

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE BROTHERS

**ASSOCIATED TOGETHER TO SEEK GOD,
FOLLOW JESUS CHRIST,
AND WORK FOR HIS KINGDOM**

Our Religious Life

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Superior General
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Nativity of the Lord

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God
(2 Corinthians 1: 3 - 4).

There is no doubt that Christmas, the Incarnation and the birth of Jesus, has been one of the greatest sources of consolation that the Father has given us. It is the manifestation of his great tenderness and his limitless and unconditional love. As God's humanity was made manifest in Christ, we can better understand God's vision for each one of us, our primary vocation to be fully human as Jesus was, the perfect man. We cannot keep this great grace and this extraordinary consolation for ourselves. Christmas means sharing this gift which the Father gives us in Jesus with everyone, renewing it each year as an important milestone in our efforts at making the world more human. Brothers, by vocation we are called to make visible the invisible love of God revealed in Jesus, to work untiringly so that in every human face, especially those of the children and young people whom we educate, and the poor whom we serve, God's

image will be fully made manifest, and that God's dream might become reality. Thus, as *Gaudium et Spes* tells us, we are witnesses of the birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined first of all by this responsibility to his brothers and to history (55). A VERY HAPPY CHRISTMAS TO YOU ALL!

The theme of this Pastoral Letter, it seems to me, responds very well to what was stated above. The gift that we have received of a vocation to the Consecrated Life not only makes our life complete and fills us with consolation but it requires that we share this received gift for the benefit of humanity. As the Congress on Consecrated Life last November 2004 reminded us, our passion for Christ must translate into a passion for humanity. In the second part of this letter, it is not my intention to write a treatise on Religious Life, but to recall some aspects that seem to me today to be of primary importance and which have helped me personally in my own personal journey. Associated together to seek God, follow Jesus Christ and work for his Kingdom is an invitation I make to myself and I make it to you so that we might live the wonderful vocation to which we have been called more authentically and with greater trust in the power of God and not in our own merits or strengths.

The Death of John Paul II and the Election of Benedict XVI

The year that is ending saw many special moments in the life of the Church. The death of John Paul II has had extraordinary repercussions on the world level as has had the

election of Benedict XVI. Undoubtedly we can recall the many messages that John Paul II aimed at us on the occasion of the many beatifications and canonizations of some of our Brothers during his long pontificate and on the occasion of General Chapters. But our hearts have been touched by his life, witness and his love for the Church, especially the young, more than by his words. As we did in our message of condolence for him, we recall the words that he addressed to the Congress on Consecrated Life last November as a type of testament. “At this point in time,” he told us, “consecrated men and women are called to offer to a humanity that is disoriented, tired and deprived of memory, the incredible witness of Christian hope.” I am sure that we have all asked the Holy Spirit to guide and enlighten our new Shepherd, who in his first homily called us “witnesses of the transfiguring presence of God.”

Visit to the United States and to Canada

Over the course of nearly three months in January - February, accompanied by Brother Miguel Campos, and in April - May, accompanied by Brother William Mann, I had the opportunity to make the pastoral visit to the Districts of the USA/Toronto Region and to French-speaking Canada. In Canada I was accompanied by Brother Claude Reinhardt. At the end of the visit the General Council met with all the Visitors of the USA/Toronto Region and with the District Council of French-speaking Canada.

In spite of the difficulties we are seeing with regard vocations to the Brotherhood, I have to say that the Lasallian

mission has a great vitality, thanks to the concepts of association and shared mission and the generous dedication of the Brothers themselves. In particular in the United States, more than in other areas of the Institute, the Brothers have learned how to attract young adults who today share our mission with extraordinary generosity. I am thinking especially of our volunteers with whom I was fortunate to meet during the course of the visit. These were unforgettable moments during which they shared both their apostolic experiences as well as their community living with the Brothers. I think, too, about the many meetings with different groups of young people who were open to dialogue and who were able to share simply and honestly their ideals and difficulties.

Another sign of vitality and of preferential service for the poor is the phenomenon of the San Miguel and the Cristo Rey Schools in which there is a creative and effective response to the educational needs of children and young people who are immigrants of Latin, Afro-American, or Asian origin and who live on the outskirts of large cities. At the same time, there are efforts being made in our schools in the United States and in Toronto, Canada, to provide training that awakens a sense of solidarity and the social dimension of the students. I was very impressed by the St. Gabriel System, Ocean Tides, Tides Family Services and by La Salle in Albany which provide invaluable service to young people who are in trouble with the law, within a caring and warm atmosphere that is able to transform them so that they can embark on a new life. Also, I do not want to leave out other schools or apostolates which, while not be-

longing to the structures mentioned above, serve students who are in need or at risk and those that serve the immigrant adult population. The same can be said of our Colleges and Universities, Saint Mary's Press, and the phenomenal service provided for Religious Life and for the Church by Christian Brothers Services and by Christian Brothers Investment Services (CBIS).

The Christian inspiration of our schools is very clear and I found in the students a great openness to religion and to the spiritual which, at times, we are hesitant to mentor. I believe that it is interesting to take note of the research done by Mark M. Gray from Georgetown University, as reported in an August issue of Time magazine this year, regarding North American young people. Young people born after 1981 are more likely to attend Church weekly, pray each day, and have confidence in the Church than their parents' generation. According to this study, 50% of young Catholics attend Mass weekly, compared with 39% attendance among the previous generation. 99% believe that religion is important compared with 77% of the generation that preceded them. This is surprising and I think that it is one of the signs of the times for the Brothers and for Lasallians in the United States that should not be forgotten.

As is our custom, we sent a letter to each District and to the Delegation of Toronto with our impressions and recommendations after our visit, and so I would only like to add here that one of the secrets of the excellent involvement of lay persons in Lasallian spirituality and mission has to do with the local, District, Regional, and national formation

programs. As a result of these programs, we can verify a deeper awareness of the idea of their respective vocation and a living out of Lasallian values. In this sense, one of the most interesting experiences was participating in the Lasallian Mission and Ministry Council in each North American District, a structure which favors new initiatives and the Christian and Lasallian character of our works.

Just as delightful was the visit to French-speaking Canada. In this District I was struck by the number of Brothers who have dedicated time to missionary service and by the far-sighted and generous way these Brothers have prepared for this service to continue in areas such as in Japan and Haiti. In spite of the advanced age of the Brothers, they have managed to hold on to their burning zeal and their apostolic creativity to respond to new needs. Along these lines we have pastoral communities, a library of spirituality that is open to the public, a Christian café that welcomes people who are looking not just for a cup of coffee but for some place to share their problems and find support, a catechetical center for children and young people from a great number of schools, residences for university students, summer camps, and so on. In all these works there is a clear desire and concern for evangelization. I was also very much struck by the care the Brothers give to senior Brothers and those who are ill, and the ability of the District to see that these Brothers remain alive apostolically, as they preserve their youthful ideals no matter what their age.

The quality and generosity of the young people who are involved in Lasallian movements is wonderful. Noteworthy

in this regard is the new community in Quebec that works with young adults and is a center for vocational leadership, and the new community in Montreal which serves immigrants. This latter community hopes to incorporate Brothers from the United States and from Latin America, as a concrete response to the idea of working together in this area, on behalf of the three Regions of the Americas.

Visit to the Antilles

For two weeks in July, in the company of Brother Miguel Campos, I visited the Delegation of the Antilles on the occasion of the Centenary of the arrival of the Brothers in Cuba. The idea is to create a new entity and during the last three years the Delegation has studied the possibility of joining with another District. Apart from participating in the celebrations marking the centennial which occurred on various islands - Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Haiti - and sharing in the centennial celebration with former students in Miami, I was able to participate also in the Assembly of Brothers from the District of South Mexico. Some Brothers from the Antilles attended this Assembly as well, which took place in Mexico City.

First of all, the celebrations of the Centenary, as in so many parts of the Institute, were a manifestation of the profound mark left by the Brothers and lay partners on so many generations of young people who recognize with gratitude what they learned in classrooms. I would like to make special mention of our former students from Cuba who, in spite of the long absence of the Brothers there, have man-

aged to preserve the Lasallian spirit. The celebration of Founder's Day over the course of decades without the Brothers being on the island is one proof of this, as is the commitment in Homestead on the part of former students in Miami, who work with immigrants from Mexico and from other countries in Latin America.

