

BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS



Pastoral Letter to the Brothers

THE IMAGE OF THE BROTHER TODAY

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC

Superior General

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PASTORAL LETTER DECEMBER 2000

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The centrality of our Fourth Vow

25th December 2000
The Nativity of the Lord

Dear Brothers:

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen”
(Ephesians 3: 20-21).

Please accept my fraternal Christmas and New Year’s greetings, Brothers. St. Paul’s words to the Ephesians allow us to recognize that it is this God the Father who invites us always to go beyond our own projects and desires to go beyond our very selves. This is highly encouraging because it is not only a good wish. St. Paul speaks to us about a power that is at work within us; the power of God that works within our human condition. I ask that the Incarnate Word, the manifestation of God that works within weakness, give us new powers and enthusiasm to carry out the work entrusted to us and that the year 2001, which is beginning now and during which we will cel-

celebrate the 350th anniversary of the Founder's birth, be for each of us and for all those who benefit from our ministry, a time of grace and salvation.

Our 43rd General Chapter, studying and promoting the topic of Association as it did, opened the Institute to a process which we do not know exactly where it will take us, but we do know that we should look at it with a lot of hope since it could mean a real way to restart our charism. This new perspective will require changes of us, for example, in the area of communication. Which publications should we open up to Associates and which should be for the Institute? This is a topic that we are looking at right now, but personally during these seven years I would want to address the Pastoral Letter to the Brothers. I have two reasons for this. There are topics that deal directly with our identity, and it is important that we reflect on this and interiorize it. On the other hand this type of contact will allow for reaching out to each Brother in a deeper and a more familiar way.

Before beginning to develop the theme of this letter, I would like to share some Institute news with you.

Thinking back on the 43rd General Chapter

The General Chapter has awakened many expectations and hopes in us. We looked at the future, and we believe in ourselves. Now it is up to the Institute's central government to put into practice, in light of the Chapter and in light of the needs and wishes that encourage us regard-

ing the Institute, the decisions that have been approved and to plan for the next seven years that we have ahead of us. It is a tremendous challenge; but we trust in the guiding presence of God to whose work we are committed, the support of our Brothers, and the quality of a team that does things very well. As Bishop Helder Camara put it: “When you dream collectively, the dream is a reality that is possible.”

Now that it has been a half year since our General Chapter was held, I think that we should give thanks to God for this congregational event. As has been said already in different ways, we cannot reduce our General Chapter to a series of documents and proposals - no matter how important they may be. For the participants, it was a time of grace, of fraternity, of looking towards a promising future. I hope that similar feelings have been passed on to the Brothers. They now have *Circular 447* in their hands; and on the District and Regional levels, they can discuss ways to put it into practice. The central theme, “Associated for the educational service of the poor as the Lasallian response to the challenges of the 21st century,” should inspire in us creative policies in our educational ministries; and it should help us to discern better our own identity.

We members of the General Council have been working for more than two months on the implementation of our Chapter and on the policy of leading the Institute and the Lasallian Family for the next seven years. The work has been arduous and demanding but at the same time enrich-

ing and fraternal. I would like to thank these Brothers for their excellent contribution, for their availability, and for their support.

World Youth Days

During the month of August here in Rome, we experienced an exceptional event. More than two million young people participated in the World Youth Days. During these days, the press reported not one negative incident. We were fortunate at the Generalate to be able to house some 1,400 young people and to welcome visits from other Lasallian youth groups who were housed in different areas of the city. Their enthusiasm, joy, and ability to sacrifice and to adapt, their prayer services and their liturgical participation were extraordinary.

Personally, this experience has made me think that we should leave aside so many prejudices that at times, show us, only the other side of the coin, and we should learn how to value the innumerable positive aspects of the young people that we have in our hands. Our work as teachers, as those who accompany, as guides, as friends of young people has tremendous value today. We came into existence for young people, and it is they who should show us the path to follow. The Rule invites us to make an effort at inculturation in the world of young people (*Rule 18*). On the other hand, it is important to support and to strengthen the Lasallian youth movement. The Lasallian youth movement from the District of French-speaking Canada is currently preparing for an international meet-

ing which will take place prior to the next World Youth Days scheduled for Toronto in July 2002. No doubt in the coming months you will receive the pertinent information.

