

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE BROTHERS

**ASSOCIATED WITH THE GOD OF THE
KINGDOM AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

Ministers and Servants of the Word

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Superior General
December 25th, 2004

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Nativity of the Lord

Dear Brothers,

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1: 3 - 6).

Warm Christmas greetings to each one of you. Once again this wonderful feast invites us to enter within ourselves and contemplate in our own heart the Word made flesh. The Good News of the birth of the Lord in each one of us is the Good News of the Gospel which, by our vocation as ministers and servants of the Word, we are called to bring to the world of education. What a tremendous ideal Saint Paul gives us: To be in solidarity with the Gospel from the first day until now! This ideal, which is no doubt full of generosity, creativity and apostolic zeal when we are young, should continue to be the driving force of our

being and our actions each day in concrete circumstances as long as we live, whether we are young Brothers, adults or seniors, with the certainty that God acts through us and that the only limit to the ministry which the Lord has entrusted to us will be, paradoxically, its culmination when Jesus returns and God is all in all. May Jesus the Word Incarnate fill all of us with his blessings throughout the new year which we are beginning.

As in previous years, I would like to begin this pastoral letter by making some comments about important events that we have experienced over the course of the year that is ending.

A Meeting of Young Brothers from RELAL (Lasallian Region of Latin America)

At the end of last year, when the pastoral letter for 2003 had already gone to press, I had the good fortune to participate in a meeting of more than 70 young Brothers under the age of 30 in San José, Costa Rica. It was an unforgettable experience which found expression in a Creed written by the Young Brothers; and I have taken the opportunity to comment on this experience on other occasions. This Creed is an expression of faith in an Institute which is undergoing renewal and which, in association with lay colleagues, is opening paths to the future. It is, at the same time, the expression of desire or wish to

strengthen the ties that unite us to our own Brothers, as we can see in two of their statements:

- We believe that our primary association is with the Brothers, and we also associate with those who want to live the charism of De La Salle in their lives: the dream of a human and Christian education for the poor.
- We believe that association happens when we share goods, feelings and a Lasallian spirituality that leads us to live together side-by-side and to share as brothers and sisters our lives, dreams and our mission...when in community we trust one another, each one taking on in his or her role a mission in favor of the poor and oppressed...when our hearts beat together and in the same spirit that maintains alive in us Lasallian values that draw the poor closer to God... when we share for mutual enrichment who we are and what we experience...when our life program is centered in Jesus Christ and our views are shaped by those of the Gospel...when the Brother's journey is made by means of others...when we recognize ourselves as brothers and sisters who are human and who are sinners.

The Seventh Meeting of Lasallian Universities in Barcelona and in Madrid

The seventh meeting of the heads of Lasallian Uni-

versities took place in Barcelona and in Madrid from January 13 to 17. Presidents of institutions who make up the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU) took part in the meeting.

My presence at the meeting was meant to be a sign of the importance that our Institute today gives to higher education, and it was intended as an act of faith in its enormous potential. The unprecedented growth in the history of the Institute of Lasallian universities in almost all Regions of the world is a sign of the times that cannot be ignored.

Looking over our three-hundred years of history, we come across the fact that our Founder dedicated himself more to teacher formation than to the direct education of children. In a way, we can say that higher education in the Institute was born with the Founder and with his concern for teacher formation. Today this is the responsibility of universities or centers of higher education in almost every country.

Our universities ought to be able, in a harmonious fashion, to combine teaching with research and social transformation. It is important not to be satisfied with the innate tendency to reproduce structures, but rather to seek how to modify them and improve them, especially those structures that will ensure a world that is more just and a society that is more participatory. It is not enough to talk about events if we

do not have the ability to monitor them and put them at the service of humanity based on a vision inspired in the Gospel and in Lasallian tradition, particularly in service of those who remain beyond the benefits brought about by globalization.

The Murder of Brother Ignacio García in Africa

On February 6 we received the sad news of the murder of Brother Ignacio García in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso. I had the good fortune of living with him for one year during my novitiate in Bordighera, Italy. Even as a young Brother, he showed great ideals and deep convictions. It was a great joy for me to meet him again in Rome, after so many years, when he made the 1997 CIL session. As he did throughout his life, he enthusiastically and unreservedly devoted himself to this renewal program.

I saw him for the final time during a District visit in Burkina Faso in 2001. At that time, he was the District Bursar. I had the opportunity to speak with him; and two things had a powerful impact on me: (1) his deep spirituality and the natural way in which he spoke about God and his personal relationship with him; and (2) his desire that two District projects in favor of the poor become realities (the primary school in Ouagadougou and the *Clima* agricultural project).

It seems to me that these two priorities – God and the poor – best summarize the Lasallian spirit. Along with you, I give thanks to God for the humble and faithful witness of our dear Brother Ignacio. I am certain that his missionary witness will help us to live our consecration to God in community and to serve those who need us with renewed authenticity.

A Visit to the Region of Central Europe

Over the course of this year, I had the good fortune to complete the visit to the Region of Central Europe. This visit began last year with the visit to Rumania and to Germany. Brother General Councillor Claude Reinhardt and I, on three different occasions, visited Holland, the two Districts in Belgium, Poland, Austria and Slovakia. This is a Region diverse in language and with two well-differentiated realities. On the one hand, these are aging Districts; and, on the other hand, these are Districts that are beginning again after the long and dark night of Communism. It was wonderful to see how they support one another based on their own reality. In fact, the District of Central Europe, with the same name as the Region, is an example of restructuring in the best possible sense. There are few linguistic or cultural similarities, but all are united in the same Lasallian spirit and mission.

In Belgium, Holland, Germany and Austria, I admired the fidelity of so many Brothers who are keep-

ing alive a joyful and shared community spirit, and who live their lives of prayer with exemplary regularity. In many cases, our senior Brothers are still filled with an apostolic zeal that seeks to find ways to continue serving others in light of the Gospel. Certainly, there are cases of Brothers who are isolated due to historical circumstances but these cases are not for us to judge.

Another aspect of life in this Region that struck me was the care given to our senior Brothers. In spite of the limitations that we are living today in these sectors, there is a good spirit; and I mentioned to these Brothers that I would be delighted if this spirit were noticed by younger Brothers in other Regions of the Institute. Also, there is the idea of shared mission and association which allows, in the majority of cases, but not without difficulty, that the Lasallian mission can be ensured in the future.

Consolidation is occurring in Poland, Slovakia, and Rumania, thanks to the generosity of other sectors of the Region and within the Institute. New schools, new works, and a sensitivity to respond to the needs of the poor (such as to disabled persons, and to children who are at risk or in trouble with the law). The greatest challenge we have is that of Brother vocations and this must be a priority if we are to be able to respond to the enormous needs of the children from these emerging countries.

A Visit to the Middle East

With Brother General Councillor Marc Hofer, I also had the opportunity to visit the District and the Region of the Middle East. This is a unique District, made up of seven countries that belong to three different continents: Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Turkey. Like the District of Central Europe, this Region has undergone an excellent process of restructuring. The word that best sums up for me the reality of this District is complexity: different languages, cultures, ethnic groups, religions. Nevertheless, on the Lasallian level, I have to say that this visit has been one of the most wonderful experiences that I have had as Superior.

I was especially impressed with three things. First, there was the enormous affection and appreciation that these people have for the Brothers, no matter what their religious creed. In this sense our schools there – as in Asia – have become places where teachers and young people find the space for dialogue, respect, and tolerance. A privileged place in this sense is Bethlehem University which, although not juridically a part of the Middle East District, maintains close ties of relationship and collaboration with the District; and we hope that this cooperation will even increase in the future for both entities.

I would like to share an important experience that I

had during the visit to our school in Tel Aviv/Jaffa. This is a unique school where we have teachers and students from various denominations (Jewish, Muslim, and Christian), and the student body is made up of 30 different nationalities. On the day of the visit, the students were off from school; and we had a meeting with the teachers, a group of which were recognized for their work of 25 years or more. At break time, a Muslim teacher accompanied by a Jewish one came over to greet me and to share their mutual friendship with me. Each introduced the other as her best friend.