Secondly, my presence was intended to be a sign and an encouragement towards the process of reunification, which is never easy but is certainly necessary to ensure the vitality and the viability of the Lasallian charism in these areas. At the beginning of the year, Haiti became part of the Delegation of the Antilles and now is looking at the possibility of integrating with the District of South Mexico, which would create a new entity. During my visit to the different areas of the Delegation, I was pleased to sense the hope represented by the number and the quality of postulants in Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

World Youth Days

Once again we saw the enthusiasm which the World Youth Days awakened in young people, this time held in Cologne with Benedict XVI. Someone said that the young people used to go to see John Paul II but they now come to listen to Benedict XVI. There is no doubt that his deep messages can serve to inspire our own catechesis with the young people confided to our care. I was very much struck by the Pope's interview on August 15 in regard to the then upcoming World Youth Days. I will share with you one of his responses which may serve to give us some guidelines for

updating the language we use with young people and to recover the trust in our apostolic ministry, which must always be inspired by profound love. I would like to show you how wonderful it is to be Christians, since there is the widespread idea that Christians must observe an immense number of commandments, prohibitions, principles, and so forth, and that therefore Christianity is, according to this idea, something that tires one out and oppresses life and that one is freer without all those burdens. On the contrary, I would like to highlight our being supported by a great Love and by a revelation that are not burdensome, but really are wings, and that it is wonderful to be Christians. This experience gives us a certain breadth, but above all it gives us community, knowing that, as Christians, we are never alone: first of all we encounter God, who is always with us. Then we encounter ourselves, among one another, we always form a great community, a community on a journey, which has a future plan: all of this makes us live a life that is worth living. The joy of being Christian is also beautiful and honorable to believe in. (Interview with Benedict XVI, August 15, 2005).

Brother Roger Schutz

I am sure that we were all saddened when we heard about the tragic death of Brother Roger. In addition to the wonderful sense of ecumenism that he managed to promote by means of the monastic life, I would like to highlight the influence that he had on young people. For many years, hundreds of thousands of young people have passed through Taizé, meditating on the theme of “the interior life lived in

human solidarity.” These young people were seeking to discover, in the sources of the faith, meaning in their lives and a commitment to serve others where they are. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who also died this year, visited Taizé over the course of the past fifty years, and described his own experience in this way: What am I seeking in Taizé? I would say that I am looking for a kind of experience in which I profoundly believe. That is to say, that which generally is called religion has to do with goodness...this is sometimes forgotten, especially in some Christian traditions. I mean that there is a certain type of narrow outlook, a closed-in view of guilt and evil. It is not that I underestimate the problem, which has concerned me much over the course of several decades. But what I need to establish, in some way, is why, however radical evil may be, it will never be as profound as goodness. If religion or religions have any meaning, it is that of liberating goodness in human beings, going to search where goodness is completely buried. However, here in Taizé, I see outpourings of kindness in the fraternity among the Brothers, in their quiet, discreet hospitality, and in prayer, where I see thousands of young people who do not have a conceptual articulation of good and evil, of God, of grace, of Jesus Christ, but they do have a basic attraction to goodness.

I would like to conclude this remembrance of this marvelous man, the present-day icon of what should be our religious life, with some words from his message on the occasion of the European meeting of young people in Lisbon: “God is preparing for you a future of peace and not of misfortune; God wants to give you a future and hope” (cf. Je-

remiah 29:11; 31: 17). Many today hope for a future of peace, for humanity free from the threat of violence. If some are affected by concern for the future and they find themselves paralyzed, there are also, throughout the world, creative young people who are full of resourcefulness. These young people are not allowing themselves to be carried along by a spiral of sadness. They know that God did not make us to be passive. For them, life is not subject to the ups and downs of fate. They are aware that what can paralyze human beings is skepticism or discouragement. These young people also seek, with all their soul, to prepare a future of peace and not of misfortune. Although they might not imagine it, they have made their lives a light that already illuminates their surroundings.

The Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist

This Synod marked the conclusion of the year dedicated to the Eucharist. I had the opportunity to participate in this important Church event as an auditor. On the first day, the Pope made wonderful reflections on the reading of the Terce and on October 10 I had the opportunity to greet him personally as each day he received two small groups during the morning break. I found him to be very simple and of pleasant bearing and he was interested in the vocational situation of our Institute. I addressed the Synodal Assembly on October 12. I spoke about young people and the Eucharist. As compared with previous Synods there were two innovations. First of all, there was an hour of free interventions on the part of the Synod Fathers and these did not always relate directly to the Synod's purpose since some

who spoke took advantage of the occasion to present a text which had been prepared previously. Secondly, there was authorization given to publish the propositions made by the Synod to the Pope. In this way, everyone was able to make use of the Message of the Synod as well as of these propositions, while waiting for the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation.

From the Message of the Synod I want to highlight the Pope's reference to religious life as well as his mentioning young people:

We greet and thank all consecrated people, that chosen portion of the vineyard of the Lord who freely witness to the Good News of the spouse who is coming (see Revelation 22:17-20). Your Eucharistic witness in the service of Christ is a cry of love in the darkness of the world, an echo of the ancient Marian hymns, the Stabat Mater and the Magnificat. May the Woman of the Eucharist par excellence, crowned with stars, and rich in love, the Virgin of the Assumption and of the Immaculate Conception, watch over you in your service of God and the poor, in the joy of Easter, for the hope of the world. (Message 20).

Dear young people, the Holy Father Benedict XVI has repeatedly said that you lose nothing when you give yourselves to Christ. We take up again his strong and serene words from his inaugural Mass that direct you toward true happiness, with the greatest respect for your personal freedom: "Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we re-

ceive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ - and you will find true life.” We have great trust in your capacity and your desire to develop the positive values in the world, and to change what is unjust and violent. Please count upon our support and our prayer so that we may together accept the challenge to build the future with Christ. You are the “sentinels of the morning” and the “explorers of the future.” Do not fail to draw from the source of divine energy in the Holy Eucharist to bring about the changes that are necessary (Message 21).

During the Synod, many topics dealing with the Eucharist were touched on. Some of these topics were theological in nature, others were spiritual, pastoral, normative, or involved discipline. Rather than new ideas, aspects that we all know were highlighted. I would like to share two of these ideas that seem to me could serve to invigorate our understanding of the Eucharist.

The first one has to do with our retired Brothers. Some months ago I received a letter from two of them, suggesting that in our houses of retired Brothers we could have Eucharistic Adoration, either as an ongoing form of worship, or on certain days, as a way of making the apostolic mission of the Institute present to the Lord and to pray for an increase in the number of vocations. The message of the Synod did direct a special word of affection to persons who are suffering. In your suffering of body and heart, you participate in a special way in the sacrifice of the Eucharist and you are privileged witnesses of the love which comes from it. We are certain that in the moment when we experience

our own frailty and limitations, the strength of the Eucharist can be a great help (Message 23). I think that an initiative such as this would be a beautiful way of helping the Institute in its ongoing conversion and a concrete way of responding to the desires of the Synod which gave wide-ranging space to Eucharistic Adoration that springs from and cannot be separated from the Eucharistic mystery where maximum adoration and the impetus to give one's life for others is concentrated.

Secondly, thinking about Brothers of all ages, I wonder about the way we celebrate Sunday, the Lord's day, which was another of the central points of Synodal concern. Proposition 30 reminds us: It is necessary to affirm anew the central character of Sunday and of the Sunday Eucharistic celebration in the different communities of the Diocese, especially in the parishes (cf. "Sacrosanctum Concilium" 42). Sunday is truly the day in which one celebrates with others the risen Christ, a sanctified day consecrated to the Creator, a day of rest and of availability. The Sunday Eucharistic celebration is a humanizing grace for the individual and the family, because it nourishes the Christian identity with contact with the Risen One. Therefore, the duty to participate is triple: with God, with oneself, and with the community.

Visit to Greece and the Island of Reunion

As a beginning to the pastoral visit to the District of France that will take place in April and May of next year, I had the pleasure of visiting two of its sectors already: Greece and

the Island of Reunion. During the visit to Greece I visited two communities there and three schools in Piraeus, Syros, and Thessalonika and I participated in an interesting educational Congress, whose main theme was Looking Towards the Future. This Congress gathered together all Lasallian educators in the area. What struck me the most, again in an area where Catholics are very much in the minority, was the excellent relations and the joint work that goes on in our works, which have an Orthodox majority. As is the case everywhere, our students feel very much at home in our centers and the Lasallian values of faith, fraternity, and service are very much in evidence. Some significant signs of this were, for example, the supper with the Catholic Bishop of Syros in the company of the Orthodox Metropolitan, the community of Brothers and all the priests from the Diocese; or the statement of Archimandrite Methodius, our chaplain in the school in Piraeus, who has an extraordinary Lasallian spirituality, and who is not afraid to express his appreciation for it.

I was also struck by the religious spirit that exists in our centers as well as by the interest in learning foreign languages and the openness to the European Union. There is concern for the decrease in the number of students due to the decrease in the birth rate and the fact that our schools do not receive any subsidy makes access difficult for the less well-off. This concern extends also to the limited number of our Greek Brothers and the lack of vocations in recent years, a situation that we hope can be reversed. On the other hand, the way that a good number of lay people are living shared mission and association in an ecumenical con-

text is admirable. There was a touching speech given during the Congress, witnessed also by Brothers Claude Reinhardt, Councillor, and Jacques d'Huiteau, by a former student from our school in Sofia, Bulgaria, who brought greetings from former students who benefited from the presence of the Brothers before Communism.