Areas in difficulty

During the last few months, our Brothers in the Holy Land have been very much in our minds. As you know they have been going through a very violent situation which has had direct repercussions in Bethlehem University by means of gunshots and, indirectly, in all our works that have had to suspend classes for a significant amount of time. We thank the Brothers and all Lasallians for their courage and commitment during these very difficult times, and we feel that we are in close solidarity with them. It seems to me that this is the time to recall the priority which the Institute has for Lasallian works in the Holy Land. Bethlehem University is, without a doubt, one of the most important works of our Institute; and all the Lasallian educational establishments there are a very valuable presence of the Church in favor of ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. We are concerned about the future and how to ensure our continued presence. Of course this is a topic that will involve time, reflection, and realistic solutions on the part of the Institute.

Beatification of the Martyrs from Valencia

On March 11, 2001, we will celebrate the Beatification of our Brother Martyrs from Valencia, along with a group

of 226 Martyrs from the Civil War in Spain. They are Brothers Honorato Andrés, Florencio Martín, Ambrosio León, Bertrán Francisco, and Elías Julián. These five Brothers were from Teruel and belonged to the District of Barcelona, which at that time included what is now the District of Valencia. The first three Brothers, from the Bonanova community, were martyred on October 22, 1936, as they were attempting to reach Aragon. They had to stop as they passed through Valencia. There, motivated by their apostolic zeal, they wanted to continue their educational ministry. This led to their being found out as religious, and they were assassinated the same day as their arrest. The last two Brothers, from the Cambrils community, had to vacate the house of formation and accompany a group of Novices and Scholastics from Aragon. As they stopped in Valencia, they were identified as religious and assassinated on November 22, 1936. The ages of these men is a striking aspect: 28, 23, 22, 23 and 35 respectively.

During the Jubilee Year, the Church wanted to honor in a special way the memory of the Martyrs. The Martyrs' Chapel in the Generalate tries to bring together and to safeguard the memory of our Brother Martyrs. They are witnesses of Christ and of Gospel values. May their lives and deaths be for us a new invitation to live radically our dedication to the Lord in the educational service of young people, especially the poor.

350th anniversary of the Founder's birth

On April 30, 2001, we will celebrate the 350th anniver-

sary of the birth of our Founder, Saint John Baptist de La Salle. Birth is always an occasion to remember, to give thanks and to celebrate life. It is in terms of life that I want to invite you, Brothers, to celebrate this important anniversary. This birth is a story about life received, through our Founder over these 350 years, on the part of so many children and young people on all continents. Here is a life challenge that we must continue to defend in all areas.

The General Chapter commitment of making our own the defense of the rights of the child seems to me to be the correct formula for living out this ideal. The Gospel text of John (10:10) which the Founder made his own in several of his writings has always caught my attention: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (*Meditations 45.1; 112.3; 196.3; 201.3; Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer 2.81; I 6.5*). It is up to us today to continue the Lasallian commitment to give life, and to give it abundantly, especially to those young people who see their lives threatened in so many ways. I hope that we use this focus in the celebrations that will mark the end of our Lasallian Jubilee year.

The image of the Brother today: The centrality of our fourth vow.

The title of this letter comes from the theme that was chosen for the Brothers’ Convocation for the Region of Italy, held in the city of Paderno del Grappa last July. I was fortunate enough to participate in the Convocation

and to share some ideas. Actually, the theme responded to a double question that was very much in the mind of our 43rd General Chapter: Who are we? Who should we be? We are confronting the topic of our own identity, a recurring theme for several years, and not only in the area of the Brother's life or of religious life, but also in political, cultural and social areas. The questions surely have arisen, among other reasons, due to the changes that we are experiencing today and which we must face.

There is no doubt that the image of the Brother in the Institute has been enhanced with a series of traits that have given his vocation new vitality. Personally, I am discovering new signs of life in the Institute. Among other things, I would highlight: the human and religious qualities of so many Brothers of all ages; the witness of fidelity among our senior Brothers; fraternity as a distinctive sign, a desire to respond creatively to the needs of today and to new forms of poverty; an attitude of respect for persons and the broad range of points of view; the incredible richness of our unified and incarnational spirituality; an openness to share our spirit and mission; the spiritual concerns of many young Brothers, and a greater sensitivity to ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.

