and “to do whatever” we may be assigned by the body of the Society or its superiors. We know well the founder’s extraordinary insistence on obedience, “regularity,” and stability. There is no doubt that for the Brothers of the Christian Schools, “association” means “intentional community.”

Association for the education of youth, poor youth especially

“Intentional community” or association in the Lasallian sense, is in view of the mission, a mission of human and Christian education of youth, poor youth especially. (*Rule*, 3) At the very heart of this mission is solidarity with the poor. Since 1986 we have called our fourth vow “association for the educative service of the poor.” (*Rule*, 25) This vow commits us to do all we can to make human and Christian education possible for the economically deprived, for victims of social injustice, for youngsters with behavioral problems, for those neglected, marginalized and even excluded from society, for those requiring special attention because of difficulties at school, at home, or in society generally. Yet the *Rule* says more. In the educational service we provide, we must “become earnestly involved in the promotion of justice and human dignity.” Whatever the personal, social, or economic situation of our students, we need to help them become increasingly sensitive to injustice

and to their responsibilities for building a society in which all can live justly in dignity, mutual respect, and peace. (*Rule*, 3, 14, 40)

Solidarity with the poor and evangelical poverty

As we linked consecration and celibate chastity, we need to link education of the poor and the evangelical poverty we profess today by vow. De La Salle and the first Brothers made no vow of poverty, but they lived poverty from the beginning. For them “insertion” was a reality long before someone coined the expression. De La Salle considered poverty, like celibate chastity, to be an essential dimension of the Brothers’ life and mission. In his beautiful meditation for Christmas day, he says that a sincere love for poverty will enable the Brothers to “touch the hearts of these poor children. . . . But if you do not resemble the newborn Jesus,” you will not be “loved or appreciated by the poor, and you will never have for them the role of savior.” (*Med.* 86.3)

Our *Rule* recognizes this linkage: “The Brothers become poor in order to follow Christ who was poor and in order to serve better all persons as their brothers and sisters, especially those most in need.” (*Rule*, 32) For many of us perhaps, to live “poorly” is a challenge that seems ambiguous, difficult, frustrating, and even futile. Nevertheless, we dare not allow “evangelical poverty” to slide to the margins of our consciousness. Some years ago Father David Fleming, currently Superior General of the Marianists, wrote, very accurately I think, that people, youth especially, expect consecrated religious to manifest simplicity, even a touch of austerity, although they make no pretense at simplicity themselves:

It is quite clear that nothing speaks more compellingly of holiness than a simple, austere lifestyle: conversely, nothing arouses more disbelief and alienation than the aroma of luxury among the professionally religious. (*Pilgrim’s Notebook*, p. 32)

The *Rule* calls us to “live simply as persons of modest condition, having everything in common.” (32) Some might find this statement either insufficiently demanding or too vague. Regardless, it can serve as a helpful instrument for examination of our life as individuals and as communities. Moreover, if “living poorly” seems vague, the strict obligations of our commitment to the common life are quite clear: we forego independent use of money and monetary goods, retain only the bare ownership of our patrimony, and agree that whatever we earn or receive as gifts or pension belongs to the Institute.

Stability

Integral to our consecration to God is our vow of stability. God is calling us to fidelity. Those of us who witnessed the withdrawal of many Brothers two to three decades ago might be inclined to view our vow of stability with a certain cynicism. My personal view, however, is that this vow should occupy a far more central place in reflections on our vocation than it does now.

It is true that Brothers withdraw from the Institute after having promised to maintain their commitment “inviolably all my life.” Their reasons are personal, complex, and varied. We profoundly regret their leaving us. Nevertheless, we hold them in loving respect and refrain from judging them. If it is true, however, that in our history a number of Brothers have not persevered, it is equally true that thousands have lived faithfully all their life. The first Brothers vowed to persevere even if obliged to beg and to live on bread alone. Many did in fact live in dire poverty and yet remained faithful. We have all known and loved many Brothers who have lived their vocation faithfully until the end of their lives. Some of these Brothers weathered severe storms of one kind or another at various moments of their lives. We thank God for all of them. They encourage and inspire us.

The International Catholic Child Bureau (BICE) has promoted in recent years the notion

of “resilience.” Obviously, many loving and devoted persons are working tirelessly to change unjust or undesirable situations of children. Nevertheless, current injustices are not going to disappear overnight. Meanwhile many young people are living in situations that are inhuman. Consequently they have to learn that they can deny external circumstances the power to destroy their lives. With God’s help they can live as human persons despite their situation. For this purpose, they need *resilience*. They need faith in God and in themselves. They need love, hope, strength, and courage.

Brothers, we also need resilience. Difficult and less than ideal situations in our personal, community, and apostolic life are inevitable. Our vow of stability obliges us to deny external circumstances the power to dominate us and weaken our resolve. As I write these words, articles are appearing throughout the world concerning the retirement of cartoonist Charles Schultz, creator of *Peanuts*. One episode, published many years ago, is quite pertinent. Charlie Brown informs Lucy, who is playing “psychiatrist,” that he can no longer tolerate this world as it is. She takes him to the top of a hill and tells him to view the world. She then asks if he sees any other world. When he answers that he does not, she shouts at him, “Well, live in it then!”

Fidelity requires us to say *yes* to the reality that is ours. Only *that* reality exists, no other. To it we have to say yes with our arms outstretched, that is to say, crucified and risen with Jesus Christ. To live the vow of stability is not to live stoically in the face of difficulty, nor is it to “play” victim or martyr. It is instead to live with joy, enthusiasm, and hope the circumstances that are ours. Paul VI wrote that people searching for meaning and happiness have to hear the Good News “not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient, or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed.” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 80)

Role of the Brothers in Lasallian mission

Although religious Brothers “perform many works in common with the lay faithful, these men do so insofar as they are consecrated, and thereby express the spirit of total self-giving to Christ and the Church, in accordance with their specific charism.” (VC, 60)

This remark of John Paul II helps to focus our reflection on the *role* of the Brothers in Lasallian mission. We contribute to the mission of the Institute, whatever our individual assignment may be: teaching, governing, animating school activities, or rendering other services associated with the mission. Nevertheless, none of these functions are *reserved* to us. Lay men and women can do everything that we can do. We cannot respond, therefore, to the question of our role by specifying one work or another as ours. As the Pope says, the difference is not in the work that we do, but in the fact that we do it as consecrated men. I will consider three important aspects of our role: service, witness, and mediation.