My experience on the Island of Reunion was no less interesting. This small island in the Indian Ocean, of extraordinary beauty, is of great importance in our Lasallian history due to the fact that it was the nucleus of Institute expansion that allowed for the arrival of the Brothers in Madagascar and Mauritius, but also because of the memory of our Blessed Brother Scubilion, whose tomb I was able to venerate. He is for us a witness who invites us to continue the work of liberation that he began in the time of slavery and which we should continue in a world where other types of oppression exist. Reunion is a jumble of ethnic groups, cultures, and religions that are harmoniously integrated and where religious spirit is very much alive. Our four schools, currently administered by Lasallian lay persons, continue the mission of Christian education entrusted to us by the Church, as was expressed by Bishop Aubry during our visit to the Diocese. Some recent difficulties have been fully overcome. Here also, the number of Brothers is decreasing and we do not have new Brother vocations, but the Lasallian spirit and mission are very healthy.

I was very impressed by the vitality of the local Lasallian Leadership Council (CLAL), a new structure for me, which, among other things, ensures the quality of catech-

esis and pastoral ministry in our schools as was expressed by some of the members at a meeting with representatives from the four centers held at Maison Blanche. Something that touched me deeply during the visit was the presence of two lay directors and a representative of a director from the three Lasallian centers that we have in Mauritius which the Brothers left in 1992 and which is currently under the control of Diocesan sponsorship. Their presence, and their desire to continue a relationship with us, by means of the Island of Reunion and the District of France, seemed to me to be a sign of an indelible stamp that the Institute left on those who were touched by our charism.

ASSOCIATED TOGETHER TO SEEK GOD, FOLLOW JESUS CHRIST, AND WORK FOR HIS KINGDOM

Our Religious Life

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace
in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the
power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13)*

Associated together to seek God, follow Jesus Christ, and work for his Kingdom is for us a passionate adventure, in spite of the difficulties that religious life seems to be undergoing. The International Congress on Consecrated Life held in Rome in November 2004 represents an important milestone in the process of discernment which we have undertaken, beginning with Vatican II and our own renewal Chapters, to continue discovering that *which the Spirit of God is making emerge among ourselves, in order to respond to the challenges of our time and to build up the Kingdom of God.* In this pastoral letter, I would like to reinforce the efforts we have been making in recent decades and to set them in motion for the future, in order to live our lives as Brothers more authentically and to respond to the challenges that affect us at the beginning of the new millennium to be witnesses of a humanity made new in Jesus Christ.

Today, more than ever, we need a sense of hope that will make us faithful witnesses. *Only those who live in hope which is handed over to Him who is our Hope can transmit hope* (José María Arnáiz). Hope should enable us to give back

the sense of enchantment to religious life, as I said in my closing words to the Congress. Rather than by way of conjecture, we can understand what “*enchantment*” means in the attraction that Jesus produced in his first followers. His person awakened what Jeremiah was talking about when he referred to his vocation as an irresistible “*seduction*,” what the prophet describes as being “*violent*,” to express the force with which it is conferred. When the disciples felt attracted to Jesus, it did not matter to them to leave behind whatever they had in order to follow him and to drastically change their lives. Therefore, the questions we have to ask ourselves are: Does our religious life as Brothers today have enough “*enchantment*” to get noticed and to attract? What should we do so that this can happen?

Today we are concerned about many things, but the Lord tells us that only one thing is necessary. We are living in a time of uncertainty, but the principal response is to live what we are and what God wants us to be with greater authenticity. This assumes that we fight against mediocrity and the superficial and that we live our vocation with passion. For us also the major obstacle might be what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls *cheap grace*: *Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace. Cheap grace means the justification of the sin without the justification of the sinner. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he*

has. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, it is costly because it costs a man his life. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "You were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us.

Such an invitation could not be more demanding. It is about being aware of the two coordinates around which we should move: God and the human person, mysticism and prophecy. An act of faith in our vocation and its value today for the world, so that we can continue being for young people the *prolongation in history of a special presence of the Risen Lord* (VC 19). Religious life with an "enchantment" that attracts by its very way of being and living, at a time of disenchantment. Religious life as an alternative to the values of the globalized world today offers us the possibility to make real the command of Jesus: *But it shall not be so among you* (Mark 10: 42 - 43).

I think that it is worth the effort. Jesuit Manuel Alcalá tells us that shortly after being elected Pope, John Paul II asked, during an audience with the Union of Superiors General (USG), *if religious life has a future in the Church today*. This question perplexed Father Arrupe, then Jesuit General and President of the USG, as well as the other Superiors General present for the audience. *Holiness*, responded Father Arrupe, *if we did not believe this to be so, we would not be here*. Perhaps this should be our response also. Kafka described an immense city at night where only a few persons keep vigil, and an immense camp in which everyone sleeps,

except for some guards. The author asked himself: Why are there just a few people awake while the rest are sleeping? And he answered his own question: *For someone to keep vigil, it is necessary that someone be there.* Perhaps this, too, might be our response, as men consecrated to God for the life of the world, for young people, for the poor, for all those who ask us about the reason for our hope.

Personal Life Journey

We cannot live an anonymous religious life. Our searching for God, our following Jesus, our building up of the Kingdom imply, besides a community experience, an indispensable, personal, spiritual life journey. To talk about our life journey is to face the mystery; therefore, it is not easy and all we end up doing is mumbling. It is really about a double mystery, that of God and that of the human person made in his image and likeness. When facing the mystery of God it is better to keep quiet, it is easier to say what the mystery is not than what it is.

The mystery is a discovery which is ever new and it assumes a continual starting over and not living “on accumulated interest” as Orthodox Bishop Anthony Bloom expresses so well: *To anchor our mind on past grace means to miss out on future grace. The God I knew yesterday will not necessarily be the One who reveals Himself to me tomorrow. You cannot subsist on memories. Memories are dead objects, while God is not the God of the dead but of the living. God is eternally new. Approach Him ready to be surprised. Convince yourself that you do not know Him and that He may bring a different face*

today than the one you imagine. Do not put in God's place the image of God which you drew up in the past: that is spiritual idolatry. Repeat the prayer: Lord, free me from all past concepts that I have formed about You. What we ought to do as we approach God is to gather all the past concepts that we have of Him, store them in the cellar of our mind, and then approach God, aware that we are face to face with a God who is close and at the same time unknown, infinitely simple and infinitely complex. We have to wait with open minds and hearts, without trying to give God form or contain Him in concepts or images: and only then can we knock at the door.

As we face the mystery of the human person, we find ourselves before a paradoxical being who, Saint Thomas says, is the only creature which God has loved for itself and who is a horizon between two worlds, that is to say, a “border being” between the corporal universe and the spiritual universe. The Psalms present this ambivalence to us in this way:

You made man little less than a god, you have crowned him with glory and beauty, made him lord of the works of your hands, put all things under his feet (Psalm 8). The Lord knows of what we are made, he remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103). Created by God, we tend toward the infinite, but coming from nothing, we tend toward nothing. To speak of our life journey clearly places us before this mystery.

León Felipe, a poet who was born in Spain and who died in Mexico, said:

*There is nobody that went yesterday,
nor goes today,
nor will go tomorrow
towards God,
along the same road that I go.
For each man,
there is reserved a new ray of light,
the sun,
and a virgin road, God.*

My journey is unique, unrepeatable, unprecedented. It is an adventure that is always open and unpredictable. *The road unfolds as one walks* (Antonio Machado). This is the experience of our founder: *God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. God did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning* (Memoir of the Beginnings).

What was stated above is not beyond the realm of our own religious life. On the one hand, I am unique and precious to God. We only have to recall two texts from Isaiah: *I have called you by name: you are mine* (Isaiah 43: 1); *Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you. See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name* (Isaiah 49: 15-16). On the other hand, I am called to unite my life in Him, as we can sense in the experience of Saint Augustine: *Belatedly I loved thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new, belatedly I loved thee. For see, thou wast within and I was*

without, and I sought thee out there. Unlovely, I rushed heedlessly among the lovely things thou hast made. Thou wast with me, but I was not with thee. Thou didst call and cry aloud, and didst force open my deafness. Thou didst gleam and shine, and didst chase away my blindness. Thou didst breathe fragrant odors and I drew in my breath; and now I pant for thee. I tasted, and now I hunger and thirst for thee (Confessions, Book 10, Chapter 26, 38).

Unique, certainly, but determined in large measure by others. Along these lines, Pablo Neruda said: *It seems to me that I have lived the life of others.* Salman Rushdie, born in Bombay and educated in London, in “Midnight’s Children,” stated the same problem: *Who, what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been-seen-done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone, everything whose being-in-the-world affected or was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I’ve gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each “I,” contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you’ll have to swallow a world.* The philosophical problem of the one and the many is, when all is said and done, the fundamental problem of human beings.

To unify our life is our principal challenge because we are more than the sum of experience. It is important to be aware that I am a cause rather than an effect, that I can and ought to be a radiant nucleus and not just a receiver. If it is true, as Ortega y Gasset said, that *I am I and my circumstances*, it is also true that our “I” is a dynamic center, a

point of departure and not just of arrival, and that life is the updating of a rich potential that we carry inside of us, propelled by a divine force, because we are beings who are inhabited by Someone who overwhelms us continually.