Nevertheless, the crisis of identity also touches us the same as it does the majority of our contemporaries. In our case, we can today speak about the Brother within the context of shared mission and, beginning with the last General Chapter, of Association. However, we could also speak of the religious Brother in the heart of the Church

who has committed himself to the laity; or about the teaching Brother in a school who each day is pressured more and more in a modern society which tends to devalue the role of teacher; or about the Brother whose purpose was to give a Christian education to children of the artisans and the poor, who today is involved in works directed towards the middle class; or about the Brother whose principal role is catechesis, but whose energy is immersed in the professional world. Furthermore, let us not forget the many Brothers who, as they reach retirement age, are taken away from what up until that time constituted the reason for their lives and who now ask themselves how to begin again.

The 43rd General Chapter pointed out in its document on Identity a concrete cause for current difficulties: “But, in the climate of uncertainty an insecurity, brought about and sustained by escalating change, of which globalization is a manifestation, questions remain about the Brother’s identity. This is particularly true where the loss of some traditional roles, formerly carried out exclusively by Brothers, has taken away what may have been only a functional identity, better expressed in terms of **doing** rather than of **being**.”

I believe that sometimes we confuse the topic of identity with the role that today we are called to carry out due to the very dramatic changes which the world has undergone. Today we talk about new paradigms that invite us to follow new paths, undertake new searches, based on new ideas. We cannot lock ourselves up in the past and

live with our backs to today's realities.

Facing today's realities we can respond in two ways. We can look at the world in which we live as something negative and uncertain, or we can live it out passionately in a way which opens up future pathways. I believe that this is the reason why there is so much talk today about refoundation. Father Kolvenbach, Superior of the Company of Jesus, in speaking about this term, says: "This term expresses our awareness that, to live out authentically our charism in today's world, there must be a profound change. We need something more radical than a simple adaptation here or there, or some circumstantial innovation or some inevitable change."

Without trying to offer a complete view of what it means to be Brothers today, I would like to reflect on some aspects of our identity which seem to me to be current and may help us make this "profound change."

The centrality of our fourth vow

Brother John in his last *Pastoral Letter* invited us to live today our founding story. I would like to continue his reflection, recalling what I consider essential in that family story while inviting myself and all of you to incarnate it again in today's world.

Personally, I think that the Founder and the first Brothers, while wanting to respond to the needs of poor and abandoned youth, considered that what was basic for them

was expressed in the formula of their definitive commitment in 1694 - to live as consecrated persons in this community of the Christian Schools, in service of the Christian education of children and the poor.

Consecration, in Lasallian terms, integrates, as does the Gospel, love of God and love of persons. For the Founder and the first Brothers, the greater glory of God was translated into the educational service of the poor. Archbishop Romero was to say later on that the greater glory of God is that the poor live, and I believe that this was the Founder's own vision as he focused his attention on the children of the artisans and the poor. At the same time, our Founder was aware that the greatest gift we can give to humankind is the living God that we should make visible with our lives.

But the concept of consecration has deep Christological roots. In the message given at Nazareth, the consecration of Jesus by the Spirit consists in bringing the Good News to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor (cf. *Luke 4: 16-20*).

However, our fourth vow does not only have this spiritual dimension of devotion to God and procuring his glory; it also has strong community repercussions. Association to conduct, together and by association, schools for the service of the poor strengthens the bonds of the Brothers among themselves. The Founder was led, little

by little, to discover that his personal vocation was linked to the fact of founding a fraternity in service of abandoned youth. He understood that the will of God for him, the service that he ought to offer to the work of God, consisted in “establishing and guiding ” a community made up of persons freely committed by God for the service of poor and abandoned youth, continually energized by reference to the living God and the work of God and by the lived experience of fraternity.