I also admired the deep religious spirit that radiated in our various works and the fervent and active participation of our Christian students in the regularly scheduled liturgical celebrations. Here also there were persons who were of Orthodox, Copt, Latin-rite, Greek-rite... And, as I will comment on later on in my letter, I was impressed also by the number of apostolic and service groups in the schools.

Finally, as I shared with the Brother Visitors at the Intercapitular Assembly, I continue to be greatly impressed by the courage and determination of our District of the Mideast to respond, in spite of their own personal poverty, to the tremendous needs of nearly 45,000 children and young people who have been displaced from their homes in the Sudan. I am pleased to inform you that on July 1, 2004, we

opened our first community in the Sudan with two French Brothers and one Sudanese Brother. One of them has been appointed Secretary of Education of the schools in Khartoum. These schools depend on the Archbishopric. All the Brothers in the community work in schools for refugee children. This is a wonderful example that should be encouraged and supported by the Institute.

The Intercapitular Assembly

With the General Council, I was pleased to welcome the Brother Regional Coordinators, Visitors, Auxiliary Visitors, Presidents of Delegations and the Brothers from the Institute's General Services to the Generalate from May 10 to 22. Our meeting was a concrete response to Proposition 12 from the last General Chapter. Its purpose was to move forward in educational service to the poor; and each District, Sub-District, and Delegation was asked to evaluate the degree to which its institutions contribute to this end. This evaluation was intended to lead to a District plan of action, drawn up with the participation of Lasallian Associates.

During this Intercapitular Assembly, we reflected on and shared the many impressive experiences that we have had along these lines. At the same time, it seems to me that the Institute reclaimed a new dynamism so that, as the Rule asks, *direct service of the poor is*

made more and more an effective priority (40a). Along with this central theme, there was significant discussion about the association of Brothers and committed lay colleagues in the same mission; and concrete examples were cited as regards the formation of Brothers and laity, and experiences were shared about the colloquiums on vocation ministry and about plans to bring about the growth and strengthening of the Institute and the Lasallian Family.

To ensure the best deployment of personnel for the Lasallian mission, the discussion on the restructuring of the Institute moved forward; and projects and processes were taken on with a view to the 2006 International Assembly on Association and Mission as well as the path toward to the 44th General Chapter in 2007.

The Parliament of the World's Religions

I was in Monserrat, Spain from July 4 to 7 and then from the afternoon of July 7 until July 9 in Barcelona as representative of the Union of Superiors General for the Parliament of the World's Religions. It was an experience that was very rich in dialogue and sharing with persons representing the world's principal religions. This Parliament, whose headquarters is in Chicago, USA, has held 4 international meetings, the first of which was held over one-hundred years ago. This was the first time that the

event was held in Europe. What most struck me was the open and respectful attitude on the part of all participants (who went beyond their own beliefs) and the certainty that together we can do something to make the world better.

One very noteworthy aspect of this event was the role that the Benedictine monks of the Monastery of Monserrat played. They shared in a very interesting dialogue their life with monks from other religions. The official opening of the Parliament was on July 7 in Barcelona and 7,000 persons from around the world were present. This was a clear sign that religion continues to be, despite what some might say, a phenomenon which is rooted in the depth of the human heart.

Together we can do something to improve the world! This event was more of a dialogue about life than a dialogue on doctrine; but it was also a spiritual dialogue in which we shared our prayer, and there were amazing similarities especially as regards asking God for peace. Specifically, the Parliament's intention was to have the participants set up simple yet profound activities in their local communities in 4 areas: (1) increasing access to clean water; (2) eliminating the international debt for developing countries; (3) supporting refugees throughout the world; and (4) conquering violence which is motivated by religion.

An Intercontinental Meeting on Vocation Ministry

The three Lasallian Regions of America (French-speaking Canada, USA-Toronto and RELAL) gathered in Guadalajara, Mexico from July 28 to August 1 to fulfill Proposition 26 of the 43rd General Chapter. With Brothers (some of them Visitors), lay colleagues, young people, vocation ministry directors, priests and students, there were more than one hundred of us.

Each of the Regions made a presentation on the needs for Brothers today, and on the signs of hope and the difficulties of vocation ministry; and they offered some suggestions for the vocation ministry proposal. In spite of the diversity, the three Regions agreed on the need that Brothers be spiritual mentors for young people and that they reflect the face of God towards the poor. The reports showed the interest on the part of young people for service and their thirst for spirituality; and that if all of them do not feel called to be Brothers, it is a fact that many want to live the Lasallian charism in other ways. Today we should talk about Lasallian vocations in the plural.

On the third day a noted Canadian theologian, Father Gilles Routhier, helped the group to see what the priority should be in vocation ministry today. It is not so much the use of new technologies (such as the Inter-

net), but rather it has to do with showing the image of a new missionary project. *This means that we need to create new apostolic projects and new ways of carrying them out, no matter how small these apostolic projects are. This is more important than merely trying to maintain and to perpetuate institutions of the past.* The best way to awaken vocations is to commit young people to missionary projects; and, based on those, some may feel the call to a more radical and definitive commitment.

A Formation week on Prayer

From August 17 to 22, I had the opportunity to share my ideas with 24 Brothers in temporary vows from ARLEP (Region of Spain and Portugal) and one from the District of France in Cambrils, Spain, on the topic of the prayer of the Brother today. It was a very fraternal meeting with rich dialogue in which the Brothers expressed very sincerely their own spiritual experiences on both the personal and community levels. They spoke about the difficulties they found in a world where productivity and competitiveness predominate and where what is urgent often times leaves no room for what is most important. I believe that this sentiment warrants attention for all of us so that we can live a balance between the constitutive elements of our vocation and so that the professional aspects do not drown out the mystical dimension that gives meaning to who we are.

A Visit to REBIM (The Region of Great Britain, Ireland, and Malta)

In October and November, Brother General Councilor Claude Reinhardt and I were delighted to visit the Lasallian Region of REBIM. We began the visit in England, where the Provincialate is located in the city of Oxford.

Some very special times included visits to two houses of retired Brothers in St. Helens and in Clayton Court, where again I experienced God's presence in our older Brothers, reflected in their serenity, their deep spiritual life and in the quality of their interpersonal relationships. A priest who had spent a week in one of these houses described it as a "home of love." We also had the opportunity to give thanks to God along with three Brothers who together celebrated their 75 years of religious life. It is a marvelous thing to think about those 225 years of fidelity!

Another wonderful visit was the one made to the new Clevedon community, near Bristol. The community is made up of two Brothers and two volunteers; but the community is "wrapped up," to coin a term, by a wider group of LAMBS (Lasallian Association for Mission in Bristol). The mission of this community is to provide leadership in pastoral ministry work in four schools in Bristol and the wider community, and LAMBS, is made up of teachers and other collabora-

tors in some of these schools. I was struck particularly by the attention and the interest that was evident by the young people as regards prayer and by the deep spirit of prayer and support in the community. In other words, they supported the most important elements of our Lasallian spirituality.

In Malta, a sector of the District of Great Britain, we were very cordially and fraternally welcomed. We had the opportunity to meet with all the Brothers and to visit the schools that we have in the country. Here we were able to share with teachers and students; and we participated in some of their activities. I remember especially a beautiful Eucharistic liturgy, complete with song and dance, which was very well prepared in the style of youth. One particular highlight was our meeting with the Lasallian Family, made up of various groups among them (a very committed group of members of *Signum Fidei*, members of the parents' associations, and former students). The great challenge is, without a doubt, how, in the face of our aging population, to ensure the future of our mission in favor of the young.