To achieve this objective, therefore, I have to start from a foundational experience and not from a theory no matter how nice it might be, from a renewed daily experience, which gives reason for who I am and for what I do, that unifies my entire being in God.

Foundational Experience

This experience must be a personal one and not a theoretical one, and so we can begin with Pascal's testimony when he shares the foundational moment that changed his life on the night of November 23, 1654. He kept a record of this memory on a sheet of paper, the famous "*Memoir*," that he kept sewn in the lining of his doublet (a man's close-fitting jacket worn in Europe especially during the Renaissance): *The year of grace 1654, Monday, November 23, Saint Clement's Day. From approximately ten in the evening until twelve-thirty the next morning. Fire! The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob! Not the God of philosophers and wise men! Certainty, happiness, emotion, felicity, peace.*

Our religious life, understood both as a natural inclination towards God as well as a call from Jesus Christ to continue his life in the style of De La Salle, cannot have any other foundation than that of a personal experience. It is about a profound, almost irresistible attraction for God, a spiritual

experience, that God is Absolute and that our entire being has its ultimate reference in Him. It is the experience of loving and being loved; it is the certainty that God is everything.

The Brazilian Jesuit, Joao Batista Libanio, in an article that helped me greatly when I was involved in formation work in Central America while discerning the reasons for vocational choice with those in initial formation, presents this experience to us as a kind of immovable stone, a continuous call to one's first love. In the background is the Gospel experience of Jesus in his relationship to the Father out of which springs his saving commitment in favor of brothers and sisters, especially those who are poor and the little ones. This means that we allow God to fill the space of our affectivity and that he loves through us. It means that we allow ourselves to be "seduced" by Him. Karl Rahner expressed this in a European publication on the occasion of his 80th birthday, shortly before his death: *The true summit of my life is still to come. It is the abyss of the mystery of God, into which one throws oneself in the hope of being welcomed eternally by his love. What is it I hope for? The light of God, his eternity and his mercy. I hope to be able to pray with Theresa of Avila "let nothing disturb you... only God is enough," and with Ignatius of Loyola: "Take, Lord, receive...give me your love and your grace and that will be enough for me." I hope that both of these will be prayed not just in words but in the fulness of life forever.*

This experience is surely a gratuitous gift from God, but it requires our collaboration. In the Gospels we cannot separate the person from the mission of Jesus. The one is un-

derstandable only in the other. Lasallian spirituality has taught us, for its part, not to differentiate between the duties of our state and those of our own salvation. It is clear for us that the best way to procure God's glory is by our service to the young people we educate, especially those who need us most, as expressed in our formula of consecration. Foundational experience allows us to live our mission as an extension of the saving action of God and it prevents our falling into a type of activism or merely professionalizing our mission.

Brother John Johnston, in his 1990 Pastoral Letter, put us on guard against the danger of living professional and apostolic activity on the margin of our religious life. *Because commitment to the apostolate has not been presented with sufficient clarity as an integral part of the consecration of the Brother to God (Rule, 87), and "ardent zeal" not always insisted upon as an essential dimension of the spirit of the Institute, many of us have not been the evangelizers we should be. We have been highly successful school men, but sometimes too easily satisfied with providing quality education and not sufficiently concerned with being ministers of the young and with making the schools centers of effective religious instruction and pastoral service - as well as centers of academic or technical excellence* (page 16).

This problem could arise when we live our apostolic activity as an end in itself or merely as a way of seeking our own fulfillment, when God is something relative or secondary in the picture or, in the worst case scenario, is non-existent. In cases such as these, our vocation is in serious danger, be-

cause if what sustains me is the absolute importance that I give to my activity, the time may come when this no longer says anything to me, or when I think I can do this work better outside of the structure of religious life, or since today we are living association and shared mission with lay persons, I think that there is no need to continue being a religious to live this effectively. Or it could happen that I fall into a state of serious depression when, for reasons of infirmity or age, I cannot continue the work.

But if God is the ultimate reason for our discipleship, there can be tsunamis and hurricanes and our boat may seem to be on the verge of sinking, but we will be able to carry on, not by our own strength, but because during our times of weakness, God continues to be the ultimate reason for our life and we know that he is at our side.

Here we could bring up the idea of vocational motivation. There is a text from the Founder that seems to me to be very pertinent, when he tells us in the Collection what the Brothers should do from time to time, especially during the time of retreat: *Consider what your state is and why you embraced it, and examine whether in so doing you had in view only the order and the will of God. If you were activated by any wrong motive, disown it. If your intention was imperfect, rectify it. Then, as if you were only just entering, affirm that your sole reason for persevering is that you believe God so wills it.* (Collection of Various Short Treatises, Christian Brothers Conference, Landover, USA, 1993, page 77, 1 and 2).

We know that our first motivation is not necessarily the one

that should support us today. During our personal life journey, there is need for a time (the novitiate would seem to be the most appropriate time and place, but God's ways are mysterious and personal rhythms are different) to have experienced, as did Pascal, that incandescent fire which changed our life and centered it in God. The important thing is not what was my first motivation, but what motivates me today and drives me to dedicate my life to the Lord totally and unconditionally.

A Living Faith and an Ardent Zeal

In Lasallian terms we can translate the foundational experience into the spirit of faith and zeal, as the Founder suggests to us, which allows us to integrate the constitutive elements of our vocation: consecration, community, and mission.

Identity-interiority and communion are the two basic dimensions of the person. My life journey ought to allow me to be myself and to be-for-others. Scripture enlightens our original vocation already as seen on the first page of Genesis. Four aspects seem to be fundamental in developing the double constitutive dimension of our person:

- *The theological aspect: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness* (Genesis 1: 26). In the innermost part of our being, we encounter God. As Saint Augustine said: *God is more myself than I myself am*. Our first vocation is to participate in divine life. We are called to be children of God.
- *The social aspect: It is not good for man to be alone* (Genesis 2: 18). As it has been said, no man is an island. Relationships with others is also a constitutive part of our

being. We are called to be brothers to others.

- *The cosmic aspect: Fill the earth and subdue it* (Genesis 1: 28). Relationships with things is also a constitutive part of our being. We are called to be stewards of nature.
- *The historical aspect: The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it* (Genesis 2: 15). Creation is put into the hands of human persons to continue it, based on creativity and responsible freedom. We are called to be builders of history.

The spirit of faith and zeal, which constitutes the spirit of our Institute, allows us to live these four dimensions in an integrated manner: child, brother, steward, builder. Saint Paul summarized this double movement with these words: *only faith working through love counts for anything* (Gal 5: 6). The Founder starts from a basic type of logic. The Brother called *to pass on the spirit of Christianity*, should be a Christian who is convinced that in his own life he incarnates the Gospel that he is trying to pass on. Faith and zeal are inseparable.

Faith and zeal open new perspectives for us, those of God, in order to have a *contemplative view* that allows us to discover the transparency of God in the Gospel, in human persons, in the poor, in ourselves, in nature, in history. Faith and zeal allow us *to discern in light of the Word* the best way to fulfill God's saving plan. Faith and zeal invite us *to trust in the Lord who directs human history with wisdom and love and to abandon ourselves to Him*. We do this, based on the three certainties that enlightened and sustained the life of our Founder. The certainty of the *presence* of God who is always near. The certainty of his mysterious but effective *ac-*

tion in the history of humankind. The certainty that we are committed to *God's work*.

The Founder, in the common Rule of 1718, told us that this spirit should animate all our work and be the motive for all our actions, and that those who do not have it or have lost it should be considered dead members. The current Rule translates this as follows: *The most important objective in the initial formation of the Brothers is that they understand and make their own the spirit of this Institute. Growth in this spirit continues during the entire life of the Brothers and extends to every dimension of their lives* (Rule, 8).

With such a spirit it is understood that the Founder would bring forward the “*venture*,” despite the fact that, as Blain often said, *the boat was at the point of sinking, or the building was about to collapse*. Today, as in the past, we, too, will be able to look at the future with confidence if we let ourselves be guided by this spirit. Might this not be the secret of creative fidelity and a way of presenting to young people a vocation that is worthwhile?

To Love and to be Loved

Faith and Zeal sum up the essence of the Gospel: to love God and neighbor. Personally, I am convinced that here is the heart of not only our vocation as Brothers but also of religious life. It is curious that we may have almost always given more importance to the *evangelical counsels* than to the double *commandment of love*. The counsels are really a function of the commandment of love.

Vita Consecrata states that *consecrated life manifests the organic unity of the commandment of love, in the inseparable link between love of God and love of neighbor* (VC 5). The Founder states, in a treasured text that we have preserved in the epigraph of our current Rule *that it is necessary that the Brothers take for the foundation and support of their observance of the Rule what Saint Augustine says at the beginning of his Rule: that those who live in community should, before all else, love God and next their neighbor because these are the principal commandments given to us by God...* (Rule, page 19). The Rule, which expresses our life, should be for us, therefore, an instrument in the service of love. Love is its reason and its purpose.