The current *Rule* summarizes extraordinarily well the outset of our origins: “John Baptist de La Salle was led to found a community of men who were enlightened by God to have a share in his plan of salvation. They associated together to respond to the needs of young people who were poor and far from salvation. Even today, each of the Brothers’ communities finds in this historical event a fundamental source of inspiration ” (*Rule 47*).

We make our personal commitment to God in the heart of a community. Our commitment to God is influenced by Brothers with whom we also commit ourselves. It is moving, to see in the Archives of the Generalate, how in the formula of his consecration of 1694 the Founder and each of the twelve original Brothers who recited it, explicitly name the twelve companions with whom they lived. Consecration is not only an alliance with God; it is also an alliance with the men in my community, my District, my Institute, with those we have worked with in educational service of the poor. The associative element of our fourth vow brings together consecration, commu-

nity, and mission.

Nonetheless, we have not always lived out the centrality of our fourth vow of Association for the educational service of the poor in a way that was clear. Our formation, especially in the Novitiate, many times revolved around the three classic vows, leaving our specific vows in the shadows. However, the three classic vows do nothing more than to detail our unique fundamental vow: consecration to God in community for the educational service of the poor and, based on the poor, to be open to the needs of all young people.

As Brothers we should feel challenged to live our fourth vow as one of the privileged ways of recovering the spiritual dimension of our origins. This vow makes us think about a new model of society in which distances are shortened and alienation disappears. Therefore in light of this specific vow we should see the remaining vows as an incisive public critique of the idols of society in the three most important areas of human life: economics, politics and, the sensual-cultural.

In the economic area, our vow of poverty should denounce the absolute value that our consumer society gives to money. Poverty opts for the person as the most important, and makes the value of things relative. This is what St. Vincent de Paul declared already in his time: “I stop being poor when things are more important to me than persons.”

In the area of politics, our obedience makes power relative and opts for unlimited service in dedication and time, countering an attitude of domination or giving priority to the pursuit of one's own interests.

In the sensual-cultural area, our chastity denounces a bias that presents sex as unconnected from love and opts for the love of Christ, present in each human face, especially the poor (cf. *Rule 5*).

This is the prophetic and anti-establishment value of our consecration, denunciation, renunciation, announcement. Based on our fourth vow we are in opposition to, without fear, the three basic idols of the system: money, power, and sex. We opt for the person, especially for those young people whose frailness is as yet unknown. We opt for service in favor of all, but especially in projects that look, by means of education, to respond to the needs of many young people who are excluded from the benefits of society today. We opt for love, clearly universal but more intense, if it reaches out to those young people who are not loved.

The current reading of our fourth vow should bring us to live out these three basic positions. Personally, I think that we do not suppress the three classic vows when we recover their original dynamic. Instead, we center these vows around the idea of our association for the educational service of the poor, such as the Founder and the first Brothers lived their original vows.

In this sense, it seems to me that what we say about our first three vows we should affirm also in our fifth vow, the vow of stability. The Founder thought about it in terms of the educational service of the poor in order to give it strength and ensure its performance. We should understand stability not only, nor principally, as duration but also, and above all, as a radical dedication to our ministry of Christian education.

Throughout my life as a Brother, a talk given by Brother Charles Henry has been particularly significant for me. The talk was given to a group of Brothers from what was then the District of Seville on the occasion of their perpetual profession. He said: “Our consecration for life refers to time, quantity and duration; but in its deeper meaning it refers to intensity, depth and quality. To respond with our lives to these two levels of meaning is to accept a real challenge because both are difficult. Even so the second is more important because, in order to respond completely to the first level, it is necessary to go in depth into the meaning of the second. I do not believe it is an exaggeration if I say that the greatest problem of commitment today is not the problem of time or of stability, but the problem of depth and of quality.”

The Brother, a spiritual “companion”

I decided not to speak of a spiritual master because our richness is to be a Brother, and it seems to me that the term “companion” responds better to what is most characteristic of our vocation and of our teaching style. It

seems to me that our fourth vow should also open the multifaceted profile of the Brother to this area which today seems fundamental to me and which some may think it odd that I am including it here in this section. I am including it here because I am convinced that in association for the service of the poor, asked of us today by the 43rd General Chapter, we Brothers especially should make this contribution, although it is not exclusively ours.