1) Service

Although no work is reserved to us, and we can transform whatever work we do into a contribution to the mission, we should, I think, give priority to some tasks. I think that we should favor positions in which we are visible, in direct contact with the young, and have the possibility of exchanging with them on issues that are important to them. I think also that when qualified Brothers are available, we should assign them to leadership positions, particularly that of chief administrator. Finally, I think that we should give priority to services that permit us to exercise the role of evangelization: religious education and various kinds of pastoral activities, including in a particular way, animating Lasallian youth groups and other forms of communities of faith.

Since we are all “catechists by vocation” and called to solidarity with the poor, I encourage

every Brother, whatever his habitual work, to find ways to exercise an evangelizing role; for example, by active participation in school liturgies, prayer services, retreats, work with Lasallian youth and other communities of faith, etc. Later I treat the subject of voluntary service. I think that we Brothers ourselves should donate a few hours a week to voluntary service of those in need.

Some of us are no longer in schools or other centers because of obligatory retirement policies, age, physical problems, or other reasons. If we are blessed with good health, however, we need to search creatively for ways that we can continue to exercise our Lasallian mission as long as we are able. The possibilities are many! Nevertheless, when the day arrives that we can no longer render apostolic service, we can contribute, as I said above, by our support, interest, prayer, and suffering.

2) *Witness*

We have to be careful that we do not separate witness and service. We do not witness in the abstract; we witness as we serve. In the work that we do, whatever it is, we send “messages” nonstop. Young people are very sensitive to these messages. They watch carefully to see if we are really striving to be the people we profess to be. Directly and indirectly we express our beliefs and values. Moreover, we communicate whether we really love and respect them. Of course our lay partners witness in this way also—and their witness is very important. Yet we witness as consecrated religious. The value of our witness, therefore, is directly related to the quality of our consecrated life. When the young esteem us as loving, dedicated “brothers,” when they appreciate our professional competence, and when they discover that we really believe in Jesus Christ—so much so that we strive to follow him wholeheartedly as Brothers—we send them the “messages” that God wants us to send.

3) *Mediation*

Still, we send the young more than messages. With the eyes of faith we recognize mediation as an essential aspect of our role. It is only with eyes of faith that we can understand De La Salle’s profound, even mystical, understanding of our vocation. He urges us to give ourselves frequently to God, confident that through us the Holy Spirit will come upon our young people, enabling them to possess the Christian spirit. When you experience difficulty in guiding your pupils, the Founder says, “turn to God with confidence.” Ask Jesus Christ insistently to make his Spirit come alive in you since he has chosen you to do his work. Present to Christ the needs of your pupils. (*Med.* 195, 196) In short, we have to live our religious consecration as Brothers with all our heart and trust the Lord to do the rest.

Although we distinguish these three aspects of our role, they cannot be separated. As we exercise our particular ministry, we send messages as witnesses and serve as mediators of the Holy Spirit.

2. **Union of Catechists, Lasallian Guadalupana Sisters, Lasallian Sisters**

I treat these three “manifestations of the charism of De La Salle” together because they fall within the definition of “consecrated life” in the Church. The founders of each of these institutes found inspiration in the charism of John Baptist de La Salle, that is to say, in the gift the Holy Spirit bestowed on our Founder. The institutes continue today to live explicitly the spirituality and pedagogy of De La Salle and, while totally autonomous, maintain close relations with us. Members participate in sessions of CIL and SIEL and as consultants in General Chapters. In addition they collaborate closely with the Brothers on the local level.

Five years ago, the *Bulletin of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* described these institutes at length. Each of them has a fascinating “founding story” and history. I limit myself, however, to these brief comments.

Union of Catechists of Jesus Crucified and of Mary Immaculate

The oldest of the three institutes is that of the *Union of Catechists of Jesus Crucified and of Mary Immaculate*. Founded in the early part of the 20th century by Brother Teodoreto of the District of Turin, with the collaboration of a Franciscan Brother, it developed into one of the first “secular institutes” in the Church. For Brother Teodoreto the catechist was more than one who explained the catechism in a school or parish: “The true catechist is a catechist on the street, in Church, with the family, in a restaurant, in the university, in the barracks. Always and everywhere the catechist has to be an apostle.” (*Bulletin*, No. 241, p. 8) Members of the *Union of Catechists* include those who consecrate themselves by means of the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience—but live “in the world” rather than in a community—and those considered “associate catechists.” Associate members include both single and married persons from all walks of life. They strive to live the ideals of holiness the *Union* proposes and participate in one way or another in the catechetical-educational apostolate of the institute.

Today the Union has in Italy an extraordinary network of House of Charity centers, that is to say, vocational/technical schools. Many members collaborate in parish catechetical activities for persons of all ages. In Peru the Union has 20 catechetical centers in which members work in cooperation with parishes. They are engaged in many other apostolates and services, including pastoral activities for young people, catechist training centers for teaching religion in state schools, work with street children and with prisoners. In Eritrea, associate catechists train young people for employment. And in Sao Paolo, Brazil, pioneer members are establishing a new foundation.

Lasallian Guadalupana Sisters

Founded in Mexico in 1946 by Brother Jean Fromental, the *Lasallian Guadalupana Sisters* describe themselves as “born under the protection

of Our Lady, Virgin of Guadalupe, and in the shadow of our Father and guide, St. John Baptist de La Salle.” His charism is a source of inspiration and spirit. (*Bulletin*, p. 25) Today the institute is present in Mexico, Columbia, the Philippines, Madagascar, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, the United States, and Rome. It has some 220 members, almost forty novices and more than sixty in pre-novitiate programs. In a variety of ways Sisters pursue the purpose of the Institute, which their *Rule* defines as procuring a human and Christian education for children and youth, especially those that are poor, and of providing domestic services in houses of religious and priests.