I consecrate myself fundamentally for Christ – for Christ the way Saint Paul did, being consumed day and night for the Gospel. Just as the sons of Zebedee did, leaving their boat and nets, or Matthew, leaving his office and his accounts, because they were captivated by Jesus as he passed by, in the same way we make our consecration because we have encountered Christ and because he captivated us. We are no longer in the moral order but in the order of virtue in the sense of the parables about the treasure or the pearl.

Therefore, we can say that the base and the summit of religious life, its roots and its fruits, its beginning and its end, is love. Only in love and as a passion for love does it have meaning. The Congress on Consecrated Life reminded us of this as it summarized its message as a passion for Christ and a passion for humanity. This love can be understood only from an experience of faith. *To be a Christian means to*

live according to Christ, to make dependance upon Christ's truth the meaning of one's own life; to be a religious means being committed radically to the life of faith, that is to say, justifying your own life and a whole series of structures (poverty, chastity, obedience, common life...), that by any other way would not be a part of your own life. This is the reason why a religious who doubts his faith feels that the floor is sinking beneath his feet, and he feels as if he were outside of reality... While the lay Christian who feels that his faith is vacillating can still find meaning in his work or family life, the religious, on the contrary, perceives this as a useless risk for his life, lacking in meaning, and this makes his values collapse to the point where he finds this unbearable. He chooses the safer road: he chooses the world and goes on his way. Or, if he does not feel that he has the strength to withdraw, he carries on with the law making the minimal effort, making his religious life no longer a choice for Christ, but the result of reckoning. "Having seen and considered everything, it seems advisable for me to stay" within a type of religious life that is as calm and as bourgeois as possible (Rovira).

We express this call to love in a particular way through our vow of chastity which, in accordance with our Rule, is the handing over of our total love to God and this frees us to serve persons and to dedicate ourselves to God's Kingdom. It is not a vow of a lack of affection, but of radical love. It stems from the very experience of human love, which in its deepest dimension is an open love and it demands absolute love. Chastity does not stem from absence or deprivation, but from the outreach and overflow of a superabundance.

We can understand this if we consider a story from Albert Camus entitled *The Adulterous Woman*, which appears in his book "Exile and the Kingdom." In this story he speaks about a woman who accompanies her husband through the Algerian steppe. One night, after going to bed and making love as married couples do, she discovers that she feels unsatisfied. She is lying next to her husband, but yet she is awake and feeling abandoned, like a woman who is lying next to a stranger. Matrimonial love, lived each day in such a manner, is not satisfying to her. So, in the middle of the night, under the desert stars, with her eyes open, she gazes at the stars and the moon, she allows the mysterious night love to inundate her. She is doing nothing. She simply feels the presence of the cosmos in her soul: she allows herself to be loved and she lets the mystery of the night reach all the way to her human, feminine existence, as a light and a torrent of love. Only in this way, after the ecstasy of cosmic love, can she return to the room where her husband is still sleeping.

In our case it is about a type of mystical union with the cosmos. Our experience of self-sufficiency and our thirst for fulfillment is centered in the person of Jesus. *He loved me* (cf. Galatians 2: 19-20) and his love is the eternal basis of and the support for my existence and for my ability for commitment. This means that we *ought to have our heart filled with God as the groom has his heart filled with the woman he loves* (Saint Chrysostom).

I was inspired by a talk given by Brother Assistant Patrice Marey in which we can see the consequences of such love.

Consecrated love helps us to accept loneliness as a constitutive element of human nature. Celibate love demands also a rejection of a possessive paternalism. Celibate love is able to say: *I love you, but I do not do so to subject you to serve me, nor so that you might become another me. I accept you as you are. Be yourself.* Celibate love has much to learn from married couples, from mothers and fathers who teach us the value of tenderness, fidelity, of being attentive to persons. Celibate love is a creative love.

In the area of education, there is in front of me a being. I have no right to possess this person and my first task as a teacher must be to seek out what he can do and become in God's eyes. Chastity gives form to our educational relationships not only by prohibiting us from committing unwholesome acts, but also and above all by guiding our affective relationships with the young people confided to our care. No longer is this a repressive vow which corners us in an alley with no exit. This vow opens us to God's love for human persons through the fraternal love we offer to them. We can say something similar about relationships with the Brothers in our community, District, Region, and in the Institute.

For its part, our vow of poverty affirms that *only God is enough*, that he is the only Lord and that we cannot allow things or money to function like gods in our life. In this regard, we make one profession, a visible incarnation in the Church and in the world. This is what the Rule tells us: *By their poverty lived according to the Gospel, 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 (32). Poverty, like chastity, is fundamentally a matter of love. Once again the vows are similar to one another. This is the experience of Charles de Foucauld: *Lord Jesus, how can the one who loves you with all his heart become poor quickly, since he cannot suffer being richer than his beloved? Being rich and at ease, living nicely off my possessions, when You lived a life of sacrifice, living laboriously while working very hard, I cannot love like that.*

By obedience, we place ourselves in the service of God's plan, which is a plan of total love for the human person, beginning with the marginalized and the destitute and extending to all of humankind. God offers life in abundance to all his children and he makes them brothers and sisters. To obey God, as it was for Jesus and ought to be for us, is to love him when we love young people, even to give our lives for them. But this dedication is not merely a commitment to a type of work, but above all it is a relationship of friendship with the Lord Jesus in a certain lifestyle; a type of love, which involves the desire to comply with His will, to love what He loves, and to deal with what He dealt with. It is about a total consecration to His person.

As we know, our specific vows – association for the educational service of the poor and stability – have the same purpose, which is love, and this has been the thinking of the Institute in recent years – love for those who need us most and for those for whom we should be willing to give our lives as the Founder invited us – love which makes us discover, *underneath their rags*, the face of Jesus – love that makes us commit ourselves *irrevocably to remain united in*

their service, convinced that this is our particular way to give glory to God.

A New Language: Biblical Images

Throughout the Congress the phrase – *something new is being born* – was repeated often. This was not about a future time but about a present reality, one that is certainly stammering but a real one nonetheless. Among other things we could highlight the signs of a Consecrated Life that is more aware of its diversity in communion, its stance in listening, discerning and searching, its Gospel-centeredness according to the Kingdom, its openness to the universal enculturation (intercultural awareness), articulated more and more around charismatic families, with an intense passion for Christ and for humanity, in particular for the poor and suffering.

To express the above invites us to a new kind of language, a language that fosters communion and increases passion. A language that is less rational and theoretical, more intuitive and dynamic. A language that will make consecrated life more significant today to men and women, especially to the young. A language that is not limited only to words.

Vita Consecrata starts from the image of the Transfiguration as an explanatory symbol of consecrated life and its essential traits. Deep down, this language tries to express the fact that Jesus has an enormous ability to attract and that he is able to transfigure the life of his followers and configure it to the Spirit and to the Father's will. *The image of the Transfiguration offers a powerful image, one that is full of resources,*

in the understanding of a vocation to consecrated life. The image is Trinitarian, it is able to explain the deepest sense of this form of life, as an attraction to the beauty and the energy of mission. Consecrated life appears as a lifestyle that tries to explain the mystery of the Trinity in which it is enveloped (José Cristo Rey García Paredes). For more than three-hundred years, our Lasallian consecration has been centered in the Holy Trinity whose glory, as far as possible and as required of us, constitutes the ultimate end of our life as Brothers.

The Transfiguration is a sign of the power of transformation that Jesus offers to us. It is an invitation to listen to him and to follow him to the very end, a demanding invitation to conform ourselves to Him. We know, on the other hand, that one of the characteristic aspects of Lasallian spirituality is its Christocentric dimension. No doubt the Founder inherited this idea from the 17th century French school of spirituality. In the spiritual directory for the seminary of Saint Sulpice, where the Founder spent 18 months, this was the principal objective: *The first and definitive objective of this Institute is to live totally for God in Christ Jesus our Lord, so that the profoundest part of His Son lives in the innermost reaches of our heart and allows each one to say confidently what Saint Paul said of himself: "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2: 20). In everything you do, this must be the only hope and the only thought and also the only exercise: to live the life of Christ in your inner self and to show it with acts in your mortal body.*

The Founder, in the Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer, invites us to contemplate the mysteries, the virtues,

the maxims of Jesus Christ in order to incarnate them in our lives. Therefore, for example, contemplating on the Nativity as the person of the Word in the form of a child, he invites us to conform ourselves to Him: *O my God, I am convinced of the truth that if I wish to have a share in your glory in heaven, I must make myself conformable to you on earth... You teach me by your extreme poverty and suffering, to prefer poverty, contempt of the world, and mortification to riches, honors, and pleasures. This is what I want to do in imitation of you* (EMO 9: 225, d, e).