From November 6 to 14 Ireland was the last District in REBIM that I visited. The visit was very well prepared; and I was able to meet with all the Brothers who gathered in four groups at Dublin, Castletown, Waterford and Downpatrick. I traveled the District from south to north and I met with the Principals

from all our schools, and I visited a good number of schools.

Here again I appreciated the excellent fraternal spirit of our retired Brothers in both the Central Community as well as in the Miguel House in Community in Castletown. I was struck by their deep religious spirit. I greatly appreciated the effort that is being made to ensure the Lasallian character of our schools, the monitoring of their academic quality and the important role played Student Councils. The District has shown great creativity in creating three pastoral ministry centers (in Castletown, Kilmacud for the area of Dublin, and in Glanaulin in Belfast). Lay colleagues and Brothers work in these centers and they lead retreat days with a very well-developed program in which thousands of students from different schools participate each year. This and other similar types of work will enable a future where Brothers who reach retirement age can continue living a new phase of their vocation with a burning zeal.

Another aspect that had a great impact on me was the realization of the extraordinary number of missionary Brothers that the District of Ireland has provided throughout its history in favor of the various Districts in Asia and Africa. Currently there are 18 Brothers (about 10% of District personnel) on the missions. In the name of the Institute, I thank the District of Ireland for this witness of generous dedication.

The Year of the Eucharist

The Pope has invited all of us in his Apostolic Letter, *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, to live a year devoted to the Eucharist from October 2004 to October 2005. I think that this would be a favorable time to renew our communion and our mission since, as the Rule says, *every aspect of the Brother's life is energized by the mystery of the Eucharist*. The Pope summarizes these two dimensions very well when he tells us: *The Eucharist is not merely an expression of communion in the Church's life; it is also a project of solidarity for all of humanity. In the celebration of the Eucharist the Church constantly renews her awareness of being a "sign and instrument" not only of intimate union with God but also of the unity of the whole human race.*

I am aware of the concern of a number of Brothers who see how the changes in the modern world have made daily participation in the Eucharist difficult for us. Young Brothers, on the other hand, show a certain difficulty – especially due to the way it is celebrated – in capturing the extraordinary richness of this mystery. Might it not be good for the community and the District to reflect on the invitation the Rule makes to us to *provide for a celebration centered around the Eucharist on those days when it is not possible to have Mass* (Rule 70a)?

The Brothers of 1904

During the month of August I participated in some celebrations for the centennial of the arrival of the Brothers in Panama. There was a marvelous outpouring of affection and appreciation. What impressed me the most was the fact that former students along with the Brothers themselves have established an NGO; and they have proposed to build 10 popular schools. The first one is already in operation in Colón with some 600 students; and I placed the first stone for the second one, which is located near the Tocumen airport in the capital city. This is all part of a tribute to the Brothers who, in 1904, at the beginning of the Republic of Panama, took charge of the official Normal School (teacher preparatory school) and were responsible for the primary schools in the interior of the country. One of these schools was devoted to indigenous people.

This event, coupled with the fact that during this year and in the next couple of years we will celebrate many other centennials, made me think about our French Brothers of 1904. Brother Pedro Gil, in a beautiful editorial in Bulletin 218 from the ARLEP (Spain-Portugal) Region, makes a tribute to those Brothers – both to those who stayed to ensure the Lasallian mission in France and to those who, with a missionary spirit, contributed to the internationalization of the Institute by responding to the needs of the

young in other parts of the world.

As Brother Pedro says, those Brothers, no matter where they were, showed themselves to be capable specialists, professional and effective. Wherever they were, they left the magnificent mark of their know-how and their ministry; and these have largely survived. Many of us are examples of this. Their memory speaks to us one-hundred years later. Their identity was born in their encounter with God in service of the poor. From that service and that encounter – lived always as a community – they were what they were.

As I conclude this section on “family news” about important Institute events, I would like in the name of the Institute to pay a heartfelt public tribute to our Brothers from 1904; and I ask the Lord to make us their worthy heirs.

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Ministers and Servants of the Word

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete (1 John 1: 1 - 4).

What we have seen, what we have heard, what we have touched... With these marvelous words from Saint John, I begin this reflection on our evangelical mission in the world today because I am convinced that this mission should have its source in an important experience, a personal encounter, and a passionate love that have transformed our lives. Paradoxically, if evangelization is the Word of life, its prior state is contemplative silence and loving union. As Saint John of the Cross expressed it: *The Father spoke the*

Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks in eternal silence; and in silence the soul must hear it (Avisos-Puntos de amor, number 21).

Speaking about the encounter with Christ, B. Meyer said: *If one meets Him on His terms, there is one thing that is made clear: what is happening is a meeting and not a theory.* This is what we can sense in the life of the Founder. His meeting with Jesus, more than theory, was a founding and existential experience that transformed the criteria by which he lived, his preferences, his objectives, his life.

And this forms part of the structure of human beings, who are called from birth to love and to serve. The secret of a fulfilled life is to carry forward a program of love and service, not as a requirement imposed from outside but as a driving force that emerges from within.

The former Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, spoke about an invitation that transformed his life: *But at some moment I did answer “Yes” to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.*

Responding in that way, a life direction was bestowed upon Hammarskjöld. In fact, it led him to the cross and to death. The same thing happened to

Ita Ford, a Maryknoll religious Sister, who worked among those displaced by war in El Salvador in 1980. Shortly before she died, Ita wrote to her 16-year-old niece in the United States: *I hope that you find what it is that gives deep meaning to your life. Something that is worth living for – perhaps even dying for – something that encourages you, makes you enthusiastic, and makes you carry on. I can't tell you what it might be. That is up to you to discover; to choose and to love.* (Dean Brackley, *Una vocación para mi tribu: solidaridad*, ST Rivista de Telología Pastoral, July-August 2003).

Today more than ever, those enlightening words of Vatican II ring true: *We can rightly think that the future fortune of humankind is in the hands of those who are able to pass on to the coming generations reasons to live and to hope* (GS 31).

We know that the present-day world does not make easier the discovery of what might give meaning to human life in a profound sense. Today what is valued more is the insignificant, which surrounds us in our here and now and in what is immediate and pleasant. The diversion of the moment constitutes an absolute value which makes us exempt from vital searching. Having has become the ultimate end, and relativism and indifference are part of our cultural heritage. And, unfortunately, we also know that even yet in those parts of the world where religion continues to

be a recognized social value, there are worrying situations. On the one hand there is a divorce between faith and life, so often reported in Latin America, for example; and still worse is religious fundamentalism which justifies terrorism in the name of God.

And nevertheless as Paul VI said: *Paradoxically, the world, in spite of innumerable signs of the rejection of God, still seeks Him, nevertheless, in unexpected ways and the world sadly feels the need, the world demands that evangelists speak about a God whom they themselves know and treat familiarly, as if they were seeing the Invisible* (EN 76).

Therefore, today more than ever evangelization is seen as an essential imperative. *To evangelize constitutes, basically, the proper fortune and vocation of the Church, her most profound identity* (EN 14). To evangelize, in the deepest sense of the word, is nothing more than opening ourselves to the mystery of God and the mystery of humankind. It is to discover a God who seeks humankind in a way that is unconditional and gratuitous and to discover humankind as an eternal seeker, never satisfied, always open to new adventures that respond to insatiable aspirations and desires, marked by a profound nostalgia when considering the daily experiences of loneliness, abandonment, alienation, separation, boredom, overcrowding, frustration, exclusion. This race is made faster and faster with new discoveries in space ex-

ploration, technology, genetics, etc., which show us that persons desire something more than what they have and that which they have not found.

To evangelize means to have experienced the presence of God in our lives in such a way that we naturally feel an inner strength which, like the Samaritan woman (John 4: 28 - 30), we cannot keep only for ourselves. We feel impelled to bring it to others as very good news, leaving behind the water jar of our safety and certainty. We are called, above all else, to be witnesses of the Mystery.