Naturally, it is in the heart of the community that this dimension should take shape. The community is the God-enlightened space that, as the Founder liked to say, should help us be interior men. For the Founder the local community was the place for the evangelical education of its members: “It is mainly in communities that good example is most notable and has the most power and efficacy. All those who live there together encourage one another to practice what is most holy and most perfect in the Gospel maxims” (*Meditation 180.1*).

Speaking about the relationship between lay persons and consecrated persons the document *Vita Consecrata* states: “In whatever activity or ministry they are involved, consecrated persons should remember that before all else they must be expert guides in the spiritual life, and in this perspective they should cultivate ‘the most precious gift: the spirit’” (*VC 55*).

As Brothers, the person and message of Jesus about being children of God, fraternity, unconditional love, and unlimited forgiveness are the major riches that we can

give young people. We can make our own the words of Peter as he cured the paralytic: “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk” (*Acts 3:6*). We should make so many children, who do not find meaning in their lives “get up and walk.” Without this, the struggle for a more just social order would be insufficient.

As the North American Sister Joan Chittister has said, the role of religious life is to keep alive the question about God. We do this based on our Lasallian spirituality which is an incarnational spirituality that unites body and soul, the profane and the sacred, school and prayer, liberation and contemplation, human development and evangelization. It is a unifying spirituality inspired by a man “who was always attentive to the concrete situation of his own history and open to God’s plan made manifest in his Word” (*Circular 435*, page 52).

In my first remarks to the Brother capitulants, I told them that “it is important also to strengthen our own spiritual dimension and make visible today the ‘memory of Jesus Christ’ and the ‘memory of the origins’, which give meaning to our vocation and invite us to live it with future creative imagination. This is because what the world expects from us is above all that we be seekers of God, that we offer the world a clue for its own quest - humble guides without pretension, aware of our own inconsistencies, but able to accompany our contemporaries in their faith journey, taking on their weaknesses, their doubts and their frailty.”

The prayer of the Brother

In April of this year, just as our last General Chapter was about to begin, two Italian magazines published by St. Paul Press, *Christian Family* and *Jesus*, published the results of and comments about a survey aimed at young Italians. At the same time a small book appeared, entitled *Prayer*, now available in several languages, in which young people from around the world, responding to a survey from more than 60 international magazines, reveal to us why and how they pray.

During my first pastoral visits I heard expressions such as: “Tell the Brothers to pray...” from various Brothers and lay persons. That fact, coupled with my reading of the above materials, has motivated me to make some remarks on this topic. And it seems to me that this is closely connected to what I have said earlier. One of the new forms of poverty is precisely this lack of meaning that many young people are going through; and, unfortunately, in accordance with the survey, very few of them find adults who are capable of lending them a hand. “The new generation,” explains Enzo Bianchi, prior of a monastic community in Bose, commenting on the survey, “shows an openness to a high quality spiritual search, a search in which there is always less need for religion and more need for asking about meaning. We find in young people the desire for prayer and for understanding what prayer should be, but also we find that they are helped very little and that they are very much alone as they learn about prayer and practice it. It is a painful statement for

those who are responsible for transmitting the faith to young people.”

In the survey two facts are very clear. Young people prefer to pray alone (84.6%) no matter the place (69.9%). I see here a correlation with some of the most important Lasallian ideas. Does not the Founder say that the first and principal exercise is precisely this substantial, silent, daily encounter with the Lord? Is not a significant amount of time, spent with the Lord in daily life the most important element of the method of Lasallian prayer? I hope that we listen to young people today and, thanks to them, we become their disciples, and return to and intensify these fundamental elements of our prayer.

And I am speaking here of a kind of prayer that has much to do with life and the meaning of life. We can see this in two examples taken from the book already mentioned: “Lord, my dream is to be able to fly away, above the world and time, to borrow your eyes so as to be able to understand my life and to know the mystery of your plans. Emptied of all ideas, images, I want to continue doing your will and feeling that I am sowing the seed of your great love” (Celeste Pilar, age 24, Argentina). “My most beautiful prayer is to look at my brother each morning, each afternoon, at all times, the brother that others continually put down” (Cristina Del Sol, Italy).