The Founder almost always linked this conformity to Christ with the cross, as a type of participation in the **Paschal Mystery**, as it appears in the Meditation for the Feast of the Transfiguration: *When the soul is transfigured in this way with Jesus Christ, it must be willing to meditate on his Passion and cross, to show that all its desire it to become like Jesus Christ in his sufferings* (Meditation 152.3). The Founder invites us to conform ourselves to the crucified one: *Let us, then, like Saint Paul, place all our glory in bearing in our bodies the sacred wounds of the suffering Jesus, so as to make ourselves conformable to Jesus crucified and to honor his Holy Cross* (Meditation 165.3).

However, participation in the cross of Jesus is a condition for life and not a search for death. It is also about participating in the life of the resurrected Christ and making the God of life triumphant over the idols of death: *The resurrection of Jesus Christ should also procure for you the benefit of making you rise spiritually...this means it will cause you to enter an entirely new and heavenly life...Mortify your earthly*

bodies, continues the same apostle, and put off the old man in order to be clothed with the new (Meditation 29.3).

The mystery of the Transfiguration, along with the mystery of the cross, allows us to grasp that *the vocation to the consecrated life is, despite its renunciations and trials, and indeed because of them, a path of “of light” over which the Redeemer keeps constant watch: “Rise, and have no fear”* (VC 40).

The Congress on Consecrated Life, held in November 2004, as it gathered together the aspirations and the concerns of many men and women religious, presented us with two *icons: The Samaritan woman and the Samaritan man*. They are highly representative and they suggest much to us as religious at the beginning of the 21st century. The first image, on the one hand, shows us *the spiritual, passionate search for living water, the contemplative passion* that must animate Consecrated Life. We must be convinced that the *commitment* to proclaim the Gospel is a result of an *encounter with God*. This harmony or even this identity, along with the *only thing needed* (Luke 10: 42), is the code wherefrom will break forth the intentions, assessments, and attitudes that we want to contribute as an alternative to the challenges presented by today's world to the Gospel message.

In the second image, on the other hand, along with the theological and pastoral tradition of the Church, we see *a reflection of a wounded humanity, abandoned to itself, and the compassion of God who, through his Son, leans down to heal it*. The words of Jesus to his questioner, *Go and do likewise* (Luke 10: 37), we take as a challenge to us to respond with

the same sensitivity and boldness that He did during his three years of public life. We feel profoundly affected by so many disfigured faces among our fellow beings on the five continents, due to different causes: war, violence, terrorism, discrimination, racism, exclusion, the faces of immigrants and refugees ravaged by hunger, and so on. All of them deform God's face in whose likeness we have been made. This cannot leave us indifferent, we who have set out to remake God's image so that it might be recognized and respected in each and every person, without distinction of age, gender, or social position.

As the final document expressed it, *the Samaritan man and the Samaritan woman are changed into mystagogues of a committed contemplation and a contemplative mercy. The two of them are harmoniously integrated in contemplation and action: the Samaritan woman experiences Jesus and goes out to proclaim this; the Samaritan man discovers in his neighbor who is suffering, the face of God and he goes to his aid.* This integration between a committed contemplation and a contemplative mercy is the best way of living the spirit of the Institute in its two dimensions of faith and zeal to continue the mission of Jesus together, sent by the Father, strengthened by the Spirit: *I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly* (John 10: 10).

Each of us may have his own biblical image about the significance of Consecrated Life. The important thing is to not manipulate it according to our own particular interests but to let ourselves be carried by the Spirit and to be attentive to that wind about which we do not know from where

it comes nor to where it goes. Brazilian Sister Elsa Ribeiro, former President of CLAR (Latin-American Confederation of Religious), shared her biblical image during one of her presentations: *I like to contemplate the parable of the banquet as an image for religious life at this moment in history: we are male and female slaves, those whom the Lord of the Feast has ordered to go out into the streets, along the roads and in the crossroads, to the slums and the country houses, to the outlying areas, deserts and borders, on nights filled with violence and the violated, to invite those whom the world ignores, excludes, and discriminates against, but who surely are the targets of the great plan that the Father has for the world and the Church in the new millennium.*

Another biblical image that strikes me is that of *Emmaus* (Luke 24: 13 - 35). As consecrated men, we can interiorize and make our own the mind of Jesus.

- We see how Jesus *comes to an encounter with humanity* that is on a journey, how he seeks out persons and walks with them to share their joys and hopes, their difficulties and their sadness in life. It is daytime, but those disciples who flee Jerusalem carry darkness within themselves. We are also called to come to an encounter with so many young people, with so many contemporaries who do not find meaning or light in their lives.
- Jesus *shares the journey with human beings* and, by means of a direct and simple dialogue, he gets to know their concerns and their feelings. To come to the encounter means making our own the concerns, fears, anxiety of our brothers and sisters, accompanying our contemporaries on their faith journey, sharing their weaknesses,

their doubts and their frailness. We ought to offer to young people and to the world hearts that are available to listen to them, understand them, and to set them on the journey once again.

- Jesus *enlightens with Scripture* the journey of men and women, he enlightens their situation and he opens for them avenues of hope. We, by our vocation, are called to be ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ (Meditation 195) and to bring the Gospel to the world of education, to proclaim the Word of God, convinced that all education that respects the human person is a way to open people to God's grace and so dispose them to accept the faith (Rule, 12).
- Jesus is *made known in the breaking of the bread*, making known his close relationship with his companions on the journey who, in their sharing, recognize the One who gave Himself up for others. We are also called to share together the work, the needs, and goods linked with daily life – to share the bread of affection, relationships, service – to share the bread of projects, decisions, activities, and roles – to share the bread of the Eucharist, which turns us into nourishment for our Brothers and for young people.
- Jesus is *proclaimed by his disciples*. Jesus disappears but the disciples, propelled by new fervor, go out joyfully to take on their missionary task. Now the darkness is in their environment and the light is carried inside themselves due to their encounter with Jesus. To return to Jerusalem is to take up the cause of Jesus again, it is to return to the community, a space of fraternity, it is to rekindle our fidelity to the vocation, to be sent by the community to bring the Gospel to all corners of the world.

Our Lasallian Icons

The literary style of our Founder is rather austere, precise, clear, and rational. It is obvious that he owes much to the Cartesian spirit of his time. Nevertheless, we can also find some images that allow us, more by intuition than by deduction, to discover some essential strokes of our vocation as Brothers. In a very subjective way, I am going to make reference to the following three images, which in my case have been inspirational for my personal journey.

My favorite Lasallian image is that of the *Good Shepherd*, applied by the Founder to the Brother in his apostolic ministry in several of his Meditations. It is a biblical image, certainly, but the Founder makes a very concrete application of it to our lives as Brothers. This biblical image presents a very consoling truth to us, as understood already by the Fathers of the Church. *To know, in Scripture, means not only obtaining knowledge by means of intelligence and understanding of a truth; to know is not just an abstract procedure, but also achieving an existential relationship with others, founded on reciprocal dialogue: to know is a personal relationship. Christ, the Good Shepherd, knows us because he has a personal relationship with each one of us, in love; he has made manifest his love by dying for us. We can know if we belong to his flock, his congregation, if we love him, if we have encountered him, if for us he is a living person with whom we have a close relationship, if we offer him the sacrifice of our own life. In encountering him, we encounter happiness* (From the Homilies of Saint Gregory the Great).

In Meditation 33 the Founder invites us, following the ex-

ample of Jesus, to know and to discern the way to proceed with each one of our students. It is about relationships and a personalized education, since *they must show more mildness toward some, more firmness toward others. There are those who call for much patience, those who need to be stimulated and spurred on, some who need to be reprovved and punished to correct them of their faults, others who must be constantly watched over to prevent them from being lost or going astray* (Meditation 33.1).

In the Gospel, Jesus tells us that it is necessary that *the sheep know their shepherd*, which implies for Saint John Baptist de La Salle, that the Brother should be a witness of life, and show special tenderness for those under his care, since this is what will move the sheep to love their shepherd and to take pleasure in his company. It is important also that *the sheep listen to their shepherd's voice*. Here the Founder invites us to adapt our language to the age and the circumstances of our students, to enculturate ourselves to their world so that our language might be understandable.

The Brother, like Jesus, must be especially attentive to the *lost sheep* and therefore the Founder makes an urgent appeal to us about intercessory prayer. *You must, then, devote yourself very much to prayer in order to succeed in your ministry. You must constantly represent the need of your disciples to Jesus Christ, explaining to him the difficulties you have experienced in guiding them. Jesus Christ, seeing that you regard him as the one who can do everything in your work and yourself as an instrument that ought to be moved only by him, will not fail to grant you what you ask of him* (Meditation 196.1).

And the Founder is pleased to repeat what Jesus said about the sheep for whom he was shepherd: *I came, he said, that they might have life and have it to the full. For this had to be the kind of ardent zeal you had for the salvation of those you have to instruct, when you were led to sacrifice yourself and to spend your whole life to give these other children a Christian education and to procure for them the life of grace in this world and eternal life in the next* (Meditation 201.3).