One of the most remarkable and admirable realizations in recent years has been the establishment of the Institute in several new countries. God is blessing their missionary commitments with vocations. In these countries Sisters operate their own schools or collaborate with the Brothers.

Lasallian Sisters

The youngest of the three institutes of consecrated life inspired by the Lasallian charism is the institute of *Lasallian Sisters*. The Brothers of the Christian Schools in Vietnam founded the congregation in 1966. Its purpose is the human and Christian education of children and young people. While the congregation is independent of the Brothers, the Sisters work by preference with the Brothers. Today some twenty-five to thirty Sisters have communities in Vietnam, Thailand, and the United States. Each country has its own formation program, with novices, postulants, and aspirants.

With exemplary faith and courage, the *Lasallian Sisters* have weathered the storms of war, poverty, separation, and exile. Today they run their own preschool programs, collaborate with the Brothers in primary and secondary schools and in pastoral activities with young people, care for retired Brothers, work in homes for the elderly and in hospitals.

Other apostolic religious institutes

These three institutes have an explicit relationship with John Baptist de La Salle. We should remember, however, that founders and foundresses of a number of other apostolic religious institutes throughout the 18th and 19th centuries found inspiration in the life and mission of De La Salle and in the new form of consecrated life he developed. Furthermore, the *Conduct of Schools* influenced many teaching congregations. Although never linked formally to other institutes of this period, the charism of John Baptist de La Salle had an extraordinary impact on the development of religious life and of education.

3. Lasallian Partners

Another way of living the Lasallian charism is as *Lasallian Partners*: “The Spirit of God has given to the Church, in the person of St. John Baptist de La Salle, a charism which even today inspires the Brothers and a great number of other educators.” (Emphasis added. *Rule*, 20)

Today approximately 68,000 Lasallian administrators and teachers are at the service of some 800,000 young people of all ages, in nearly a thousand schools and centers. Of these 68,000, 2 percent are priests or religious of other institutes, 6 percent are Brothers of the Christian Schools, and 92 percent are lay men and women. These statistics reveal vividly the extraordinary change we have experienced in the last thirty to forty years: a change in the number of collaborators and in our vision of Lasallian mission, a change leading us to encourage the full participation of lay men and women, as well as priests and religious of other institutes, and to accept them as partners.

From Brothers’ schools to Lasallian schools

For years I have used the image of an inverted triangle to describe the model of Brothers’ schools that I experienced as a pupil and as a

young Brother. At the inverted base were a large number of Brothers and at the inverted pinnacle a small number of lay teachers. These men—*literally* men until recent years—helped the Brothers run “their” school. Gradually, for several reasons, the triangle began to change shape. What was formerly the base became the pinnacle. A small number of Brothers now found themselves at that pinnacle. Conversely a large number of lay teachers found themselves at the base. Despite this change, however, we didn’t alter the way we understood our schools. We continued to think of them as Brothers’ schools. The lay teachers were there to help us run our school. Yet the model no longer made sense. It was creating frustration and disorientation for everyone.

Confronting squarely this anomalous situation, we began to change the model. We started to speak of *Lasallian schools* rather than *Brothers’ schools*. In a Lasallian school the lay teachers do not help the Brothers run the Brothers’ school. They are “partners” with the Brothers in animating the school. The model of triangle yields to that of circle. The 41st General Chapter in 1986 captured succinctly this dramatic shift:

The Brothers’ community is ever mindful that its apostolic activity takes place within an educational community in which all the functions, including positions of responsibility, are shared. . . . The Brothers make known to all the other members of the educative community the essential elements of the Lasallian tradition . . . and participate in the creation of communities of faith. (17a, c)

Seven years later, the 42nd General Chapter reinforced the *Rule* by declaring that “a way of looking upon ourselves as the only authorized agents of the Institute’s mission is obsolete.” (*Circ.* 435, pp. 8–9)

Reception of the movement

The positive, even enthusiastic, reception of this movement by so many of our teachers, personnel, parents, board members, former students, friends, and benefactors has astonished many of us. Of course, not everyone has received it enthusiastically. It is not surprising that some—particularly teachers hired in the past without reference to the Lasallian character—are indifferent. We need to insist, however, that all members of the educative community understand De La Salle's vision of young people and his approach to education and, at the very least, not be obstacles. We have to do all we can to encourage everyone to become active participants in the task of creating schools that are worthy of the name *Lasallian*. And, of course, when we have control over the hiring process, we need to make sure that candidates know what the school expects of its teachers and are willing to meet those expectations.

We have teachers who profess religions other than Christian. Many of them, while not believing in Jesus Christ as we do, believe in God, religion, and moral values, and have great appreciation of the Lasallian tradition. They find inspiration in the charisma of John Baptist de La Salle. We can say, therefore, that they share in his charisma.

Meaning of "partners"

I need to explain my understanding of the word "partners." I use the word in a way that includes persons who participate in the Lasallian charisma in very distinct ways and at different levels of commitment. I am not proposing "partners" as a formal category of members, or as persons who would work with others not considered partners. I think to define "partners" in this way would be divisive. We Brothers have gradually learned that looking upon ourselves as the "authorized agents" of Lasallian mission is "obsolete." (*Circ. 435*, pp. 8–9) We are working diligently to transform our schools from "Brothers' schools" to "Lasallian schools." We

are learning to accept our lay collaborators as "partners" rather than as persons who help us run our schools. We don't want to create a new elitist group of "authorized agents" that would expect to be the privileged ones in a school.

Rather than focus on who are "in" and who are "out," we should encourage everyone to become active participants in the task of creating schools that are authentically *Lasallian*. We should never stop inviting, perhaps more indirectly than directly, all members of the educative community to participate wholeheartedly in the Lasallian tradition.

Need for decisions and new governmental structures

Participation of the Brothers in our institutions takes many forms today. In some schools a Brother is Principal and a certain number of Brothers teach. In other schools Brothers teach under the direction of a lay head. In still others no Brothers work in the schools. These institutions have become *Lasallian schools without Brothers*. They remain, however, in the network of District schools and centers. The District leadership team animates them and holds them accountable, like all the other works in the network.

