

**BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS**



**Pastoral Letter to the Brothers**

**Being Brothers in community:  
our primary association**

**Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría**  
**Superior General**

**December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2001**

**Via Aurelia - Rome, Italy**

# PASTORAL LETTER TO THE BROTHERS

## **BEING BROTHERS IN COMMUNITY: OUR PRIMARY ASSOCIATION**

"I Promise to unite myself, and to remain in society  
with the Brothers of the Christian Schools"

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC  
Superior General  
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The Nativity of the Lord

Dear Brothers,

*"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body"*(Colossians 3:12-15).

I begin this pastoral letter to the Brothers with these words from Paul, and I ask the Lord, the Word incarnate, that during this Christmas and throughout the year which we begin soon, to help us discover again *"how very good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!"* (Psalm 133:1) This is precisely the topic of this Letter: to reflect on our being a Brother in community as our primary association.

## The year that is ending

Looking back at the year that is ending I am filled with two feelings. First of all I cannot hide a sense of unease because of the world events that have occurred since the tragedy of 11 September. This sense has been increased by the war and its consequences, and it is reinforced by the uncertainty in which we live today and in which young people live as they face their future as well as the poor in view of their exclusion from even the most basic goods.

Nevertheless, as St. Paul says *where sin increased, grace abounded all the more* (Romans 5:20). Christian hope encourages us to discover signs of life in the world and therefore the second feeling I have is one of confidence in a God *who desires everyone to be saved* (1 Timothy 2:4) as the Founder reminded us, along with the certitude that this God of life made flesh in Jesus Christ will have the last word about the idols of death which today threaten us.

Some of the concrete situations that most concern me today at the Institute level are the following:

First of all, there is the climate of insecurity that we experience everywhere, especially in the United States. I feel very united to the Brothers and members of the Lasallian family who have experienced this reality first-hand or have had to mourn victims

of the terrorist acts of a few months ago. I believe that we all have the impression that life will be different since those events. I hope that there will be a chance to find paths of peace and harmony, solidarity and justice for all.

The war continues affecting our works in the Holy Land. Already last year there was talk of concern for the situation there, especially at our Bethlehem University. Unfortunately, the news this year has not improved and violence has even reached the doors of the Basilica of the Nativity. As published on our web site, our University was the object of two long nights of intense Israeli bombing when Bethlehem was taken over by the Israeli army. All campus buildings, except the library, were affected by gunshots. There is proof of at least forty-five tank projectiles and hundreds of shells have been found. Sixty-six windows were shattered, including forty in the soon to be inaugurated new academic building. The Brothers' residence, where eight Americans, three British and one Palestinian live, was hit at least ten times during the last two days [of Israeli occupation]. Some of the Brothers' bedrooms were hit directly or indirectly. Thanks be to God there was not one death or injury. By recalling this, I want to thank the courageous witness of our Brothers and partners, as well as the interest shown by the USA Bishops' Conference, in the person of its President, Bishop Fiorenza, and by several Vatican agencies I learned of during the Synod.

The war in Afghanistan, and its effects, are closely affecting the lives of our Brothers and Lasallians in Pakistan. I am thinking also about our Brothers and the Lasallian Family in Colombia, in Sri Lanka, and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as in other areas in Africa where violence has increased and peace accords have not been achieved. These are situations about which we ought to feel a sense of solidarity and we should ask the Lord of history to help us experience in our own bodies the suffering of others, and to help us become builders of peace.

### **350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Founder's birth**

The year just ended allowed us also to celebrate the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Founder's birth on the congregational level. We had hoped that this would be a remembrance of life received from the Founder and that this remembrance would be spelled out by concrete actions in favor of life threatened in all its forms, especially as regards the poor. Brothers, I cannot imagine a better tribute to our Founder than one which turns out to be a project or program in favor of the poor. I hope that we were all able to celebrate the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Founder with the young who were so close to his heart.

In terms of the number “350” there have been creative activities involving solidarity and service. It is a shame that all of them will not be known, but it is

worth the time to point out some examples. There was the one done by St. Mary's Press with the help of a Lasallian Educational Fund and a private donation made by the Winona community. This program made available 350 Catholic Youth Bibles to young people in detention centers in the United States. And then the La Salle Guadiana School of Durango, District of North Mexico, created an academic program at the technical level for 350 needy young people. In the end, this number was surpassed, thereby making progress towards new anniversaries.

The District of France, birthplace of the Founder, invited me to participate in three activities that were planned to recall this anniversary. First there was the meeting in Rheims for Lasallian Teams where I was very impressed by the commitment both on the spiritual as well as the educational levels of a good number of our lay partners, many of whom already live out true forms of association.

No less important was the meeting with young Brothers of Europe in Thillois. The theme for the meeting was: *Being a young Brother within the new context of the Institute*. These young Brothers shared dreams and ideals with particular insistence on the search for significant programs to respond to new needs in the educational service of the poor, and the search also for a quality, community life. Finally, there was the Lasallian Education Congress in Lyon which revolved

around the question of Saint John Baptist de La Salle's work in his own time and how it has made a profound mark on very current educational tasks.