To be a spiritual companion should be a priority today for us, and we should consider this a new call to renewal in prayer. Lasallian prayer has always made us reach out

to young people, because young people and the needs of the world are very much present in the heart of the Brother, so much so that even in those times aimed at meeting God face to face, the Brother cannot but think about young people and the world. Lasallian teaching on this is clear: “You have exercises which are arranged for your own sanctification, but if you have an ardent zeal for the salvation of those whom you are called to instruct, you will not fail to perform them and to relate them to this intention” (*Meditation 205.2*). To be a spiritual companion means also to be an intercessor before the Lord.

Brothers, normally students have no difficulty in seeing us as excellent teachers and warm persons; they do not always see us as men of prayer. We should make that dimension visible. I think that we can find here an important incentive for the renewal of our prayer and offer this to the world as one of our main contributions. Prayer has a kind of revolutionary aspect to it as we confront a world where everything is based on usefulness and immediate results; a world that has made the laws of the market place absolutes. Prayer shows, without words but with force, the presence of God who is Absolute and the absolutism of the human person; it is, today more than ever, a necessary space for gratitude.

Today theology has gone back to using narrative language. In fact the Christian faith came into being by means of salvific events. We know that, because of the influence of Greek *logos* theological discourse came into being as a narrative and ended up being an abstract for-

mula. Young people today are inviting us to recover a narrative language that is concrete, warm, and based on experience. If Jesus was able to do narrative theology, it was because he spoke of what he had seen and heard in intimacy with the Father. This should be the language of our prayer - prayer which is incarnational - prayer that, like that of Jesus, has to do with a personal, silent and deep openness to God as Father and at the same time is a discovery of his saving will and a dedication of one's life for those whom the Lord has entrusted to us.

I am convinced that, since young people today are looking for meaning in their lives they will feel attracted to unite themselves to men who live out a life with meaning, men who have discovered God as absolute, men who live deeply and joyfully their own vocation of preferential service to the poor, men who are able to accompany young people in their ambiguous but sincere search for meaning.

To be a spiritual "companion," a "companion" in prayer, does not allow for retirement. How many senior Brothers would be able to continue accompanying with their accumulated wisdom, their lived experience and their silent prayer, so many young people in search of horizons and answers in their own lives!

CONCLUSION

Brothers, as I finish this letter I wanted to highlight the profound relationship that exists between the centrality of our fourth vow and the invitation to be spiritual companions. At first sight, it may seem as if they are very different arguments; but within a unified spirituality, such as the Lasallian one, they seem to me to be closely linked. For Saint John Baptist de La Salle what was spiritual was not something apart from, different from, or superior to what was real. For the Founder the stuff of spiritual life is concrete existence, events, and the poor, while at the same time recognizing in all these things another reality, another depth, another meaning, another inner world.

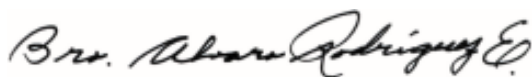
For the Founder, God made himself present in events and in persons, especially in children and the poor, so much so that he does not hesitate to ask us to make the act of adoration the high point of our relationship with God, in his presence: “Recognize Jesus in the poor rags of the children whom you have to instruct. Adore him in them” (*Meditation 96.3*). For the Founder, there is a direct relationship between our love for the poor and our belonging to Jesus Christ: “The more affection you show for them, the more you will belong to Jesus Christ” (*Meditation 173.1*).

I think that today, as in the origin of our Institute, children and the poor, whose cause we have consecrated ourselves to by our fourth vow, are a sacrament of Jesus Christ that makes us experience two things: God as fa-

ther and our own poverty; at the same time, these children urge us to a service in solidarity with them. Is not this one of the most characteristic traits of the image of the Brother today?

I look forward to a study of the original intuition of the Founder and our own identity which the 43rd General Chapter has asked to be done by an intercapitular commission. I hope that these words may be a stimulus to study this topic in depth and that they may help us to keep alive the fire that brought us into being.

Fraternally in De La Salle,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Bro. Alvaro Rodríguez E." in a cursive script.

Brother Alvaro Rodríguez Echeverría
Superior General