Because of the steady decline in the number of active Brothers, however, some Districts, in the not-too-distant future, will have to decide how many and which schools they wish to maintain in the network, to which schools and centers they will assign communities, what action they will take with the other schools—and, obviously, what criteria they will use to make these choices. John Paul II addresses the "difficult and often painful" task of reassessing apostolates and suggests certain criteria: fidelity to the charisma of the institute, the fostering of community life, attention to the needs of the universal and particular Church, necessity for generous and bold responses to new forms of poverty and to those forgotten, excluded, and abandoned. (*VC*, 63)

Another important matter is that of participation of the laity in decision-making and in

accountability. Clearly “partnership” presupposes both. Our Lasallian Partners need a way to share in the determination and execution of policy regarding schools and works—and in the creation of new works. For this purpose we need suitable structures at every level. Situations vary considerably in the Institute. To describe the structures that schools, communities, and Districts have already created would require more space than I can afford in this letter. I want to make one comment, however, concerning a recent development. Some Districts are adapting their District chapters and District councils to permit lay men and women to function as consultants. Since these bodies must consider all Institute concerns, which include far more than matters relating to the network of District apostolic works, I think these adaptations should be considered temporary at best. On the other hand some Districts have created new structures of partnership that function independently in matters that concern the apostolic network, but always in relation with the District Council. Still other Districts have organized highly effective convocations or assemblies of lay partners and Brothers and charged them with responsibility for proposing fundamental orientations for the future of the mission. A significant number of Districts have lay men or women working full-time as members of the Visitor’s team in various areas of mission.

I strongly support this movement, provided, of course, that structures meet certain conditions; for example, recognition of and respect for the distinct identities of participants in Lasallian mission. In the immediate future, at least, newly created bodies have to be clearly accountable to the Institute regarding the *Lasallian* character of the institutions. Finally, their policies must always be coherent with Institute and District policies.

The time has come, I think, to consider the creation of an international working commission on mission, made up of Lasallian Partners and Brothers. Moreover, I believe the General Chapter should consider the advisabil-

ity and feasibility of some kind of international assembly of partners and Brothers, an assembly that the Superior General would convene, for example, one or two years before the General Chapter. Furthermore, I think that a lay man or woman should be a member of the secretariat for Lasallian mission at the Generalate.

Unexpected and rich insights

Obviously the success of all aspects of this movement depends on the willingness of the laity to assume responsibility for the Lasallian character of our schools, the openness of the Brothers to partnership with the laity, and the organization of effective formation programs at the Institute, District, and school levels. What many parts of the Institute are realizing in these areas is impressive. Nevertheless, we need to do better. The long-range success of Lasallian schools as instruments of human and Christian education is directly dependent on what we do today to invite and assist our lay men and women “to share more intensely in the spirituality and mission” of our tradition. (VC, 54) That is another way of saying that we must do even more to help our lay partners share as married or single lay men and women in the charism of John Baptist de La Salle.

John Paul II writes that the “participation of the laity often brings unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of the charism, leading to a more spiritual interpretation of it and helping to draw from it directions for new activities in the apostolate.” (VC, 55) Is that not an accurate description of our experience?

4. Lasallian Associates

The 42nd General Chapter declared that “the sharing of mission will be a priority at all levels in the Institute during the next seven years.” I think that the Institute has in fact given high priority to the development of what we call “shared mission.” Regions, Districts, and communities have made an extraordinary effort to make known to “the members of the educative

community the essential elements of the Lasallian message.” (*Rule*, 17c) And the good results of this effort are evident.

According to that same article the Brothers offer to those who want it a more intensified sharing of Lasallian spirituality, encouraging them to make a more explicit apostolic commitment. Many Lasallian Partners have in fact endeavored to live their baptismal consecration in accord with the charism of John Baptist de La Salle. Some, relatively few, have become members of groups or communities of faith inspired by that charism. Most, however, have been content to live their commitment wholeheartedly as members of the larger educative community. They have not expressed any particular desire to become members of a Lasallian association.

Search for new forms of association

On the other hand, some of our partners are manifesting a desire to become more closely and more formerly associated with Lasallian mission and with the Institute. Although we lack precise data, indications are that their number is increasing. I think it important that the General Chapter take very seriously this interest and respond creatively to it. I have observed that religious institutes without many schools and teachers have not given high priority to the development of what we call *shared mission*. Many of them, however, have done much more than we have in promoting *associations*. One observer has spoken of an “explosion” of associations linked with religious institutes. In many countries a thirst for “spirituality” is very evident. Unfortunately, some people are seeking to quench this thirst by employing a “supermarket” or eclectic approach. That is one reason, I think, that the synod on consecrated life encouraged religious institutes to make it possible for the laity to “share more intensely in the spirituality and mission” of their institutes and thus foster “renewed spiritual and apostolic dynamism.” (*VC*, 54, 55)

I am very encouraged that certain lay men and women recognize Lasallian spirituality as

highly Christian and apostolic and want to live their faith in accord with it. Last year a Lasallian volunteer spoke with me concerning her future. She was an active member of Lasallian Youth in secondary school, founded a Lasallian Youth group at one of our universities, and is now a Lasallian Volunteer. She knows that she can become a Lasallian Partner, but she is looking for more. How many others want to become Lasallian *Associates*, I do not know. Nevertheless, the interest manifested in various areas of the Institute merits a response.

Of course we have to be clear that what we are talking about is a structure of association for those who are spiritually and apostolically motivated. We are not talking about a “professional” organization. There could never be any expectation, for example, that members of such associations would receive preferential treatment in the appointment of heads of schools and departments.

Our experience and current policies

Various kinds of associations linked with the Institute already exist. We have a long history, for example, of associations of parents and of former students. During the last twenty-five years, however, groups have emerged with a more explicit expression of consecration to God. One of these associations is called *Signum Fidei*. The first group of *Signum Fidei* members consecrated themselves to God during the General Chapter of 1976. They renewed their baptismal consecration and pledged to live it in accord with the charism that the Holy Spirit gave John Baptist de La Salle. They committed themselves to a life of faith and zeal and to collaboration in one way or another in the human and Christian education of youth. Today there are more than eight hundred members of *Signum Fidei* in some thirty countries. The essentials of the association are the same everywhere, but they are expressed in accord with the cultures of their nations. Many Lasallians in Spain belong to communities of faith. A Third Order, founded in France in 1986, has few but very faithful

members. France also has “Lasallian teams” made up of men and women who have completed the intense two-year formation program that the District offers. Different forms of associations are evident in other countries as well.