## **The Pope's letter**

It seems to me that the letter is worth speaking about separately, even though we all know that it deals with the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Founder's birth. The Pope, in a gesture of paternal affection, wanted to share in giving thanks, along with the Brothers and all those who share our ideals, for the example of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, who founded our Institute “*to give a Christian education to the poor and to strengthen the young in the way of truth*”, and with regard to the topic of the Letter, the Pope invites us to make visible the gift of brotherhood made by Christ to the Church. “*Such a community is naturally attractive. The exhilaration that radiates from it, even in the midst of difficulties, becomes a witness which confers on religious life a great power of attraction, and which is a source of vocations*” (number 4).

## **The Synod of Bishops**

The invitation to participate as an auditor afforded me an experience that was both rich yet disparate. On the one hand was the possibility of getting to know the incredible cultural variety in which Christianity had been incarnated, the many initiatives of Chris-



tian love and solidarity, the suffering experienced in some places, the ideals involved in making the Kingdom of God real. On the other hand there was the limited topic of the Synod itself, which centered around the role of the Bishop. This, of course, meant that the majority of the discussion dealt with internal problems. Personally, I would have liked stronger language regarding hope in the Lord Jesus in a world that is today immersed in so many difficulties and which is in need of hope more than ever.

My personal intervention in the Synod was about the Bishop and charismatic diversity. In particular, I made reference to the lay religious life of men and women which makes up 82.2% of consecrated life today, but as we know very well, it is not always appreciated and understood by other members of the people of God or it is considered to be incomplete or “second class”. Therefore, I said that it is important that Bishops recognize the reality of the lay consecrated life, that they appreciate and promote this original vocation that enriches the variety of gifts within the Church. It is also important that its “church ministry” be recognized and that its members are able to participate openly in the various organizations and councils that study and decide both the nature of and propositions about religious life on both universal and local levels.

I also said that our lay congregations are certainly not without their challenges, particularly at a time when

some ask themselves if the life cycle of religious life has ended. I said, too, that I had the impression that often when speaking of religious life today, we fixate on statistics and withdrawals and not so much on urgent responses to today's needs. It seems to me that we should start from a religious life that is not focused on itself but one which is open to the needs of the world. It is here where we need the support and guidance of our bishops so that our religious life is not merely a '*remembrance of the past*' but above all a '*prophecy for the future*' (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* 3).

## BEING BROTHERS IN COMMUNITY: OUR PRIMARY ASSOCIATION

*"I promise to unite myself, and to remain in society  
with the Brothers of the Christian Schools"*

*"The Institute is the first form of association desired by St. John Baptist de La Salle. The original vow for the service of the poor, which associated the Founder with twelve Brothers in 1694, is the source of Lasallian associations of lay persons and religious who wish to be part of the Lasallian Mission. This is where new forms of association for the mission have their origin" (Circular 447, page 3).*

If there is one topic that is deeply rooted in my heart it is that of our brotherhood. I am sure that you will recall my first words after I was elected Superior. I repeat them here: *"Our treasure, our secret, our greatest wealth is to be Brothers"*. I believe that the text of our last General Chapter with which I began these reflections gives us a very important key that goes beyond mere emotion. Community was for the Founder and the first Brothers the primary form of association, and it is not only this first community experience that should motivate us and be our source for new responses in association for mission, but the current lived reality in each of our communities should do so

as well. Opening ourselves to association with lay persons does not diminish the importance of the Brothers' community but, on the contrary, it strengthens it and gives it new vitality and drive.

I was struck by two phrases referring to our brotherhood during the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter of 1993. They seem to me to be original and stimulating. The first one comes from Claretian Father José Cristo Rey García Paredes: “*It belongs to you to **exaggerate** Christian brotherhood. That is why you are called **Brothers***” (Bulletin 239, page 33); the second one we find in the Message from the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter: “*Brothers living a **contagious** brotherhood among themselves, for their students and with others who wish to be associated with them in their work*” (Circular 435, page 8).

We are called to be witnesses of brotherhood. I do not know if we have learned how to use our brotherhood, our being Brothers, as one of the prophetic elements of our vocation, as one of the most important ingredients of our mission. We need to ask ourselves to what point is our brotherhood exaggerated and contagious today. And this is especially important since the world and religious life in particular are rediscovering the value of and the need for community.

However, community life at the present time includes a very special connotation. In today's globalized world, with the fall of the great ideologies, we

are living through an exciting time in which the search for communion is becoming a basic need. We feel today like seekers of truth and the participation of all enriches us, rather than like crusaders who defend an idea. Current cosmology and sociology have set aside competition between beings, on which Darwin insisted, and class struggle that characterized Marxism.