We declare to you what we have seen and heard, what we have touched... This is the profound experience that has transformed our lives and that we know can also transform the lives of those young people we educate. It is to share, not so much as teachers but as witnesses, that the Father in Jesus Christ and with the force of the Spirit is the unfathomable mystery that allows us to reach full realization. It is the idea that the same longing we have for God, God has for us and that this is the revolutionary news that can quench our thirst as creatures who come from nothing but who aspire to the infinite. For that reason, the psalms which we repeat often in the Liturgy of the Hours resonate within us: *O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water* (Psalm 63: 1). *As a deer longs for flowing*

streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God (Psalm 42: 1-2).

Brothers, we should make our own the words expressed by Martin Luther King, Jr. on a frosty night in Oslo in December 1964 when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize:

“I accept this award today with...an audacious faith in the future of mankind.

I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him.

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.

I believe that even amid today's mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow.

I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies,

education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.

I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive good will be proclaimed the rule of the land. 'And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid.' I still believe that we SHALL overcome!"

Everyone is familiar with the words of Karl Rahner, which he considered to be his own testament. They continue to be very relevant today and a challenge for our future: *The religious man of tomorrow will have to be a mystic, a person who has experienced something; or he cannot be a religious, since tomorrow's religion will not be shared based on a public conviction which is unanimous and obvious.* This is because, in order to be a believer, each one must, as Hans Urs von Balthasar once said, discover what it is *to be a being with a mystery in the heart which is greater than yourself.*

The most important thing for evangelization today is not only to pass on a doctrine, to offer moral values, or to facilitate religious practices. The primary thing is to relive the experience of the first disciples in their relationship with, and in their closeness and trust in Jesus, the incarnate Word revealed by the Fa-

ther. I believe that this would be the best way of living in 2004-2005 the priority, centered on our *pastoral ministry*, which was proposed by the Institute in our last General Chapter (Circular 447).

We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the good news of Evangelization. This is the experience that we want to share with the young people we educate and with all those with whom we associate; and it is this which, as it did for Saint John, constitutes for us the source of our great joy (1 John 1: 4). The Founder had the same thought when he wrote: *What a joy it will be to see that they have received the word of God in your catechism which is powerfully at work in them, as will be clearly apparent in the virtuous lives they continue to live* (Meditation 207.3).

Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection (Hebrews 12: 2).

The preaching of Jesus has two fundamental focal points. On the one hand, there is the revelation of God as “Abba” and, on the other, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. From the very beginning of his

preaching, Jesus proclaimed: *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the good news* (Mark 1: 15). The revelation of God as Father-Mother is the good news that we are, over and above any differences between us, all sons and daughters. The proclamation of the Kingdom is, for its part, the good news that we are all brothers and sisters who are called to build a Kingdom of *truth and life, holiness and grace, love and peace* (Preface for the Feast of Christ the King).

The word “*Abba*” may just be the most revolutionary one in the New Testament. It is the revelation of the closeness of a God who loves us as a father loves his child. “*Dear father,*” with this simple formula the early Church took in the core of faith which was Jesus. What did this invocation mean for the early Christians? Paul says it clearly and concisely in his letters to the Galatians and to the Romans, in different terms as to the form but with the same content: “*And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*” (Galatians 4: 6). “*When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God*” (Romans 8: 15-16). *These sentences mean that to cry 'Abba' is something that goes beyond all human ability; this is not possible except within the new relationship with the God who has given us his Son. By the action of the Spirit, God himself makes this cry spring forth; and,*

in this, he renews the divine affiliation each time it is expressed (Jeremías J., Abba. The central message of the New Testament).

The center of all evangelization is the double commandment of love: love of God and love of neighbor. Therefore all evangelization results basically in a passion for God and a passion for humankind. The miracles that Jesus worked were signs that the Kingdom of God was near, a manifestation of the compassionate love of the Father. They were liberating realities that allow us to understand that the Kingdom is both *promise and reality* which invite us to continue Christ's saving action as one of the privileged forms of all evangelization.

In an illuminating text, Saint Augustine presents very clearly this fundamental truth of our faith to us: *Love of God is first among the commandments, but love of neighbor is first among practical actions. The one who gives you the commandment of love in these two rules does not teach love for one's neighbor first and then love of God, but vice-versa. But since we do not see God yet, by loving one's neighbor you acquire the means to see Him. By loving your neighbor you purify your eyes to see God. As Saint John says: "For those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen"* (cf. 1 John 4: 20). *If you feel the appeal to love God and you say to me "Show me the one I must*

love,” I could only respond to you with the words of Saint John: “No one has ever seen God” (John 1: 18). But so that you do not think that you are completely excluded from the possibility of seeing God, John also says: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4: 16). You, therefore, love your neighbor and, looking within yourself where this love is born, insofar as that is possible, you will see God (Treatise on Saint John 17: 7 - 9).

The modern mind has not always understood things like that. For many of our contemporaries, it would seem that what we give to God we take away from the human person. We can find an illustrative example of this in the dialogue between Kaliyev, who has been imprisoned for threatening the Czar's regime, and Foka, a common prisoner in charge of cleaning his cell, in Albert Camus' *The Just*:

Kaliyev: We are all brothers and sisters, and justice will make our hearts transparent. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Foka: Yes, about the Kingdom of God...

Kaliyev: You don't have to say that, brother. God can't do anything. Justice is up to us! Don't you understand? Are you familiar with the legend of Saint Demetrius? He had an appointment on the steppe with God himself, and he was hurrying there when

he met a farmer whose cart was stuck in mud. Saint Demetrius helped him. The mud was thick, and the pothole was; deep and he had to struggle with this for over an hour. When he finished, he ran off for his appointment; but God was not there.

Foka: And so?

Kaliayev: So there are always those who arrive late for appointments because there are too many stuck carts and too many humans to help.

For us it is just the opposite. Faith tells us that it is in the brother or sister who is in need that we can best discover God and that everything we do for the least ones we do for God. An encounter with a neighbor in need, far from being an obstacle, is the normal way for our journey to God. It was the same for the Founder, who invites us to *recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to instruct* (Meditation 96.3).

To evangelize is to continue the mission of Jesus. Saint John Baptist de La Salle invites us to live our ministry as disciples of Jesus who feel that they cannot keep only for themselves the grace of this marvelous encounter which is able to transform life. They feel called to share this gift with their students: *However, it is not enough for you to be true servants of Jesus Christ; you are further obliged to make him known and adored by the children whom you instruct*

(Meditation 182.3). As a result, we should be aware that we cannot give what we do not have: *You are commissioned by God to clothe them with Jesus Christ himself and with his Spirit. Have you been careful, before undertaking such a holy ministry, to clothe yourselves with him in order to communicate this grace to them?* (Meditation 189.1).

The Founder invites us to conform ourselves to Christ in our ministry of Christian education. What is striking is that the language used by the document *Vita Consecrata*, when speaking of the relationship that should exist between a consecrated person and Jesus Christ, we already find in the writings of the Founder. In fact, the Synodal document invites us to *conform one's whole existence to Christ and to a profound "configuration" to the mystery of Christ* (*Vita Consecrata* 16).

For the Founder, this conformity meant going more deeply into identification and not simply copying something from an external model. *In carrying out your service to children, you will not fulfill your ministry adequately if you resemble Jesus Christ only in his guidance and in his conversion of souls. You must also enter into his purposes and his goals* (Meditation 196.3).

This concern for achieving inner conformity with Jesus Christ appears repeatedly in the Explanation of

the Method of Mental Prayer. For example, when we are presented with the act of union about humility, we find: *May the unction of your holy grace teach me to be **humble of heart** and to practice humility, not only exteriorly, as do people of the world out of shrewdness, but **with a view of faith, in union with your spirit, in conformity with your dispositions, and in imitation of you*** (EMO Chapter 14 - 285 b 2).