The experiences of these existing structures can serve as point of departure for discussion during the General Chapter. Moreover, the experiences can be helpful even now in countries that want to respond creatively to the interest some of their partners are manifesting. Article 146 of the *Rule* expresses the official position of the Institute. Written ten years before *Vita Consecrata*, its language is notably similar. It declares that “the spiritual gifts” that the Church received in the person of the Founder go “beyond the confines of the Institute he founded.” The Institute considers the various Lasallian movements a grace which is renewing its vitality. It welcomes men and women who want to live according to its spirit and participate actively in its mission. The Institute helps them achieve their autonomy and at the same time creates “appropriate ties with them and evaluates the authenticity of their Lasallian character.”

Carmelite theologian Bruno Secondin considers the Pope’s treatment of “communion and cooperation” between consecrated religious and the laity “a new horizon, one of the most interesting and open” of *Vita Consecrata*. I agree. I have already referred to some pertinent paragraphs. I find remarkable such passages as “a new chapter, rich in hope, has begun in the history of relations between consecrated persons and the laity . . . experiences of communion and cooperation should be encouraged to give rise to the spread of a fruitful spirituality beyond the confines of the Institute.” (*VC*, 54–56, 62)

Future possibilities

I believe very strongly that we should foster structures that will allow *Lasallian Partners*, if they wish, to become *Lasallian Associates*. I think, as I said earlier, that there can be a variety of ways of living the Lasallian charism.

Lasallians can live “unity in diversity,” manifesting mutual respect, support, cooperation, and collaboration.

The original way of living the Lasallian charism is, of course, as members of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Thanks be to God, we have young people in reasonably good numbers entering our novitiates each year, especially in Africa/Madagascar and Latin America, but in other Regions as well. At all costs we have to avoid lack of clarity and confusion concerning the identity of the Brothers. There can be no blurring of the distinction between Brothers and lay associates. Sister Judith Merkle addresses this point very well:

Religious communities (institutes) need a clear identity around the meaning of core membership in order to invite others to selective participation. They maintain the necessary boundaries for their own identity and respect the fact that those with selective participation have core membership elsewhere. The more a religious community is a random association, the more it is headed for identity confusion and dissipation. It will not be haven for others because its own house is not in order.

(Different Touch, p. 156)

We don’t want to propose to our lay partners a form of association that is in reality a “watered-down” version of the Brothers’ life. Such a proposal is paternalistic and a subtle form of “clericalism” in that its underlying assumption is that a spirituality that is both lay and Lasallian is not feasible. The late Cardinal Pironio, a man of exceptional experience with both consecrated life and lay associations, once said that lay people are not looking for a “new form of consecrated life. What they want is to live in a secular way as true disciples of the Lord.” We need to welcome enthusiastically those who wish to become *Lasallian Associates* and help them create new and original ways of living the Lasallian charism. They themselves, however, must be the protagonists in this

search. Nevertheless, the Institute, Regions, Districts, and communities obviously have to help in establishing appropriate and sound formation programs for prospective *Lasallian Associates*.

5. Lasallian Volunteers

Still another fascinating way lay men and women, most of them young, are living “our founding story” is as *Lasallian Volunteers*. Their commitment is for a limited period. Yet it is an authentic embodiment of the Lasallian charism. The story of John Baptist de La Salle and the gift the Spirit conferred on him motivates and inspires these generous men and women. The pillars of the movement are faith, communion, and service.

Lasallian Volunteers—short-term

During vacation periods throughout the last two decades, many volunteers have offered themselves for service in poor countries, and also in their own nations. These volunteers include pupils, former pupils, teachers, personnel, parents, and friends. Some have served during two, three, or even more vacation periods.

Ordinarily these volunteers are engaged in programs of education or of development that contribute significantly to the life of the people. Simultaneously these activities are valuable educational experiences for the participants. They come to know the richness of cultures previously unknown to them and grow in understanding and esteem for them. Because of the concrete service they have rendered and the personal relationships they have established, they become more aware of and more sensitive to the situation of disadvantaged peoples and frequently become involved in the long-range struggle against poverty and structural injustice.

Lasallian Volunteers—one or more years

The movement of volunteers on a long-term basis has been evolving in diverse ways for

many years. Numerous young men, for example, as an acceptable alternative to mandatory military service, have collaborated in the apostolic works of the Institute in countries other than their own. Some of them have lived with the Brothers.

In recent years, however, increasing numbers of Regions and Districts have been responding positively to the desire of young men and women to dedicate a year or more of their life in the service of the poor. In some areas the responses are *ad hoc*; in others they are more structured. Some include the option of living with the community.

The structured programs differ from Region to Region. In one, for example, approximately thirty volunteers live together in a large community made up of Brothers and volunteers and commit themselves to an intense program of prayer, community, and service of the poor. In another Region thirty to forty volunteers live with the Brothers in communities in poor or troubled areas, either within their Region or in a foreign country. Nearly all are young, but there are exceptions. They work as teachers, teacher aids, catechists, or youth ministers. Some are involved in literacy programs, sports, and a variety of other activities and services. These volunteers are looking for an experience of community life. Therefore, they freely accept the requirement to participate in the community life of the Brothers, including daily prayer and Eucharist. Some former volunteers have become teachers and youth ministers in Lasallian apostolates.

Perhaps we should now be more explicit in inviting older persons to become *Lasallian Volunteers*, including men and women officially retired from teaching.