Nevertheless, today there are worrying signs, powerful ones at that, of just the opposite, such as irrational terrorism that sacrifices innocent victims, a religious fundamentalism that justifies violence in the name of God, the continuation and strengthening of conflicts between people with no solution in sight, an apparent opposition, at times for political purposes, between Islam and Christianity, the consequences of war, increasing unemployment, growing immigration, many children with no future, abandoned street children, arms manufacturing and arms sales and globalization itself that leaves the great majority of impoverished people outside and excluded...

As we face the future in the new millennium that has just begun, John Paul II invites the Church to be *the house and the school of a communion that invites us all to promote a spirituality of communion: "making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed...a spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the*

*mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us...a spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a 'gift for me'" (Novo Millennio Ineunte 43).*

The document *Vita Consecrata*, for its part, asserts: *"The consecrated life can certainly be credited with having effectively helped to keep alive in the Church the obligation of fraternity as a form of witness to the Trinity. By constantly promoting fraternal love, also in the form of common life, the consecrated life has shown that **sharing in the Trinitarian communion can change human relationships**" (Vita Consecrata 41).*

Since the events of last September 11<sup>th</sup> which directly or indirectly have affected all of us, the unity of the human family is at stake and our community witness is charged with new meaning and strength. Facing global uncertainty, terrorism, war, and growing poverty...we should feel, first of all, that we are in solidarity with those who are suffering and with those who seek answers to a future which is unclear and, secondly, we should show with our own life that an alternative model in society, centered on Gospel values and made visible in our community life, is possible.

I hope that the topic of this letter might inspire our prayer, motivate our reflection and promote our actions so as to put into practice in each District Proposition 18 from our 43<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter: “*The General Chapter requests all Districts, Sub-Districts and Delegations to devote a year to the renewal of our community life, based on the study of the basic elements of the spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*” (Circular 447, page 39).

## **Looking at our origins**

The Founder in futuristic terms spoke to us about the “**spirit of community**”: “*This Institute will always manifest and maintain a true Spirit of community*” (Rule 1718, C. 3, 1). Here he is assuming a union so close, so intimate and steady that it may be considered as a mirror and an anticipation of the union that exists within the Trinity: “*not exactly the same, because the three Divine Persons have only one essence, but the union among the apostles would participate in the union of the Trinity in such way that their union of mind and heart, desired by Jesus Christ for them, would have the same effect as the essential union of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*” (Meditation 39.3).

We know that *Together and by Association* for the Founder and the first Brothers was an ideal, an essential trait. It dealt with living out the lifestyle of

the first Christian community. It meant not only being teachers for young people, but also being their brothers, friends, servants; it meant cooperating in God's work of building up a fraternal world in the image of the Trinity.

The Rule gives us a text that I personally appreciate as one of the constitutive elements of community from the time of our origins and, although I cited this in my first pastoral letter, I think it is important to recall again: ***“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”*** (Rule 47).

This text presents to us the three basic elements of all communities, yesterday's and today's. First of all, the Founder and the first Brothers lived out an experience of God, they experienced a passion for God, so much so that *“procuring his glory”* became an existential goal; they experienced themselves as being empty so as to look at the world and the story of mankind with the eyes of God, the God of Jesus Christ who took on mankind's history. The Rule expresses this clearly when it tells us *“As he became aware, by God's grace, John Baptist de La Salle...”*



(Rule 1); “*John Baptist de La Salle, came to discern, in faith...*” (Rule 11). We can speak of this as a **mystical** moment.

Secondly, there is a way of looking at the world, in which specific ways of denying the Kingdom are seen. It is a free, merciful, transforming coming together. It is a passion for the world. It is the mission, the **political** moment, in which is discovered that the greatest glory of God is that mankind live. In the same texts from the Rule this second movement appears. “*Aware, by God's grace, of the human and spiritual distress of the children of the artisans and the poor...*” (Rule 1); “*Deeply moved by the way the children of the artisans and the poor were abandoned and left to themselves...*” (Rule 11).

Thirdly, a community response is given, a body is born that is organized in history to energize the world in the direction of God's plan: “*He brought these teachers together in a community and subsequently founded with them the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*” (Rule 1). This is the **organizing** moment that comes from a common mystical and political moment.

Today, this dynamic fidelity to our origins should bring us to update again this triple movement: the spiritual, the analytic, and the operative. Our community life should be nourished, supported and mo-

tivated by this triple common experience. If this does not happen, then community life will be merely an “institutionalized” experience which will be reduced to accepting extrinsic norms, to be satisfied with rules, regulations and behaviors or, as a contrary reaction, to closing in on itself in a type of egoistic individualism.

The early Lasallian community was aware that it was not simply a collection of individuals that found themselves gathered together casually or by accident. It was an association of persons who wove fraternal ties among themselves, based on a common experience: that of having been “caught” by God to serve poor, young people.