Another beautiful Lasallian image is that of the *bothersome friend* which the Founder presents to us in Meditation 37. What is interesting about this image is that, if the Brother is the *bothersome friend*, the young people we teach, especially the poor and those young people who live in particularly difficult situations, are represented by *the traveling friend, weary and exhausted...*

This is also about a biblical image seen from the point of view of our charism, as seen in the parable in Saint Luke (11: 5 - 10). We need to be willing to be bothersome for the sake of the children whom we educate in order to obtain what might be necessary for them, without counting the difficulties or the inconveniences this might cause for us. It is not only about the centrality of the young person in educational activity but above all about the primary concern for their integral salvation based on a compassionate view of them since we are invited to look on them *as poor, abandoned orphans...whom God has placed under your guardianship, aware, that He looks on them with compassion and takes care of them as being their protector, their support and their father, and it is to you that he entrusts this care* (Meditation 37.3).

As Brother Alfredo Morales tells us, *De La Salle wrapped up those children in faith, beaten as they were by poverty and wounded by bad moral values. For them he surrendered his life, his goods, his social prestige, and he left them as a precious inheritance a community of Christian educators, devoted to them "from morning to night."* It is up to us to continue this mission.

Finally, I am also moved by the Lasallian image of the *guardian angel*. Today, since the topic of angels has again been in the news, this image can have more to say to us than in the past. The topic of angels is very present in the writings of the Founder. In the Meditations we find 76 references to angels and there are 90 references in the Duties of a Christian.

The guardian angel appears as a model of religious life for the Brother, particularly in its posture of adoration. His presence in the mysteries of salvation invites the Brother to involve himself in the personal history of his students. It is here, when we refer to the educational activity, that the Founder understands an interaction and identification between the action of the guardian angel and the Brother. In fact, the Brother as well as the guardian angel is a mediator between God and young people. *You are mediators for them, and God uses you to teach them the way they are to be saved. Fulfill, then, the office God has entrusted to you.* (Meditation 56.3). We find the same idea when the Founder encourages us to follow the example of John the Baptist, as precursors of Jesus. *You, too, as well as Saint John, are real angels sent by God to prepare a path for him, so that he can enter your own*

hearts and those of your disciples (Meditation 2.1).

It is especially in Meditations 197 and 198 that the Founder makes an explicit call to us to exercise the function of a guardian angel in our ministry. To do this, we find a series of recommendations: be vigilant guides; study the Gospels thoroughly; reprimand and encourage; inspire in them the Gospel maxims by teaching them to them and directing their way along the path that will lead them to put them into practice.

Above all, be their intercessors before God. For this image the Founder starts from the beautiful biblical metaphor of Jacob's ladder, on which angels go up and down, inviting us to proceed in the same manner: *You must do the same thing for the children entrusted to your care. It is your duty to go up to God every day by prayer to learn from him all that you must teach your children, and then come down to them by accommodating yourself to their level in order to instruct them about what God has communicated to you for them* (Meditation 198.1).

I Will Dine with Him, and He with Me (Rev 3: 20)

If religious life is fundamentally a matter of love, it assumes, it demands, not as a moral imperative but as an existential one, times of deep, prolonged, frequent encounter with the one who loves us. We love Him because He loved us first. It is not about earning God's love because His is a gratuitous love. Rather, it is about responding, exposing myself to His light, His mercy, His power, as I expose myself to the sun on the beach. This exposing myself to God's sun leads

me, without realizing it, to the world, young people, the poor, my fellow men. Kierkegaard expressed this with an image of two doors. When we open the door that leads to God, we automatically open the door to our neighbor and if we close the door that leads to our neighbor we automatically close the door to God as well.

Prayer cannot be anything other than unified. This unifying character is proper to our Lasallian spirituality, as expressed by our 42nd General Chapter. *We believe that the contemplative attitude of the Founder, who was always attentive to the concrete situations of his own history and open to God's plan made manifest in his Word, invites us to live a unified Lasallian spirituality, knowing that it is the same Spirit who consecrates the Brothers and converts the hearts of young people* (Circular 435, page 52).

During the Symposium on prayer, held in 1980, it was said that prayer is a gift and an art. I personally believe that it is more of a gift than an art since basically prayer does not come from what *I can do*, because my prayer is not going to depend fundamentally on any mental control that I might have. Techniques of self-mastery may help me but they are not prayer in the proper sense. We should not forget that prayer, although a human task, is above all a gift from God.

Neither can prayer be reduced to what *I think*, because prayer is not the result of my intellectual speculation, nor of the inner logic of my thoughts, nor of any esthetic beauty attached to them.

Prayer is not centered either in what *I feel*, because feelings may be useful, but they are not prayer. We can apply to prayer what an Arabic saying says to us: *How different it is to attend a banquet for the sake of the banquet, than to attend a banquet for the sake of a friend.* The Founder tells us that it is more important to seek the God of consolation than to seek the consolation of God.

Our prayer should come from the idea of what *I want*. This is not a type of wanting that, at least in Spanish, that is synonymous with being able. We often say *Where there's a will, there's a way.* This is a type of wanting based on abandonment that springs from a deep and disinterested love. What is really being said to the Lord is *I want what You want.* Dryness, consolation, or emptiness matter little, provided that it is what you want. Prayer is centering ourselves on God and de-centering ourselves on ourselves. In the case where we might honestly feel that we do not want what God wants, no matter what the demands of the cross might be, to pray in that case is at the very least to say: *Lord, I would like to want what You want.* As Elizabeth Barrett Browning said in a poem about human love: *If thou must love me, let it be for nought except for love's sake only.*

The great model for our prayer is Jesus, and the most convincing argument to pray is none other than his example. Our prayer, rather than being focused on theories or techniques, should be focused on his person. *The first thing one observes in data gathered from diverse Gospel traditions is that prayer is not something accidental or secondary in the life of Jesus. On the contrary, we must say that it holds an essential,*

irreplaceable position. Prayer accompanies all great decisions and important events in his life (J. A. Pagola).

Here are three means to help us achieve the above:

1. ***Be ready to listen***, because, as Saint Theresa says: *The Lord teaches those who want to be taught in prayer.* For this to happen, we must become aficionados of the Lord. It is interesting to see that this is the term used by the Founder, even though he was unaware of our current sports terms. *And to whom should we attach* [Translator's note: in Spanish, the verb used here is a form of *aficionado*] *ourselves, if not to the One from whom we have received everything, who alone is Our Lord and our Father, and who, as Saint Paul says, has given being to all things and has made us only for himself?* (Meditation 90.2).
2. ***Update our Christology***. If, as the Rule tells us, *The Brothers nourish and strengthen their faith by biblical and theological studies* (Rule, 6), this is shown basically by a study of Jesus. A good study of Christology can be an excellent door to reach Christ. Our spiritual reading and our initial and ongoing formation should keep this very much in mind.
3. ***Make Jesus the object of our contemplative prayer***. The most important thing is to arrive at Christological contemplation. In the Collection, the Founder expresses it in this way when he talks about the effects of faith: *The first effect of faith is to lead us efficaciously to the knowledge, love, and imitation of Christ, and to union with him. Faith leads to the knowledge of Christ, since eternal life is knowing him. Faith leads to love of Christ, since anyone who does not love him is a reprobate. Faith leads to the imitation of Christ, since the predestined ought to conform to*

him; and to union with him, since we are to Jesus Christ like branches to a vine, dead when separated from him (Collection of Various Short Treatises, Christian Brothers Conference, Landover, USA, 1993, page 67, 2nd full paragraph). Such is the goal of all authentic, Christian prayer. Without a doubt the Founder had made his own the spirituality of the Sulpician school: *An exclusive line of thought of our century has sustained that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the world... This new opinion, not followed widely in the science of the stars, is useful and should be followed in the science of salvation. Jesus, in fact, is the motionless sun in his greatness and he moves all things... Jesus is the true center of the world, and the world should be in continual movement towards Him. Jesus is the sun of souls, who receive all grace, light, and influence from Him. The earth of our hearts ought to rotate continuously around Him* (Cardinal Bérulle).

Witnesses of Hope

It seems to me that today one of the dimensions of our life as religious Brothers is to keep hope alive. Keep alive the hope that our life is worth the effort and that it has a future. Keep alive the hope that the Lasallian mission, open today to shared mission and to association, will continue to be an instrument of salvation for the Church and for the world, especially the world of youth and the world of the poor. In a more global view, Teilhard de Chardin made an urgent invitation to us to keep alive the idea of expectation. *Expectation – anxious collective, and operative expectation of an end of the world, that is to say of an issue for the world – that is perhaps the supreme Christian function and the most distinctive*

characteristic of our religion. Historically speaking, that expectation has never ceased to guide the progress of our faith like a torch. The Israelites were constantly expectant, and the first Christians too. Christmas, which might have been thought to turn our gaze towards the past, has only fixed it further in the future. The Messiah who appeared for a moment in our midst only allowed Himself to be seen and touched for a moment before vanishing again, more luminous and ineffable than ever, into the depths of the future. He came. Yet now we must expect Him – no longer a small chosen group among us, but all men – once again and more than ever. The Lord Jesus will only come soon if we ardently expect Him. It is an accumulation of desires that should cause the Parousia to burst upon us.