It is interesting that in 1976, the 40th General Chapter opened the door to the laity not only for involvement in the apostolic activities of the Institute, but also for living in community with the Brothers. (*Circ. 406*, p. 21) Twenty years later, John Paul II declared that the Church should hold “voluntary service, which draws from the richness of consecrated

life, in great esteem.” Moreover, he endorsed a synod proposal that religious institutes enable lay persons “to share fully for a certain period the Institute’s community life and its particular dedication to contemplation or the apostolate.” (VC, 56)

6. *Lasallian Youth*

The 42nd General Chapter recognized “Young Lasallians” as members of the Lasallian Family. The movement of *Lasallian Youth* is an integral dimension of pastoral ministry with young people. It is a structure that is clearly formative. It is equally true, however, that young Lasallians, in their life of faith, communion, and service, share in the charism of John Baptist de La Salle. Their movement, therefore, is an expression of that charism. During the past several years there has been an “explosion” of *Lasallian Youth* activity. That is not an exaggeration—although situations vary considerably. In some areas of the Institute the development is remarkable. In other areas, there is less development or even none at all.

The movement takes different forms. Some Regions or Districts organize national or regional assemblies and periodic international assemblies. Sometimes the programs are five to seven days in duration and include well-organized service projects. Many of our schools have active groups of *Lasallian Youth*. Members meet weekly or monthly for prayer, planning of service projects, and reflection on their experience. They commit themselves to service on a weekly or monthly basis. Some have more extensive projects during the vacation period.

7. **Affiliated Members and Benefactors**

For many years the Institute has given public recognition to men and women who have participated actively in Lasallian mission or have contributed significantly to it in one way or another. This recognition takes different forms. But the two “classic” forms are *affiliation* and *benefaction*. The Institute grants persons who have collaborated in Lasallian mission in a

striking way over a long period the title of “affiliated members.” The Institute recognizes still others with the title of “benefactors.” Public recognition of the profound relationship existing between certain lay men and women and the Institute is both necessary and appropriate. We need to express publicly our gratitude and appreciation.

These forms of recognition predate the contemporary Lasallian movement. I think that the General Chapter should consider *affiliation* and *benefaction* in the light of recent developments.

IV. **LASALLIAN MISSION**

The challenge: live today our founding story. We have a “founding story” to live today because John Baptist de La Salle gradually discerned God’s will in his regard and embarked in faith on an adventure that has continued for 320 years. He came to believe that God was confiding him with a special mission. We would now say that the Holy Spirit bestowed on him a *charism*. He shared that charism with the first Brothers who then began the process of transmitting it to successive generations of Brothers. Today we understand more clearly than before that living this charism is not reserved to the Brothers. We have just reflected on diverse ways that lay men, women, and youth can live the charism.

The charism of John Baptist de La Salle is essentially apostolic and, therefore, oriented toward mission. The mission confided to us is the human and Christian education of youth, poor youth especially. The mission is also at the service of young adults, adults, and “veteran” adults. (*Rule*, 3, 13) My purpose now is to offer brief reflections on seven topics related to Lasallian mission: 1. the Reign of God; 2. education in the faith; 3. pastoral ministries; 4. education of the poor as the effective priority; 5. education in social justice; 6. advocates for social change; 7. defense of the rights of children.

1. The Reign of God

Last year I suggested that the notion of the *Reign of God* provides an excellent framework for understanding Lasallian mission in general and the defense of the rights of children in particular. To “live today our founding story” includes a determined commitment to establish, renew, and diversify our works “in accord with what the Reign of God requires.” Every Lasallian school and center must be “a sign of the Kingdom.” Its orientations, atmosphere, and quality of relationships must “signify” the interpersonal communion that the Reign of God requires. More than that, each school or center must be a “means of salvation.” Our ministry requires us “to work effectively for building up the Kingdom of God.” (*Rule*, 11, 3, 69)

John Paul II says that “by their charisms consecrated persons become signs of the Spirit pointing to a new future.” The expectation of Christians is directed toward the future Kingdom, but that “expectation becomes mission so that the Kingdom may become more fully established here and now.” (*VC*, 27) The Reign of God “aims at transforming human relationships; it grows gradually as people slowly learn to live, forgive, and serve one another.” Its nature is “one of communion among all human beings—with one another and with God.” Christianity, he says, longs for “universal fellowship and sisterhood, for all men and women are sons and daughters of the same Father and brothers and sisters in Christ.” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 14, 15, 43).

Jesus dedicated himself to the proclamation and establishment of the Reign of God. Because our vocation is to make visible the loving and saving presence of Christ, we dedicate ourselves to the proclamation and establishment of the Reign of God. It is within this framework that we situate *Lasallian Mission*.

The Regions of the Institute have submitted to the General Chapter several major challenges. They include the following: evangelization today; announcing Jesus Christ to the young in a world that is multi-cultural, multi-

religious, secularized, and dominated by consumerism and individualism. (*2nd Letter of Preparatory Commission*, p. 17) To live today our founding story, we must confront this challenge.

2. Education in the Faith

The General Council and members of the various secretariats studied recently the situation of education in the faith in Lasallian mission today. I do not intend to report on these meetings or to discuss the issues, one of which is terminology. That is a matter for our specialists. For convenience I will employ the expression “education in the faith.” I have reflected on this theme in several pastoral letters, most recently in the letter of 1997. In that same year we published *The Lasallian Mission of Human and Christian Education*, which devotes many pages to the Christian dimension of our schools, education in the faith, faith in relation to culture, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, and other relevant topics. Moreover, you have recently received the *Bulletin* with its report on the fifth colloquium, entitled *Communicating the Faith Today*. Even more recently you have received our *Report to the General Chapter*, which has many pertinent comments.