Blain understood that here was found one of the great Lasallian ideas, and he expressed it in terms that now seem very appropriate: *“The name of BROTHER was agreed upon and that is what was taken...This name taught them the charity that gave rise to the Institute should be its soul and life; that charity should prevail over all deliberations and shape all plans; that it is charity which should be the guiding principle which should regulate all processes and be the driving force behind all words and works. He told them that, as Brothers among themselves, they should offer reciprocal witness of a tender yet spiritual friendship. And he told them that, considering themselves the older Brothers of those*

*who come to receive instruction, they should carry out this ministry of charity with a charitable heart”* (CL 17, pages 240-241).

For the Founder, the community itself is the place for the evangelical education of its members: *“It is mainly in communities that good example is most notable and has the most power and efficacy. All those who live there together encourage one another to practice what is most holy and most perfect in the Gospel maxims”* (Mediation 180.1). That is why the model for the early Christian community presented in Acts is the ongoing point of reference: *“Do you make yourself one with your Brothers? Do you speak to them and treat them with love? Do you not pay too much attention to your dislikes and antipathies? Deepen within yourself the spirit that in community you should live anew the spirit of the first Christians, who were all of one heart and one soul”* (Meditation 113.2).

Finally, for the Founder the future of the Institute depended on the quality of our community life. We see in the Rule of 1718 a type of futuristic view that invites us to *preserve the spirit of community*. And in one of the Meditations that is proposed to us to evaluate the year that is ending he tells us clearly: *“Union in a community is a precious gem, which is why Our Lord so often recommended it to his apostles before he died. If we lose this, we lose everything. Preserve it with care, therefore, if you want your community to survive”* (Meditation 91.2).

## Jesus our brother

Our community is Christocentric and not egocentric. The community has Jesus Christ as its basic stone: *“You are members of the household of God, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord”* (Ephesians 2: 20-21). The centrality of the mystery of Christ is a Lasallian constant. For the Founder, Jesus Christ was in our midst within the community and therefore the first fruit that sprung up from this presence is *“that all of our actions may be related to Jesus Christ and tend toward Him as to their center and draw all of their power from Him as the branches of the vine draw their sap from the vine, and so there is continual movement of our actions to Jesus Christ, and of Jesus Christ to us since it is He who gives them the spirit of life”* (EM 34).

In a quick but incomplete reading of the Gospel, we can discover what being a brother meant for Jesus. The quintessential parable is that of the prodigal son, which we could also call the parable of the two brothers. This parable gives us some clues with regard to the journey. The older brother in the parable, regarding the brother who returned, speaks about him contemptuously, saying to the father: *this son of yours*. And the father responds with: *this brother of yours*. Jesus makes us see that being and feeling like brothers is the best way to appreciate persons (cf. Luke 15: 30-32).

Therefore the invitation made to us is not to look for any other word. *“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father--the one in heaven”* (Matthew 23: 8-9).

After his resurrection, Jesus found no better title for his disciples than that of my brothers: *“Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’ ”* (John 20: 17).

Being a brother who shares flesh and blood, who likens himself to his brothers, who is in solidarity with their sufferings, is what Christ did, the merciful and faithful priest, the pioneer of our salvation. *“Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested”* (Hebrews 2: 14-18).

We are called to imitate the image of the Son, because He is the firstborn. Just as in a family where the younger brothers feel the need to imitate the older siblings, so we are called to imitate the image of Jesus, our older brother.

*“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family”* (Romans 8:29).

But there is even more. As expressed in *Vita Consecrata*, the community is above all a God-enlightened space that allows us to realize the mystery of the resurrected Jesus, as the Founder had sensed when he proposed to us as one of the ways in which we put ourselves in the presence of God, the living presence of Jesus in the midst of those who are gathered in his name. *“In community life, then, it should in some way be evident that, more than an instrument for carrying out a specific mission, fraternal communion is a God-enlightened space in which to experience the hidden presence of the Risen Lord”* (*Vita Consecrata* 42).

## **Fraternal community**

I would like to start from a text of a personal friend of mine in Guatemala, a Missionary of the Sacred Heart. This text was published some years ago in the

Bulletin of the Conference for Religious of Guatemala: *“The religious community expresses itself and conducts its affairs, not basing itself on structures but on ‘friends’, as Jesus said, who want to participate more radically in his life and mission to give witness to the fraternity and to the filiation to which all are called. Therefore, there ought to be a place to confirm oneself in the faith and to let oneself be confirmed. And the first criterion of community life is that it be truly Christian. In order for that to happen, we have to ask ourselves if, in this regard, respect, helpfulness, freedom, participation, collaboration, responsibility, happiness, sensitivity, understanding, really do exist. And these are all above and beyond any norms or structures. In order to achieve this, dialogue and community discernment are indispensable as well as creating spaces where this can happen”* (Ángel García, *Carta Confregua*, August 1993).