The flame must be revived at all costs. At all costs we must renew in ourselves the desire and the hope for the great Coming. But where are we to look for the source of this rejuvenation? We shall truly find it in the perception of a more intimate connection between the victory of Christ and the outcome of the work which our human effort here below is seeking to construct (The Divine Milieu).

In Scripture we find on almost every page a call to hope that does not disappoint. *For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope* (Jeremiah 29: 11).

As we face ageing and a decrease in the number of Brothers in some areas of the Institute, the temptation is to let ourselves be carried along by pessimism and by discouragement. However, based on faith and enlightened by hope

and by a profound love for all those we ought to serve, we can also make our own the experience of Paul in Asia, at a time of profound confusion and danger. *Indeed, we had accepted within ourselves the sentence of death, that we might trust not in ourselves but in God who raises the dead. He rescued us from such great danger of death, and he will continue to rescue us; in him we have put our hope...* (2 Corinthians 1: 9 - 10). What we are seeing now, might it not be an opportune occasion, a time of grace based on our frailty, to trust not so much in ourselves, in our means and our prestige, but to trust in God who is able to raise the dead and in whom we have put our hope?

We can apply to religious life what André Fossion says about Christianity as we make use of an African proverb: *The old tree that is splitting makes more noise than the jungle that is growing.* More important than the tree that splits and falls is the jungle that is giving birth and growing. On the level of religious life it is difficult to imagine and to program what is happening. What we can and ought to do is to favor its growth. Religious life in the future will not be only nor principally the result of our effort; it will be, above all, an unexpected new fruit, surprised by the action of the Spirit in the very heart of the world.

Here lies our hope, in those new shoots that are germinating today in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America...but also, and in spite of difficulties, in those new shoots that are emerging in Europe, North America, Oceania. It seem to me that it is important to keep in mind with regard to this what Pedro Belderrain, a Claretian, says in the Spanish magazine

“Vida Religiosa”: ‘Often there are many generalizations and no time for nuances. For example, religious life in some nations is neither totally dead, nor in other places does it incarnate perfectly the Kingdom of God. I imagine that today there is some “north” (adoption of bourgeois ways, neo-liberalism, giving up...) in the South and some “south” (commitment, insertion, hope) in the North...Nor is the entire future of religious life in Asia and Africa, nor is it completely finished in Europe.’

We are called to be witnesses of a hope that we carry within as Saint Peter invites us to be. We Brothers today are called to be men of hope. A hope that is born of faith certainly, but which has its roots also in the enormous ability that our Institute has had to begin again after times of crisis. In November 2004 I was invited to participate in the bicentennial celebration of our schools in Lyon, France. That celebration was really about more than just that. It was about restarting the Institute after the French Revolution. Only 80 Brothers responded to the call and the Institute had the ability to begin again in 1804 and to undertake an extraordinary development. One-hundred years later was the crisis of 1904. At that time, there were more than 10,000 Brothers in France. It was a very difficult time and other alternatives could have been considered, as we know from the studies done by Brother Pedro Gil. Nevertheless, even with all the limitations, we were strengthened by the internationalization of the Institute. Today we can consider this to have been a providential moment. I like to think that one-hundred years later, 2004 - 2005, we are also living a privileged moment and we are protagonists in a wonderful adventure with shared mission and association

with lay persons who can assure the vitality of the Lasallian mission of the future in favor of the young.

But we should open and share our hope beyond our congregational borders and our apostolic mission. We should not forget that we are a part of humanity, as the Congress on Consecrated Life reminded us a humanity that thirsts for well-being in a world filled with consumption and poverty, of love in the midst of chaos and disordered love, of transcendence in a context of political and existential disillusionment. We need to identify with this human face and not with that of the sacred institution (priest, Levite, temple), distant from the poor and from the suffering of humankind or as a wife prostituted by alliances of convenience represented by different husbands, as in the case of the Samaritan woman. Therefore, we must allow ourselves to be questioned by the thirst for meaning, the suffering of humanity, love, and compassion made manifest by Jesus toward all that is human.

Conclusion: Seekers of God, Followers of Jesus Christ, Builders of His Kingdom

At the conclusion of the Congress on Consecrated Life, a small group of “auditors” tried to summarize the most important and impressive ideas that had surfaced during the Congress by creating a list of signs of life that already proclaim a new dawn for consecrated life. Among other items, I would like to highlight the following:

- The desire to *be born again* from the perspective of the Incarnation.

- The fascination that the person of Jesus today exerts on consecrated life.
- The centrality of “lectio divina.”
- The passion for the mission that energizes our imagination and urges us to take on new, bold, prophetic, and ‘frontier’ initiatives.
- The search for a communion that is more alive and for a community that is more authentic, based on deeper, more inclusive, and evangelical relationships.

It is now up to us to continue what was begun during this Congress. To continue welcoming invitations from the Spirit who urges us to describe, relate, listen to, live what He himself makes manifest in the compassion for those who respond to those most in need. To let ourselves be transformed by that passion of Christ which makes us embrace his passion for a suffering humanity. To let ourselves be led to new places, without borders, to begin new practices, in new structures, based on the double and unique exigency of a passionate love for Christ and an always open passion for humanity that should lead us to personal and community conversion, to the transformation of society and its unjust structures, and to celebrate, daily, throughout the liturgical year, the slow but burning and powerful force of the Resurrection, already present in the world and in history, that “*makes all things new.*”

I was struck very powerfully by all the interventions made by the young men and women religious during the Congress. They made specific reference to the quality that they hope for from our life in community. I believe that this is a

sign of the times to which we ought to be attentive. It is about a community that gives more importance to relationships than to structures, one that harmoniously integrates the personal and the common; one that is responsive and open to the new forms of poverty; one that helps us live Gospel values.

Passion today is above all solidarity, fraternity, presence, welcoming, mentoring. *Our essential mission is to be bearers of tenderness and mercy, as Jesus was, bearers of welcome and understanding, of pardon and hope* (Alejandro Fernández, O.M.). We are called to be a more human and compassionate face of the Church, or as Father Radcliffe put it during the Congress, *an ecological nest of freedom*. Camus, as an example of true friendship, wrote of a man whose friend had been imprisoned and every night this man slept on the floor of his room so as not to enjoy a comfort that had been snatched from the one he loved. The writer added that the great question for those of us who suffer is the same: *Who will sleep on the floor for us?* Charles Péguy told a story of a man who went to heaven and an angel, upon examining him, asked: *Where are your wounds? Wounds?*, said the man. *I don't have any wounds*. Discouraged, the angel, responded: *Was there nothing for which it was worth fighting?* Our wounds, those we suffer for others, make us who we are. They identify us, says North American Dominican Chrys McVey, as he commented on this text, in the same way that the apostles could identify with Jesus after the Resurrection, when he showed them his wounds (cf. John 20: 20).

The challenge is a demanding one, but it is worth the ef-

fort and there is no lack of witnesses. When there is passion, we may be deprived of everything but no one can keep us from moving forward. This idea was beautifully expressed by Armando Valladares, a Cuban poet, who was imprisoned for 22 years (1960 to 1982) for his Christian and political convictions.

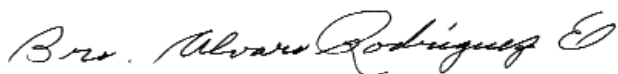
“They have taken everything from me,
pens, pencils, ink,
because they do not want me to write
and they have buried me
in this cell of punishment
but not even this will crush my rebelliousness.
They have taken everything from me
- almost everything -
because I still have my smile,
my pride at feeling like a free man,
and in my soul there is a garden
of everlasting flowers.
They have taken everything from me,
pens, pencils,
but I still have the ink of life
- my own blood -
and with that I still write verses.”

I believe that Mary should be for us the model for the religious life we want to live today. She lived, always oriented toward the Father and toward her brothers and sisters. She knew how to integrate faith and zeal, the mystic and the prophetic, love of God and love of neighbor; passion for Christ and passion for humanity. These are areas that

should also be present in the way we live our total surrender to the Lord.

Mary without a doubt lived this profound reality in her being as virgin and mother. As virgin, she always listened to God, in a silence that resounded with the divine word. Karl Barth has pointed out that Mary's virginity is a hymn of the absolute primacy of God, that God in whose presence we should be absorbed and amazed, letting ourselves be transformed by Him. As mother, silence turned into the word, virginity into motherhood, a motherhood characterized by gentleness, tenderness, gift. *May the Virgin Mary, the icon of the one who prays, teach us in her silence the experience of God and may she help us to be as receptive as she was to the Mystery's initiative, – to be, like her, the womb of God, welcomed within us in order to be able to be witnesses before the world with our lives, of the fact that God is the world's true womb, that everything is wrapped up in Him, that everything comes from Him and returns to Him, that only He is the meaning, the strength, the hope of the life of humanity!* (Bruno Forte)

Fraternally in De La Salle,



Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría
Superior General