This conformity with Christ should lead us to be a sacrament of Christ for our disciples. *He wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your instructions as if he were giving them to them. They must be convinced that your instructions are the truth of Jesus Christ who speaks with your mouth* (Meditation 195.2). This has to do, then, with living a deep faith, the first condition for all authentic evangelization. *Do you have a faith that is such that it is able to touch the hearts of your students and inspire them with the Christian spirit? This is the greatest miracle you could perform and the one that God asks of you, for this is the purpose of your work* (Meditation 139.3).

Conformity with Christ should lead the Brother not only to give life in abundance to young people (cf. Meditations 201.3, 196.3, 45.1, EMO 25, Meditation 112.3), but to give his own life for them, as Jesus did. *Your zeal must go so far in this that in order to achieve it, you are ready to give your very life, so dear to you are the children entrusted to you* (Meditation 198.2).

Ministers of the Word according to Saint John Baptist de La Salle

The Founder often invites us, especially in the Meditations for the Time of Retreat, to consider ourselves as God's ministers and dispensers of his mysteries. This is one of the most wonderful dimensions of our mission. *You must not doubt that it is a great gift of God, this grace he has given you to be entrusted with the instruction of children, to announce the Gospel to them and to bring them up in the spirit of religion* (Meditation 201.1).

We should be ministers of the Word and ambassadors of Christ, first and foremost, in the manner of Ezekiel or Jeremiah, who devoured, internalized, and pondered the Word (Ezek. 3: 1 - 3; Jer 15: 16). Our Rule clearly invites us to do this. *To acquire and live by the spirit of their Institute, the Brothers find endless sustenance in studying, meditating and sharing among themselves the word of God. They have a profound respect for Holy Scripture, especially the Gospel, “their first and principal Rule.”* (Rule 6).

Our Founder uses, in this regard, another verb in the Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer when he invites us to “taste” the Word. Some passages of Holy Scripture, *being words of God, according to the teaching of our faith, have in themselves a divine unction. By themselves, they lead us to God; they*

make us taste God, and they help us to have sight of God and to conserve also within us the taste for God (EMO Chapter 4 - 143).

We should approach the Bible not as a treatise but as a story or narrative. It is the living story of God's love for humankind. However, we should not read this story as something from the past; we should read it as a story that helps us to understand where we are at the present time and where we ought to be heading. That is why Jesus tells us in the Gospel: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing* (Luke 4:21). As he cites the prophet Isaiah and presents to us his anointment by the Spirit and his plan *to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor* (Luke 4: 18- 19), he tells us not only what his mission is, but also the mission that we are called to live.

The plan of Jesus should also be our plan. The Spirit of the Lord is also on us, and he has anointed us to bring the Good News to young people. *It is God, by his power and very special goodness, who has called you to give the knowledge of the Gospel to those who have not yet received it. Do you look upon yourselves, then, as ministers of God? Do you fulfill the duties of your work with all possible zeal, and as having to give an account of it to him?* (Meditation 140.2)

Isaiah, while recalling the release from Egypt and the Red Sea to those who were in exile in Babylon, tells them: *Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise* (Isaiah 43: 18 - 21).

Isaiah tells this story not to encourage escapism but so that everyone might realize that today the same thing is happening to them. This is how we should approach the Bible. It is a matter of reading the text not simply as a point of departure for reflection, nor as something from which to draw moral lessons. Neither is it simply information about past events. Rather, it is a story that sheds light on current reality, an aid in understanding what is happening in the present and an invitation to carry on God's saving plan today. The Word of God involves us in a relationship, not a memory. *This has to do with a living relationship in which, here and now, I am the one who recognizes God present in my existence – God who welcomes me, supports me, guides me, speaks to me* (Andrés Torres Queiruga).

That is what Jesus did, and that is what we should do.

Without forgetting that Bible texts, in the end, should center ourselves in the person of Jesus, the ultimate and definitive word that God proclaimed and which the Holy Spirit updates each day in the deepest part of our being and in the world. *Listening to the Gospel, even the deepest and strictest understanding of the words in the Gospel are insufficient and deceptive without a focused look at the living person, without direct meditation on the Lord. The irreplaceable value of the Gospel, the sign of its authenticity, is precisely what separates words from the Word* (Jacques Guillet).

Meditation on the Word of God, *lectio divina*, should always conclude with openness, commitment, and giving. After having read the text attentively and asking myself what God is saying to me in that text and then listening to him with an open heart and after allowing my feelings of peace, joy, happiness, trust, gratitude, praise, pardon and everything that beats within my heart to rise up, I feel that the dialogue with God, which has managed to turn into silent contemplation, does not end here. I feel that this Word is not only for myself. I need to proclaim it and to spread the message. That gift of God – his Word – I have to share with my Brothers, with the young people whom the Lord has entrusted to me. Because, as the Founder tells us: *You carry out a work that requires you to touch hearts, but this you cannot do except by the Spirit of God. Pray to him to give you today the same*

grace he gave the holy apostles, and ask him that, after filling you with his Holy Spirit to sanctify yourselves, he also communicate himself to you in order to procure the salvation of others (Meditation 43.3).

And the most convincing way of spreading the Word of God is one's own witness as a Brother – who has been transformed by the Word – a witness evident in the Brother's daily life in the reality that is proclaimed. *It is in vain that you believe what Jesus Christ proposed to you in the holy Gospel if your actions do not give proof of your belief...How do you show that you possess the spirit of Christianity? Be assured that to possess it your actions must not give the lie to the faith you profess, but rather be a lively expression of what is written in the Gospel (Meditation 84.3).*

Communicating the faith today

It seems important to me to look at our past and study the reasons that gave life to our Lasallian mission and which continue to illuminate our educational evangelizing activity. *Why we came to birth* should continue to illuminate what we do.

In the words of the Founder, *the purpose of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children; and for this purpose schools are kept so that children are under the direction of teachers morning and afternoon, who instruct them in the mysteries of our*

holy religion, inspiring in them Christian maxims and therefore providing them with education which is right for them (Rule 1718, 1.3). The Founder adds: *Procure this benefit for children of the artisans and the poor, since this was the purpose for instituting the Christian Schools* (idem 1.5).

In this same sense, we should understand the insistence on *gratuity* as a way to see to it that the poor could go to school. *The Brothers everywhere will teach school gratuitously, and this is essential for their Institute* (idem 1.5). Gratuity has not only a financial connotation. It also has a spiritual dimension because the ministry of the Brother constitutes a gratuitous gift from God which, in turn, should translate into a gratuitous and disinterested commitment which makes the unconditional love of God visible to children and young people.

In addition, the Founder's concern was that *the school function well*, as he expressed in some of his letters (Letters 52.8; 44.20 Lasallian Publications). Gratuity does not mean a rejection of effectiveness. On the contrary, the Founder manifested a determination that was historically relevant and that brought about revolutionary and bold changes such as the simultaneous method in primary school, the use of the mother tongue instead of Latin, a practical pedagogy which prepares one for life and, finally, his intense desire to respond to the needs of the

times with a healthy pedagogical realism.

Fundamentally, he was attempting to put the means of salvation within the reach of children; and, therefore, the spirit of faith that inspires the Brother should translate, in light of Gospel values, into a burning zeal for the salvation of those under his care and for *educating them in piety and in the true Christian spirit, that is, according to the rules and maxims of the Gospel* (Rule 1718, 2.10).

If we look at our past and recall our roots, it is not for the purpose of repeating in a mechanical way what the Founder and the first Brothers accomplished during their time, conditioned as it was like all other times by certain situations and limitations. What is important is to keep alive the spirit to build up the Kingdom of God by means of Christian education that guided them in their mission. What the Founder said to the first Brothers continues to be relevant for us today, provided that we adapt it to our changing world. *You have been appointed by God to succeed the holy apostles in teaching the doctrine of Jesus Christ, and in confirming his holy law in the minds and hearts of those whom you instruct when you teach catechism, which is your principal function* (Meditation 145.3).