The above seems to me to be fundamental; the community should be in favor of the growth of the person of each one of the Brothers. The principle of individuality and of belonging should both grow at the same time. Each person should have his own first name and a common last name. The community ought to integrate union and differences; personal aspirations and group spirit; psychological requirements and the common good; the Personal Annual Program (PAP) and the Community Annual Program (CAP).

The solution to these necessary and dynamic tensions can only be achieved with a balance of polarities, and an awareness that the individual cannot be fulfilled without the community and that personalization does not end with the subject himself, but in one's being for others, in forgetting about oneself, in community and in mission.

We are also aware that a person's growth does not mean, as is sometimes heard, *individualism*. Individualism is the antithesis of dialogue and of communion with God and with mankind. It pretends to have a direct link with God, without taking into account human intervention.

There are two ways to understand growth in community. The first is to think of the community as a type of **sphere of influence**: lifestyle, community events, work, living under the same roof and having the same structures...The second is to think of the community as a **relationship**, which involves communion, interpersonal relationships. If in the past we thought that to improve the community we had to change structures before anything else, today we believe that to improve the community we should above all strengthen and enrich our relationships.

This will avoid our reducing community life to a place where work is performed or falling into the trap of individualism, as we prepare ourselves to



walk with others, to dialogue with them, to confront them, to leave ourselves open for their questions, to reach a consensus...This will also help us discover the transforming value of love and experience the Kingdom of God in our midst when we grow together, when we care for one another, when we work on common projects, when we pray together, when we suffer together. I think that no one will deny our capacity for work. But work in itself cannot guarantee the development of some basic dimensions of human beings. In the apostolate we act more often than not like older Brothers, but what about the child within us? We need to have free meeting spaces just for the purpose of being there, conversing, sharing. If this is not the case, it would not be surprising for us to look outside for that which we were not able to create within.

Therefore we are talking about a type of relationship that is not lived *at the side of* but rather, *with* our Brothers. In this sense we can make our own the words of Ruth. “*Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!*” (Ruth 1: 16-18)

It seems to me that one of the most important elements needed to live out an authentic type of fraterni-

ty is a sense of realism. This realism would mean making peace with my own personal traits and with my own personal history. I could also apply this sense of realism to the community, remembering along with Bonhoeffer that whoever loves his dream of community more than the community itself, will end up destroying it. Father Radcliffe in a letter sent to the Dominicans in 1998 recalled the case of a novice master who, as he faced disappointment in one of his novices who had discovered the weak, sinful and fragile side of one of his Brothers, told him: *“I am happy to hear you say that you no longer admire us. Now you have the chance to be able to love us.”*

If I want to live community life authentically, then my first step would be to accept my own situation as something that helps determine who I am and that at the same time opens new possibilities for me. *“Whoever knows his own pitfalls and dark side, knows that he can only live life to the full insofar as he understands himself and is able to say yes to the unique way in which he was created. Only when one accepts oneself can he accept the one who seeks advice without judgment. He can only be merciful to others if he is merciful with himself, if he has come to grips with his own dark side”* (Anselmo Grün, *Treating Oneself Well*).

Based on faith, self-acceptance comes from the personal acceptance of God's unconditional and free

love, of his tireless forgiveness, of the certainty of his close presence. These are outlooks I am invited to live out, based on Gospel values, based on my relationship with my Brothers.

Our community should be a place of dialogue. The Founder's notion of *Together and by Association* ought to continue being valid in our communities, today more than ever, in a world where communication and participation have evolved in ways previously unforeseen, but where also there has been an increase in hatred and distance. *Vita Consecrata* asks that the community's internal dialogue open itself to a world that is divided and unjust, thereby promoting a ***spirituality of communion*** “*first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries, by opening or continuing a dialogue in charity, especially where today's world is torn apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence. Placed as they are within the world's different societies...communities of consecrated life, where persons of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, are signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony*” (*Vita Consecrata* 51).

## **A community of prayer**

The following text from our Rule has always raised questions for me: “*The distinctive character of the Brothers' community is to be a community where the*

*experience of God is shared”* (Rule 48). On more than one occasion I have asked myself if this really is the character that distinguishes our Brothers' communities. Aware that faith is a broader reality and that it is not possible to measure it externally I would like to focus my attention on a very specific but basic aspect of prayer: our community prayer life.

**Praying alone or together** with regard to mental prayer, is one reality that is being lived out in different ways within the Institute. In fact, the 1987 Rule leaves open both possibilities. On the one hand, *“man today experiences a certain taste for solitude and claims the right to it”* (Louf). On the other hand, what is characteristic of our age is the social dimension, which has repercussions in our own prayers: *“Another aspect of this new prayer is the need to share this experience with others. That is to say, the need to pray together, passing on the richness of the Spirit to one another”* (Cardinal Pironio). No doubt it is important to look for a balance, aware that mental prayer is above all something personal, but aware also of the support that we need from the community and of the need to share our experience of God, which the Rule characterizes as a distinctive trait.