I limit myself now to raising the topic and to expressing my conviction that it must be a major theme of the General Chapter. The temptation to back away from the challenge implicit in education in the faith is great. In the face of the indifference and occasional hostility that young people manifest, we sometimes feel helpless and fearful of facing the challenge squarely. Nevertheless, I don’t want to exaggerate. Lasallians are increasingly taking constructive action. In some areas of the Lasallian world, our schools offer well-organized classes of education in the faith or of religious studies on a daily basis. More frequently, schools have classes twice a week. Brothers and Lasallian Partners are striving to understand young people and their milieu. They are trying to find the “right moment” and the “appropriate language to speak of Jesus Christ.” (*Rule*, 15)

Catechists by vocation

Brothers, if we do not confront this issue, we are not serious about “living today our founding story.” De La Salle’s vision of the Brother, evident everywhere in his writings, is unambiguous. We must, of course, put flesh on that vision in a world very different from his own:

You have been appointed by God to succeed the holy apostles in teaching the doctrine of Jesus Christ, and in confirming his holy law in the minds and hearts of those whom you instruct when you teach catechism, which is your principal function. . . . Did you apply yourself sufficiently to this during the year? Have you looked upon this task as your principal duty in their regard? (*Med.* 145.3, 91.3)

Inspired by such passages, the authors of the *Declaration* state that we are *catechists by vocation*. (38.1) Despite the difficulties in communicating the faith today, “we do not renounce in any way our determination to proclaim Jesus Christ.” (39.4) To be a *catechist by vocation* is to love and respect our young people as distinct human persons. It is to accept them “as they are” and to take them seriously. It is to walk side by side with them, permitting them to share openly their perplexities and questions about the meaning of life and about religious faith. To be a catechist by vocation is to share with young people what we see, think, and believe, without trying to impose our faith on them.

Formation and leadership

Obviously, Brothers, we—and all others engaged in education in the faith—require sound intellectual formation. We must insist that all those involved in education in the faith in our schools be well qualified and hold views that are consistent with the teaching of the Church. We can be pleased that in many parts of the Institute, our young Brothers are receiving a solid education in religious sciences, catechetics, and pedagogy.

One final remark concerns leadership. Many Brothers throughout our history have been outstanding leaders in the field of education in the faith. Some Brothers today provide extraordinary leadership to the Church both locally and nationally. Moreover, we are educating hundreds of “catechists” in our universities and specialized centers around the world. For example, our new centers in Abidjan and Nairobi are educating young religious of more than fifty religious institutes. On the other hand some Brothers ask whether we are exercising the leadership that we should exercise. I ask that question myself and hope the General Chapter will consider it.

3. Pastoral Ministries

In listing pastoral ministries as a separate category, I do not separate it from education in the faith. By pastoral ministries I refer to those activities that contribute to education in the faith but ordinarily take place outside the classroom. Organization of pastoral activities is very diverse in the Lasallian world. Still, everywhere I sense a renewed interest in helping young people become aware of the presence of God in their lives and learn to pray. Schools have creative programs to help their students appreciate the sacraments of the Eucharist and of Reconciliation, and to prepare for the sacrament of Matrimony. They make retreats and days of recollection available to all. They organize small communities of faith that permit those who are serious about their faith to live it with others who seek the same possibility. Many schools have pastoral centers where young people can receive counseling and find pertinent reading or multimedia materials. Often those responsible for these centers organize talks, seminars, and discussions on topics important to young people today.

Faith, communion, service

In many of our schools today, young people devote two or more hours a week to service of the

poor, aged, or sick. Some schools require a minimum number of hours; others make it voluntary. We could classify such programs as “social” rather than “pastoral.” Personally, however, I believe that they are very effective instruments of evangelization. Last March I had the opportunity to participate in a panel discussion on “service as formative.” One of our Lasallian Partners mentioned that he had been responsible for organizing service activities for some fifteen years. Yet during the past seven years he has linked the program to the movement of Lasallian Youth and to the three “pillars” of faith, communion, and service. He remarked on the positive impact of this linkage. It has situated service within a framework of faith and deepened its meaning and significance.

I have already treated the Lasallian Youth “explosion” in many parts of the Lasallian world. Nevertheless, the topic is very pertinent to this reflection on pastoral activities. I read recently a fascinating interview given by Nicolas Toussaint, a young Lasallian in France. He discovered these pillars as a student in one of our schools. He later became a Lasallian volunteer and worked in a program for marginalized and excluded youth while living with the Brothers. Nicolas is now a volunteer in the Philippines. He commented in the interview, very perceptively, that he recognizes “a unity and a force in the three pillars: faith, communion, and service.” Nevertheless, because of what he calls a “brilliant intuition,” these three pillars do not constitute an “entrance requirement.” They are instead “three paths proposed to each youth to advance toward unity.”

Often I have listened with great emotion as young people have reflected on their experience as volunteers or young Lasallians. They invariably speak of the tremendous impact that the experience of service has had upon them, asserting that they have received far more than they have given. In fact some say that the experience has changed their lives. A year ago I listened to some thirty Lasallian university youth who had just returned from a one month winter “break,” a vacation they had used for serv-

ice. They described the poor people they had just met and served. Some were moved to tears as they spoke . . . and were unable to continue.

My conviction grows steadily that the experience of groups founded on faith, communion and service is formative. Some young people discover or rediscover God and religious faith. Others find a new image of Jesus Christ. They come to know him as loving and compassionate, as the Good Samaritan and the Good Shepherd. Still others discover a new understanding of Church. Finally, I think that through service youth come to know intimately a world of poor and disadvantaged people, a world they hardly know now, or know only cerebrally.

These pastoral programs are, I think, Providential. They are effective. When structures emerge that are effective in educating young people in the faith today, we need to promote them!

Sense of vocation

In both classroom teaching and pastoral activities, we have to foster in our youth a sense of vocation. They have to see that God is active in their life, now and in the future. They have to recognize the Providence of God as they choose a partner for marriage and as they make career choices or search for employment. They have to be open to the possibility of a call to the priesthood and religious life—and our young men, to the possibility of a vocation to the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Decisions to enter seminaries and postulancies are often counter-cultural. In the face of frequent family opposition and bewilderment among their peers, candidates need our support, encouragement, and accompaniment.

4. Education of the Poor as the Effective Priority

Living today our founding story requires us to take seriously article 40a of the *Rule*. Our Districts must establish a plan of evolution of apostolic works that will make direct service of the poor progressively the effective priority.

Implementation of this article requires strengthening works for the poor that already exist, passing some of our current works to others, and creating new ways of educating the poor.

Article 40a states clearly that such a plan includes ways to recruit or train replacements that will permit the release of Brothers for education of the poor. Interestingly, the *Rule* gives the same directive when speaking of the missionary activities of the Institute. In 19a we read that to respond to pressing needs in other countries, we might have to confide to others some of our current works. The basis of this orientation is *Ad Gentes*, 40, of Vatican II.