This is not an easy challenge in a secularized world where the religious dimension has lost significance.

Neither is it easy in a world that does maintain these religious values, but which often does so in a manner that is disconnected from real life. The Declaration told us nearly 40 years ago: *The contemporary mentality finds the Christian message irrelevant to the extent that it appears as an abstract ideology, imposed by external authority or by deduction from principles, without any relation to the concrete experience of life and the situation of each person... These difficulties invite us to search together for answers in a clear-sighted and courageous fashion. We do not renounce in any way our determination to proclaim Jesus Christ; we believe that young people today need the gospel message and are capable of hearing it* (Declaration 39).

This is because, in spite of appearances, today's world, especially youth culture, when motivated, is very sensitive to the search for the transcendent. *If Christ is presented to young people as he really is, they experience him as an answer that is convincing and they can accept his message, even when it is demanding and bears the mark of the Cross. For this reason, I did not hesitate to ask them to make a radical choice of faith and life and present them with a stupendous task: to become "morning watchmen" at the dawn of a new millennium* (John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 9).

Christian education, therefore, has an extremely im-

portant role to play in our current reality, provided that it is understood integrally as a type of education that is human and personal and which plays a critical role that makes possible the creation of a new society... an education that is participatory and fraternal... an education that makes students take charge of not only their own development, but also the development of their own community...and which allows them to interiorize and make Gospel values their norm for life.

With regard to this, it is interesting to look at the process which the Latin-American bishops have used in their discussions on Christian education. It seems to me that we could apply this to many other contexts. In Medellin, they spoke to us about a “*liberating education*,”; and in Puebla, they also asked us for an “*evangelizing education*,” because *the best type of service offered to brothers and sisters is an evangelization that prepares them to be fulfilled as children of God, that frees them from injustice and promotes integrity* (Puebla 1145). In Santo Domingo they explained this objective. *When we speak of Christian education, we speak of teachers who teach about a plan for humanity in which Jesus Christ is alive. Therefore, the Christian teacher should be considered as a Church member who evangelizes, catechizes and teaches in a Christian manner. He or she has a defined identity in the Church community. His role should be recognized in the Church* (Santo Domingo 265).

The objective of Christian education is a very ambitious one. It is about renewing faith – as teaching and as a way of life – so that it becomes the foundation of a new personal existence. This faith is capable of responding to the ultimate questions of existence; but it is a faith rooted in history and it translates into demands for social and structural transformation. This faith is not only a “*profession*” but also a lifestyle marked by Gospel criteria.

An international Institute such as ours encompasses various sensitivities and expressions. This is, no doubt, one of our greatest riches but; at the same time, it makes processes and vocabulary more difficult. Even over and above the terms, which are not always understood in the same way, the transmission of faith is not the same in a secularized context as it is in an environment that has maintained a religious mentality.

We should use three approaches to consider the changes that we experience:

- **immersion:** an invitation to keep in mind the particular situation at hand as we immerse ourselves in the world of youth and enter into dialogue with the young.
- **a systematic view:** this is different from an atomistic study that analyzes things in a linear way as to cause and effect. The systematic view

states that a system is made up of interdependent elements and presents to us a systemic logic that interacts with the environment. In reality, both sensitivities are needed: that of a linear transfer of historical heritage and that which springs from fields that are affected by the range of changes and by interactions that we are called upon to establish.

- **individualization:** because each individual manages his own faith in his own way and without much concern for received heritage as compared with personal lived experience.

The Lasallian school should be the privileged place to put the mission of the Institute into practice. This has to do with seeing how the school today can continue to be an instrument of evangelization and how to help young people to move from religious theory or practice to a true life experience, where religious values have greater relevance. This happens on various levels. There is the school atmosphere itself, explicit catechesis, pastoral ministry, apostolic or Christian life groups, openness to families, commitment to the Church and to society, especially to the poor, interreligious and ecumenical dialogue.

Inculturation of the faith

We know that Lasallian spirituality is based on the Incarnation. The Founder invites us to live this mys-

tery from a dual perspective. He invites us to live it and to proclaim it based on unbounded charity as Jesus did when he became one of us; to live it and proclaim it from a deep humility that leads us to become children in the Gospel sense so that our message can reach the children and young people we educate. Lasallian incarnational spirituality connects body and soul, the profane and the sacred, school and catechesis, human development and evangelization. It is a spirituality which starts from a reality that is always enlightened by the Word. The Incarnation is expressed in a triple movement: closeness, solidarity and identification. The mystery of the Word Incarnate enlightens the task we must do to inculturate the Gospel in the world's different realities.

The Rule tells us, in this regard, that every culture needs to be evangelized. The Brothers make every effort to get to know, to respect and to assimilate the positive values of the cultural heritage of the people where they are and whom they are called to serve. With joy and hope the Brothers discover there the signs of the presence of the Spirit. They ensure that the ferment of the Gospel renews and enriches this cultural heritage (Rule 18).

Dialogue with cultures makes it possible for the Gospel to make them fruitful, advancing God's saving plan in the history of humankind, especially with the new venues of evangelization which the world

presents to us today. And dialogue will draw us closer to the globalized and modern world with its lights and shadows, but also it will draw us closer to local cultures with their contemplative senses and their values of solidarity and participation.

Paul VI expressed it very well: *The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them* (Evangelii Nuntiandi 20).

It is, therefore, important to reflect on some concrete principles as regards the inculturation of the Gospel:

1. First of all, a change of approach is necessary: to go from imposition to listening, from commanding to sharing, from thinking that we already know it all, to the humble and demanding task of preparing ourselves to evangelize in a new way in the world of education. We cannot forget that when foreign ways of being and thinking are imposed on a people, without tak-

ing into account their own cultural foundation, sooner or later these ways will be rejected or they will end up as something that is peripheral and superficial.

2. To accept, not only in theory but also in practice, that in all cultures and by means of all religious expression, God is manifest. *In every culture and every religion there can be found **the seeds of the Word of God and the power of the Spirit of God.** This implies a respectful stance toward cultures and religions* (Circular 435, page 39). This is not easy because we are accustomed to think that we possess the truth and that our work is simply to pass on what we already possess, without searching for anything new or being open to the truth which is evident in others.
3. It is important, also, to be inculturated in the world of the young. The fifth commission during the first stage of our 42nd General Chapter stated: *We realize that today there is a gap between the universal culture of youth and the realities of the Institute and the Church. This obliges us to raise the consciousness and the commitment of all Brothers, both in developed and developing countries and, to intensify the process of inculturation in the world of the young in all cultures. This will put us in harmony with their ideals. As a result of these efforts, there could be a new boost of optimism and vi-*

tality on the part of the entire Institute which would benefit the pastoral ministry of vocations.

4. To respect persons who think differently and who are different from us, convinced that *salvation becomes a reality in every culture, even outside the limits of the visible Church*. We need to live this approach also within the Church and our educational communities.
5. One practical aspect of inculturation assumes a certain stability in places where the mission is being carried out. Inculturation assumes a preparation and some psychological and spiritual changes that need time to mature and bear fruit.
6. As the 42nd General Chapter reminded us, we must be convinced that the Gospel is Good News for all cultures: *The Gospel ought to help a culture flourish by advancing God's plan of salvation in human history, but directed to the promotion of the Kingdom of God, rather than exclusively to the conversion of individuals. This implies that differences be accepted and respected. I should not begin with myself in order to meet the other, but begin from the point of view of the other* (Circular 435, page 39).
7. At the same and without denying what was just said, that which is specifically Christian cannot be relinquished, since it is capable of purifying and enriching all cultures. The person and the

message of Jesus concerning relationships, fraternity, unconditional love, unlimited forgiveness, are the greatest wealth that we can give to humanity in its religious relationship with God, with others and with the world. Today, like Peter, we can say to others, no matter their culture which may be overwhelmed by senseless things: *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).