The Church today invites us to a community prayer dealing with the Word of God. *“Meditation of the Bible **in common** is of great value. When practiced according to the possibilities and circumstances of*

*life in community, this meditation leads to a joyful sharing of the riches drawn from the word of God, thanks to which brothers or sisters grow together and help one another to make progress in the spiritual life” (Vita Consecrata 94). This should sound familiar to us since it responds to our Lasallian spirituality which always starts from the word of God as we can see in our Method of Mental Prayer.*

Going out of ourselves helps us in not becoming hardened in our own way of seeing and feeling. In this sense community mediation is very important. We know that God speaks to us through the community. This is a Gospel principle that our Founder spoke about forcefully: *“How fortunate I am, my God, to make mental prayer with my dear Brothers, since, following your words, we have the advantage of having you in our midst. You are there, O my Jesus, in order to pour out your Spirit upon us, as You say through your prophet and as you poured it out on your Apostles...Give me also the grace, through your presence in our midst, assembled in order to pray to you, to have an intimate union of mind and of heart with my Brothers...” (EM 37 a, b, c).*

It seems to me that shared prayer ought to have a privileged place in our community prayer. The Spirit who sanctifies us, the union of the community, the zeal in the apostolic ministry are all strengthened by this prayer. If we believe that we gather in Jesus' name and

enjoy the presence of the Spirit, we will also believe that the Spirit is made manifest to us through our Brothers. Shared prayer can help us go out of our spiritual world, often one that is narrow and centered on itself, to open ourselves to new horizons. On the other hand this prayer will also allow us to discover our Brothers, just as they are, with their undreamed-of richness as well as their limitations and difficulties that are not always outwardly expressed.

It is important not to forget that prayer is above all a listening to God which also is made manifest in silence. Even in shared prayer we should not use too many words. We should give space for silence after each one prays so as to discover and internalize better the word that the Lord is communicating in his own way.

In the Gospel there is an “*icon*” that reveals this spirit of fraternal sharing in prayer. It is the paralytic whose friends carry him on a stretcher and present him to Jesus after opening a hole in the roof and lowering him through it. What was most interesting, Luke tells us, was that they placed him “*in front of Jesus*” (Luke 5: 18-19) and he adds that Jesus, “*seeing their faith*” (Luke 5: 20) forgave him his sins and then cured him. What power fraternal intercession has! What is important is to find a style of praying that creates community rather than a community that recites prayers.

Sharing prayer does not necessarily mean praying to-

gether or being physically present. It is rather a communion of one another in God; it is seeing that others make up part of my relationship with God. *“We should bring our fellow human beings to our prayer and achieve unity in prayer. Often we are not single hearted because we are very far from one another due to the fact that our personal situations are very different. How can we achieve unity? Only in God who created us and who keeps us just as we are; only in God who is the ultimate purpose of all things no matter how different they are nor how different our fellow human beings are; only in God in whom we live, move and have our being. Only in Him is this unity possible. But we are only in God if we pray.”* (Karl Rahner)

I would like to conclude this point by speaking about the high point of our community prayer. I am referring to the Eucharistic celebration, an important time of day for a community of consecrated men. Because the Eucharist in its essence is nothing more than sharing: sharing the body and blood of Jesus, sharing the wish of salvation and the willingness to sacrifice this broken body and this blood which is poured out. The Rule expresses this beautifully: *“Every aspect of the Brother's life is energized by the mystery of the Eucharist. As far as possible they participate in the celebration of it every day. There, in communion with the death and resurrection of Christ and listening to the Word of God, the Brothers are a community united in mind and heart in the same Spirit for the same mission”* (Rule 70).

Neither should we forget that it is impossible to share the Bread without sharing the Word and it is impossible to share the Word without sharing the story of those *children and young people who come to us in the middle of the night as helpless orphans* (cf. Meditation 37). Bread, word, and personal life stories are the three points of the triangle around which the community should move.

## **An apostolic community**

The Founder and the first Brothers were aware of the importance of the community as the base of apostolic activities. Therefore, according to Blain, the Founder, faced with the abandonment of almost all the teachers and dealing with the fear of seeing the work disappear, finds in 1691 that the solution is community renewal: *“After mature reflection concerning the appropriate means to shore up an edifice that was threatening ruin at the same time as it was being built, an inspiration came to him: 1. Associating himself with two of the Brothers he considered to be more suitable for sustaining the newly-formed community and committing themselves to it along with him, by means of an irrevocable bond, to continue working to consolidate it. 2. Searching near Paris for an appropriate house to restore the health of the Brothers who were worn-out and ill. 3. Gathering there, during vacation time, all the Brothers, taking up the spiritual exercises in order to restore the first fervor of the spirit and grace of their state... 4. Establishing a*



*Novitiate for the formation of the Brothers.”*

I think that today some Brothers think that what they give to the community takes away from the mission and they do not realize that community witness in itself is mission and I would say that it is one of our principal missions especially if we think that religious life should not only offer service but above all help others find meaning. We cannot reduce community to a simple means for the apostolate.