These passages are definitely “hard sayings” for many of us. Yet John Paul II confirms them by urging religious, even if their institutes are experiencing a paucity of vocations, “to respond generously and boldly to new forms of poverty through concrete efforts, even if necessarily on a small scale, and above all in the most abandoned areas.” (*VC*, 63) He says further that it is God who calls consecrated persons to present new answers to new problems in ways consistent with their original charism. (*VC*, 73)

The number of Districts taking concrete steps to implement articles 40a and 19a is increasing. We are witnessing an impressive number of new projects, activities, and even schools and centers. These initiatives are not “on the margin” as they perhaps would have been a few years ago. They are instead in the “mainstream” of District apostolic works. Some Districts have withdrawn communities or reduced the number of Brothers in certain schools, maintaining the institutions as Lasallian schools of the District. They have reinforced current works for the poor and have created new ones. The withdrawal of a community from a school in no way implies a lack of confidence that the school can be an effective instrument of human and Christian education. It implies instead that we Brothers have a particular commitment to the education of the poor and, because of our vows, have the freedom to act.

The significant progress and positive attitude of the Brothers is encouraging. We need to keep moving in this direction!

5. Education in Social Justice

We see progress also in the creation of effective programs of education in social justice. Again, the *Rule* is clear. (14, 40). No institution, whatever kind of education it offers and whatever the age of its students, can justifiably use the label *Lasallian* unless the students are learning to be brothers and sisters, not only among themselves, but also to and for others, particularly those in need. This is a message we need to send uncompromisingly and unambiguously to all members of the educative community.

Specifically we have to organize programs of education in world problems: courses, lectures, assemblies, seminars, reading materials, multimedia materials, etc. In addition we need to educate our young people in the social teachings of the Church. Then we have to organize programs of service similar to those I have already described, with opportunities for reflection on the experience in the light of the Gospel.

6. Advocates for Social Change

We need to consider still another dimension of our commitment to justice: Lasallians should be advocates for social change. We have an enormous force of Brothers, teachers, personnel, board members, parents, former students, friends, and young people. What we can do depends on our imagination and determination, but, of course, the degree of freedom of expression and accountability of politicians that exists in our countries has an influence. Whatever the political situation, however, we have to “brainstorm” possibilities, then develop a plan of action. In most countries we can have an effective impact through participation in campaigns for desired change. The Pope writes that all Christians must have a preferential option for the poor, but consecrated persons “in a special way.” The Lord calls them “to denounce the injustices committed against so many sons and daughters of God, and commit themselves to the promotion of justice.” (*VC*, 82)

7. Defense of the Rights of Children

Last year I wrote that the situation of countless children in today's world is an unspeakable scandal. I said that our Lasallian charism invites us to make solidarity with neglected, abandoned, marginalized, and exploited children a particular focus for our mission. Trying to be concrete I wrote seven pages of possible actions. Nevertheless, I acknowledged that I am not at all an expert in the issues involved. God willing, I will be able to devote time after the General Chapter to research and to contact with persons and agencies active in the field.

The response of both Brothers and Lasallian Partners has been encouraging. I hope that the General Chapter will promote the defense of the rights of children as a specific way that Lasallians can live today our founding story.

AFTERWORD

"You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also *a great history still to be accomplished!*

Look to the future,
where the Spirit is sending you in order to do
even greater things."

(VC, 110)

These words capture the spirit of the synod accurately and succinctly. They capture also what I have tried to say in the title and content of this pastoral letter: **The challenge: live today our founding story.**

The Pope reminds us, however, that religious institutes "have a future to the extent that still other men and women generously welcome God's call." (VC, 64) I have written about diverse ways that men and women can live the Lasallian charism. The Brothers' vocation, however, is the original way. We believe with the Founder that "the need for this Institute is very great" and with the 41st General Chapter that "the young, the poor, the world, and the Church still need the ministry of the Brothers." (Rule, 141)

I thank God that we have excellent young men in various stages of formation in the Institute. Nevertheless, we all know that some Regions have a good number of vocations while other Regions have few. I had originally intended to include a section on the pastoral ministry of vocations, but this letter is already too long. Besides, I have addressed the topic in many other pastoral letters, particularly in the letter of 1998, where there are eight pages on vocations.

Nevertheless, I would like to share with you the initiative of Brother Jeffrey Calligan, whose position in the United States/Toronto Region includes coordination and animation of the pastoral ministry of vocations. He plans to send a letter to each Brother in the Region concerning the vocation situation and invite him to return a card saying what precisely he is going to do to promote vocations. I applaud the initiative and pray that it will bear fruit. I suggested two years ago that if every Brother would invite at least one qualified young man to consider the possibility of a vocation to the Institute, our statistics would be different! May many Brothers throughout the Institute commit themselves to the pastoral ministry of vocations!

Several times over the years, I have mentioned certain recommendations of Brother Cornelius Luke, longtime Visitor General. In a visit during my novitiate year, he suggested that every day we pray a passage from the Imitation of Christ. I have not succeeded in finding the reference, but I recall the passage because I have prayed it regularly since my novitiate:

*Lord, what I have done in the past is nothing;
give me the grace perfectly to begin.*

On this first day of the new year, new century, and new millennium, a year of great significance and importance for all Lasallians, I make those words my prayer for each of you and for all others participating in Lasallian mission. When I apply the prayer to Lasallians, however, the first part of the prayer becomes hyperbole. What we have done in the past is definitely not "nothing." On the contrary, the

good that generations of Lasallians have done during our 320-year history is beyond imagining. Nevertheless, we wish it had been even better than it has been, and we ask pardon for our failures and shortcomings.

But it is primarily the second part that I pray today:

*Lord, give us the grace "perfectly to begin."
Give us the grace to live today our founding story.
I pray through the intercession of Mary,
Our Lady of the Star, Our Lady of Good Counsel.
I pray through the intercession
of our beloved Father and Founder,
Saint John Baptist de La Salle.
I pray through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Fraternally in St. De La Salle,

Brother John Johnston, FSC
Superior General