Proclamation and Dialogue

The proclamation of Christ and interreligious dialogue are two actions of Evangelization, complementary but different from one another. *In the light of the economy of salvation*, John Paul II tells us, *the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue. Instead, she feels the need to link the two in the context of her mission 'ad gentes.'* *These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable* (Redemptoris Missio 55).

Inspired by the way the Church was moving and by the changes in society in recent years, the General Chapter of 2000 proposed, among other things, two urgent needs for the next seven years. On the one

hand, the Chapter proposed the explicit proclamation of the faith where this is possible, and, on the other hand, it proposed a Lasallian presence in multi-religious societies (Circular 447, page 28).

1. Proclamation

The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed (Evangelii Nuntiandi 22). For that reason Paul VI stated that beginning with Peter's discourse on Pentecost, the history of the Church is often confused with the history of this proclamation. "Where possible," the General Chapter tells us. But that does not mean that we are satisfied with the minimum. By vocation we are ministers of the Word and we are called to live it, proclaim it and share it. Like Saint Paul, we can say: *If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!* (1 Corinthians 9:16)

For his part, the Founder states that this proclamation should lead us to a profound prayer life, so that our words might be truly effective. *You have the advantage of sharing in the duties of the apostles by teaching catechism daily to the children under your guid-*

ance and by instructing them in the maxims of the holy Gospel. You will not do them much good, however, if you do not possess in full measure the spirit of prayer, which gives a holy fervor to your words and makes them able to penetrate very effectively the depths of the hearts of your students (Meditation 159.2).

More than thirty years ago the Declaration proposed to us a series of elements concerning the primacy of our catechetical mission which would be good not to forget. These elements summarize the rich Lasallian heritage that has characterized the Institute for more than 300 years. The Rule has captured the essence of this tradition and tells us: *The Brothers consider that their 'principal function' consists in the work of evangelization and catechesis whereby they contribute to growth in faith of those who have been baptized and to the building up of the ecclesial community. This conviction plays a dominant role in the formation of the Brothers as well as in the choice of the assignments for which they will be prepared (Rule 15).*

However, we know that there are very strong links between evangelization and development and for that reason it is important not to forget, especially in those cases where explicit proclamation is not possible, that *the Brother labors to bring into reality the divine plan of salvation, not only when he exercises the ministry of the Word of God, but also by devoting himself, in everything he teaches, to the education of*

those he helps to arrive at authentic and complete maturity as human persons (Declaration 13.5).

The Declaration also states the basic role of the catechist himself, without beating around the bush. *It is not in books or in words that the young first encounter the God who calls them, but rather in the one who catechizes them* (Declaration 40.5).

As the 43rd General Chapter studied this topic they presented us with a realistic vision of our experience today and of the diversity of current situations. The explicit proclamation of the Good News raises questions on every continent. Some questions come from the multi-religious context, some come from the phenomenon of de-Christianization, some come from secularization or from non-belief. The Chapter also stated that when the explicit proclamation of the Good News is done in a way that is overbearing, it is doomed to fail because the young person does not feel that he is respected. The explicit proclamation of the Good News is done in religion class, within the school schedule and by means of pastoral ministry activities outside the school schedule. The explicit proclamation of the Good news is also done, in not a few cases, through the efforts of our lay colleagues. In spite of the difficulties, their commitment is obvious and this has developed into a request for formation and for beginning to plan for catechetical training.

Based on these experiences we Brothers and lay colleagues have been invited to a renewed commitment to catechesis and to renewed training in this particular area, which is very important, as was already highlighted when we spoke about inculturation, getting involved in the world of the young and their culture, which is certainly an ambiguous one, but which bears Gospel values.

Among my memories as a young Brother I cannot forget the influence that three Institute catechetical events had on my life during those years of the Second Vatican Council – years which were marked by a climate of renewal and enthusiasm. I am grateful to the Lord for having been able to study at the Saint Pius X Institute in Salamanca, Spain, where catechesis occupied a privileged place not only on the curricular level but also and above all in the spirit that was radiated there. The magazine *Sinite*, the catechetical index and the catechetical exhibition hall are proof of this spirit. Secondly, there was the publication by Brother Michel Sauvage of *Catechesis and the Laity*, which was a milestone in our history; and finally, Brother Superior General Nicet Joseph published Circular 371, dated February 2, 1962, entitled *The Catechetical Mission of the Brother of the Christian Schools*.

Brother José María Navarro in his doctoral dissertation *Lasallian Catechesis During the Last 50 Years* summarized the essential points of this important cir-

cular, recognizing at the same time just how current it continues to be for our catechetical mission: *Catechesis is a priority for the Church; our mission is one of the most necessary; the proclamation of Jesus Christ is at the center of catechesis; the catechist should be well-prepared in all aspects; the Christian school is the privileged place for the proclamation of the Good News; catechesis should hold a prominent place in the school; the Christian school ought to have a favorable atmosphere so that faith can grow; the Christian school should become a community of active faith; true faith education cannot happen without the witness of teachers and a fraternal atmosphere that should exist there* (page 180).

Today it is a wonderful reality that the majority of our Scholasticates are basically oriented towards integrated training in religious science and education. This no doubt will help to promote the pastoral ministry aspect of our mission of evangelization as Brothers in the future because one of the dangers for us today with the reduction in the number of Brothers is that the Brothers may be only in administrative posts, and normally these positions do not provide for relating with students directly.

I believe that it is becoming more and more clear for us today that catechesis should be integrated into the broader field of pastoral ministry. In this sense pastoral ministry that takes place within a school is not

the same as a school where pastoral ministry is key. Pastoral ministry cannot be reduced to just participating in the sacraments or in the liturgy. A school where pastoral ministry is key is one in which practical transforming actions of a Church community take shape; where these practical activities aid in the commitment to proclaim the Gospel and to promote the dignity of the person; where the saving presence of God is celebrated.

Pastoral ministry is a means that facilitates the encounter of the person with God and the discovery of his plan of salvation. We should not forget that today a necessary and urgent way to evangelize is to make something human. This is always possible even in pluralistic societies where we find ourselves more and more. At its deepest level, to be a Christian means to promote everything that is human within us, living a fraternal relationship with one another and a relationship as children of God. *To open young people to life, to a sense of their responsibilities, to knowledge and to love, is already a way of accomplishing God's work since his Kingdom is built both by the activity of the Church and by work in the world* (Rule 15c).

Keeping in mind at the same time that, in Christian environments, pastoral ministry, a part of the Church's mission, constitutes a group of activities which make salvation present by means of knowing Jesus Christ, his life, his message and his basic com-

mandment – love. The Founder places the bar that we should reach at a very high level. *If you love Jesus Christ well, you will try in every possible way to enkindle his holy love in the hearts of the children you are forming to be his disciples. See to it that they often think of Jesus, their good and only Lord, that they often speak of Jesus, that they long only for Jesus, and desire only for Jesus* (Meditation 102.2). It is in this sense that we can speak of a pastoral ministry of discipleship.

Pastoral ministry translates into an immense gamut of possibilities inspired by creativity and by apostolic zeal – departments of faith education, commissions, volunteer movements, Christian faith communities, youth groups, prayer groups, missions, apostolic groups which serve the poor, retreats, study groups, and more. I must confess that during my visits I have been amazed by the number and by the energy of such groups in some of our schools and I think especially about the Middle East where, along with Christian groups, there are other service groups or activities comprised of students of different religions.

Besides these things, pastoral ministry activities should not forget the wonderful Lasallian traditions that have distinguished so many generations of our students, traditions such as the daily reflection, the frequent recall of the presence of God, prayer at the beginning of certain activities, spiritual mentorship,

contact with Gospel maxims, liturgical participation, initiation in sacramental life, and more.

Today, as we speak about shared mission, it is also true that we share pastoral ministry activities whereby many of our lay colleagues and Associates participate actively in pastoral ministry programs in schools and it is here where they contribute their irreplaceable complementarity based on their own state of life.