In order that the community be apostolic means that we should not remain closed in on ourselves in an ego-based culture that leads to a private life that revolves around the development of individuality and places self-fulfillment above the needs of the world. It is clear that this is not the Gospel community model envisioned by Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

When, in the Meditation on the Nativity, the Founder says that “*We are poor Brothers*”, this is perhaps the greatest treasure that we can give to a world which is more and more divided, indifferent to sorrow, marked by injustice and inequality. It is possible to be Brothers and live in a different way. Our community gives witness to the idea of “Come and see”. In this way we carry on the idea that gave birth to the first Lasallian community “*to respond to the needs of young people who were poor and far from salvation*” (Rule 47).

Communities do not exist for themselves but they exist for a mission. Their value lies in being mediators of Gospel values. This is what it means to be an apostolic community. As Juan Ramón Moreno, one of the Jesuits who was assassinated in El Salvador said, *“The unifying element of community is not found in its living together, but in the way it looks collectively at the world and at people, letting this be a concrete reality, a people of flesh and bone, the element that determines our activities and our way of life.”*

If we want our communities to be an answer to the worries of young people and those of the world, they should be, as were the communities of our origins, Samaritan communities. After writing about the deplorable situation of the poor children of his time, the Founder tells us: *“God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools, where the teaching is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God...”* (Meditations for the Time of Retreat 194.1). Likewise today our communities should be attentive to children who are injured along the roadside, by means of their warm presence, their active solidarity and their prolific creativity.

## **An open community**

Association, to which the last General Chapter has invited us, has consequences as regards the type of community that we should be living in today. We

should not reduce our community life to the persons with whom we share the same house. Living in community today means opening ourselves, as in concentric circles, starting with the community of Brothers, to all persons who share our mission and who pool their efforts along with ours in the carrying out of that mission.

A community is, above all, based on persons who are committed to what is essential. We can recall how the consecration of 1694, during our beginnings, was capable of creating community. A Community was born out of concern and a great love for others, that went beyond the rules and beyond itself. I like to recall often the text of Nietzsche in which he states that when we have the *why* for living we are able to overcome any type of *how*. Today we share this *why* with the lay persons with whom we associate ourselves to give our charism new vitality. It is only natural, then, that we open the doors of our hearts and of our communities.

It is important that we Brothers not forget the why of our community association and the why of this new association with lay persons. I like to apply Association to what St. Exupery says about friendship: *“We are not talking about looking at each other but looking together in the same direction.”* And this direction is none other than the educational and evangelical service of the young who are poor and, based on them, all young people. It is by basing ourselves

on this purpose that structures should be built that will ensure our association and give it strength.

It seems to me that we should look upon association as a time of grace and renewal. I know that within the Institute some Brothers have their doubts about this and they fear that our vocation might be watered down. Personally I think just the opposite. We know that the charism came from a movement and we have made it into an institution. This is an inevitable and necessary process. But it is important to revive the fire that gave us birth and to re-live the mystical moment of our origin. Are we not living in a time of new charismatic freshness with new blood and a new reading that is being done by lay persons? Might not this new reading be an opportunity to renew our community life?

I am convinced that in this new form of association to which the Institute is opening itself today, the Brothers' community will play a specific, irreplaceable role. Relationships which are free, egalitarian, service-oriented, and in solidarity with members of the community, and the community itself involved with other groups, these offer the best witness in a world that is heading toward commercial, discriminatory, utilitarian, and unsupportive relationships. The Brothers' community should be a laboratory of just and fraternal living together for other associated members, for the young people we educate, for the environment in which it is located and for all of society.

Nevertheless, communion never has only one sense. Lay people today can help us live our own vocation with greater authenticity and they can enrich our community life. This is what John Paul II asserted in *Christis Fidelis Laici: the lay faithful themselves ought to help priests and religious on their spiritual and pastoral journey* (number 63).

To be an open community also implies the possibility of placing some of them, on the District level, in a poor area. The last General Council has made a call to us in this regard: “*As a way of encouraging personal and community conversion, each District sets up a structure which will enable Brothers and communities to examine to what extent they live as persons of modest means, and have contact with such persons (living standard, kinds of relationships, access to communities and schools, involvement in social and educational activities...)*” (Recommendation 6).

## **The community and young Brothers**

One of the major concerns that I have both personally and as a member of the General Council is the current situation of our young Brothers. As I shared with the young Brothers from Europe at the Thillois meeting last July I am convinced that within the Institute they especially should be the ones to help us discover the characteristics of our Lasallian communities of tomorrow.

For me the presence of young Brothers at our last General Chapter was inspiring. They were the ones who, in a special way, kept hope alive. Their dreams and their programs, their prayers and their contributions were really stimulating. But what struck me most personally was their determination to bring forward a proposition concerning the pastoral ministry of vocations even though it was beyond the deadline for propositions. More than the proposition itself, which may be more or less valid, the most impressive thing was how by this very act they showed their faith in and deep love for the Institute and their collective wish for the Institute's future and for its vitality.

Nevertheless, I have to say that by the personal dialogues I have had and by my own lived experience our young Brothers do not always find a favorable atmosphere for their personal, Christian, and religious growth in our communities. The group in Thillois spoke about community as a sign of God's kingdom, one that is apostolic and strong within, in which the experience of God and affective experience are supported; a community which is a place for human encounter and fraternal solidarity.

I believe, as I have said several times to the Brother Visitors from Europe and from Latin America, that without setting aside our efforts for the complete renewal of all our communities and ministries, we ought to facilitate, in each District, the existence of one or

more **communities** that could be “*islands of creativity*” (Joe Holland), pilot experiences that could open roads for the future. In communities such as these, the presence, initiative and contribution of young Brothers would be indispensable.

It seems to me that Proposition 22 from our last General Chapter goes along these lines when it asks us to evaluate our ministries and administration structures within the District and that we change what may be appropriate to change, for the purpose of offering to the Brothers, especially younger ones, the possibility of giving priority to the educational service of the poor and of leading a meaningful community life. I think that this proposition presents us with a very clear vision of what the Institute of the future should be if we are to continue to have meaning and to bear fruit. Two conditions are indispensable: the priority of educational service to the poor and a meaningful community life. This is the most important heritage that we must pass on to our young Brothers.

## **CONCLUSION**

Today we are discovering again the value of our community life. John Paul II goes as far as saying that all the fecundity of the apostolic mission depends on the quality of community life and some religious life theologians say that, based on the New Testament, prophecy has passed from individuals to

communities. The community of the Twelve and that of the Acts of the Apostles are examples of this. On the Lasallian level we could also think of the community of our origins. Sometimes we run the risk of attributing everything to the Founder and we forget that those courageous Brothers, along with the Founder, in an association that was, at times, heroic, made the birth of our Institute possible. Today we are called to make their experience our own as we all feel responsible for continuing their salvific mission.

As I shared recently with the new Visitors who gathered in Rome last October, today we have many causes for concern, among others the sense of global uncertainty which I mentioned before, and on the Institute level there is the question of numerical diminution, ageing, delicate situations, the perseverance of young Brothers, the meaning of religious life...The solution is not to look at the past with a sense of nostalgia or to look at the future pessimistically, but to live in the present placing ourselves confidently in God's hands. The Founder puts us on the right track: *“This community can be very useful to the Church, but be convinced that it will be so only to the degree it is based on these two foundations, piety and humility, which will make it indestructible”* (Meditation 161.3).

I am aware that the terms *piety* and *humility* today say almost nothing to us. But I understand that for the Founder piety meant what today we can call a



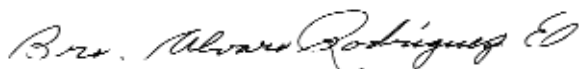
type of profound spirituality, an active faith in the practice of love. I think that here he is speaking about a call back to the basics. Making God and the Gospel the center of our life, our mission and our interests. An invitation to strip away the idols that many times take the place of God. A reminder that if we are Brothers it is first and foremost to procure the glory of God and we should mutually help one another in community in order to achieve this.

In reality, the key for a correct understanding of Lasallian humility can be found in the Meditation for the Feast of Christmas. Commenting on this, Brothers Miguel Campos and Michel Sauvage state: *“The community of Brothers has been founded starting from the distressful situation of abandoned youth. To reach these young people in order to announce to them the salvation of God, the Brothers enter into the movement of the Incarnation of the Son of God. They come out of themselves, renounce the seeking of riches or of power, in order to espouse, as far as possible, the humble condition of these forsaken children. Like the children, they live poor and unknown. It is in assuming this situation, which associates them with the mystery of the Son of God become human, that they fulfill the conditions of a fruitful ministry. We find again here the word of the Meditation of St. Francis Xavier: ‘The more you practice self-abasement, the more you will touch the hearts of those whom you instruct’ ”* (Meditation 79.2; Sauvage, Campos, *A Commentary*

on John Baptist de La Salle's *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*, page 310, 1995). During these Christmas days this text seems to me to be especially pertinent and enlightening.

*Lord Jesus, we ask you, through the intercession of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers, inspired by the example of those who have gone before us and those who found within their communities support and encouragement to bring your salvation to poor, young people and, based on them, to all young people; animated by the witness of so many senior Brothers who have made their communities havens of peace so that your presence is tangible; driven by the enthusiasm of young Brothers with their dreams and their projects, help us to be builders of a community which is capable of 'giving life, and giving it abundantly' (John 10: 10) to a world that today needs you more than ever. AMEN.*

Fraternally in De La Salle,



Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría  
Superior General