2. Dialogue

The spirituality of communion, in a Church which defines itself as the People of God, should lead us to live dialogue in various areas and on different levels – the most important type of dialogue in the globalized world in which we live is ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Dialogue is intrinsic to those in religious life – which is the reflection of the Triune God. The invitation to start up this type of dialogue is made to us by the Church herself: *Because 'interreligious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission,' institutes of consecrated life cannot exempt themselves from involvement also in this field* (Vita Consecrata, 102). And John Paul II presents to us what the purpose of this dialogue is: *Through **dialogue**, the Church seeks to uncover the 'seeds of the Word,'* (Ad Gentes, 11, 15) *a 'ray of that truth which enlightens all'; these are found in individuals and in the religious*

traditions of mankind. (Redemptoris Missio, 56).

Ecumenical and religious dialogue is a reality we have lived in the Institute thanks to our international character. In fact, our presence in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, which goes back more than 150 years, is noted for its extraordinary spirit of respect, dialogue and tolerance. On a personal note, my visits to these Regions of the Institute have been some of the most wonderful experiences that I have had as Superior General. At the present time it is a fact that there are Lasallian educational works in Europe – and also more and more in North America and Oceania – where a significant percentage of our students are Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists or they come from other religious groups or they are non-believers.

The scale of this kind of dialogue is already classic and it goes from the dialogue of life to the dialogue of theological interchange right through to the dialogue of action and religious experience (cf. *Diálogo y Anuncio*, 1991).

In this regard, our last General Chapter tells us how great religions live a faith that is centered on God's design which has created all humankind and which calls everyone to live together as brothers and sisters and to journey towards God as sons and daughters. Christianity must be seen in this context and it must dialogue, be tolerant, and work together with other

religions in building a world that is more just, while still being witnesses of Jesus Christ, the manifestation of the Father.

An Institute such as ours, dedicated to Christian education, is at odds with this dilemma: to create an educational environment centered in inter-cultural and interreligious openness on the one hand; on the other hand, to raise the awareness of young Christians about loyalty to the Gospel and to the Church.

The Chapter invites us to interreligious dialogue on four levels:

- **Life:** We Brothers, partners, and young people should build up friendly relations with others and nurture a fraternity which transcends religious differences.
- **School:** A place where the child is the focus of concern, whatever his religious beliefs. It is a place where human and religious education is given, and where the educational service of the poor is a priority.
- **Service:** Despite their religious differences, Brothers, partners, and young people show solidarity in their service of the poor.
- **Institution:** There is inter-faith dialogue at national and international gatherings. (Circular 447, pages 31 - 32).

It seems to me that the deepest roots of interreligious dialogue are in the Gospel and the teaching, freedom and actions of Jesus. For Him, the principal commandment is to love God and neighbor. For Him, at the end of life we will be judged on how we loved: *I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty...* (Matthew 25). Dialogue which goes beyond religious differences should lead us to build a world where all can be and feel that they are sons and daughters of God; brothers and sisters among themselves who pay special attention to the poor and to those who suffer. In other words, it leads us to build God's Kingdom together, a kingdom based on welcome, forgiveness, humility, closeness, tenderness, solidarity, compassion, and mercy.

Undoubtedly it is in Asia, the birthplace of great religions, the privileged place for this dialogue, that today is opening to the world. For this reason, I asked one of the Brothers from Malaysia, who has much experience in this area, to share with me some concrete ways of living the dialogue of life and religious experience in our communities, and I share this with you now. Differences in living should be mutually complementary and enriching:

- Our communities tend to be very much organized around work and service and they have the latest conveniences; communities of other religious groups emphasize life in general and es-

pecially the spiritual life. People share with members of these communities during the course of the day and their work is less formal.

- In one way or another, we Catholic religious are perceived as scholarly teachers – they are seen as holy and spiritual people of prayer.
- In general, we appear as being less committed to the poor directly, but we are admired for the way we influence people intellectually.
- As our religious communities are committed to justice and peace, there are also similar movements and authorities to work with jointly.
- Their meditation and psalm prayers seem to be more solemn and less hurried than our vocal prayers.
- In some cases their religious communities are temporary formation centers where adherents to their religion spend a fair amount of time, without embracing the religious life permanently.

The **experience of God** that we are called to live is also a meeting point. This means that *purification* is part of the process, symbolized by the water of baptism, the baths of Hinduism, the sprinkling of water in Buddhism... These rites are signs of the integration of the divine and the human. As a Sufi poem expresses it: *“I have thought about You so much that my being gradually changed into Your Being. You*

approached me and little by little I drew farther away from myself.” We could use these words from Saint Paul to translate those words: *I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me* (Galatians 2: 19).

Purification is not an end in itself, but the road towards union with God. When a person has lost the “I” he becomes a sacrament of God. *“What he sees, he sees with the eyes of God; what he hears, he hears with the ears of God; and the words he speaks will be God’s words”* (Sufi poem). Or, as Tagore expressed it as he shared his experience of transcending things being submerged in God: *I come to You not just for a glass of water; but for the spring itself. I come not looking for a guide to lead me to the door; but to lead me inside the Lord’s house; I search not just for love present, but for Love itself.* We should recognize that the Spirit *blows where it will and we do not know where it comes from or where it goes* (John 3: 8) and be open to all that is noble and good, offered to us by other persons and other religions.

This certainly does not mean that we should fall into the trap of relativism and think that everything has value. We make our contribution based on Christ, whom we follow and with whom we want to identify. This is not to say that all opinions are true, but rather, that all religions which sincerely seek God and are open to the needs of one’s neighbor, espe-

cially the poor and needy, are roads that lead to God.

Diverse religious expressions enrich the world, as G. Jung expressed. *It does not matter what the world thinks about religious experience; those who have it possess a great treasure of something which for them becomes a source of life, meaning, and beauty, which gives new splendor to the world and to humanity.* What is certain is that when religion seeks union and the experience of God, this always translates into a desire to give of oneself and to surrender oneself for others. In this sense, we can almost say that outside of a fraternity there is no salvation.

Interreligious dialogue opens up tremendous possibilities to us that we can face together. For example: promoting and fostering such dialogue and dialogue between cultures, avoiding what has been called the clash of civilizations; committing ourselves to peace and non-violence; creating networks of solidarity, and working for a more just international order and for those who are excluded; defending human life and nature; being witnesses of transcendental and ethical values.

This needs to be done without forgetting, daily, about respectful and fraternal dialogue that allows us to feel comfortable with those who are “*different*” and to be aware of our own goodness on the level of love and friendship which goes beyond mere understanding on

the level of ideas or intellectual concepts. As Brother John D'Cruz, a Malaysian Brother, says: *During these times of deep, personal and genuine sharing of our stories, feelings, desires and dreams, moments of silence also emerge. Such moments of silence are a call to stop our aimless thoughts and to open ourselves, in wonder, to a deep knowledge of our spiritual life. It is during these moments of silence where true dialogue springs up from the heart and makes it possible to combine unity and diversity.*

Making God's face visible

The world today needs more than theories, statements, and signs that will shake it up and open it to what is important. The Founder tells us that young people learn more by what they see than by what they hear. *Example makes a much greater impression on the mind and the heart than words, especially for children... and they ordinarily model themselves on the example of their teachers. They are led more readily to do what they see done for them than what they hear told to them* (Meditation 202.3). Lasallian institutions should offer an alternative scale of values – one that challenges the status quo, one that is an inspiring model for a society, and one that is inspired in Gospel values.

Education today ought to lead young people to an encounter with God in their inner selves. We should

educate about the world within. Paradoxically, this is achieved when we facilitate the discovery of one's own vulnerability.

At the *Euro La Salle* meeting in Strasbourg, France in 1994, Gabriel Ringlet, Vice-President of the University of Louvain, Belgium, said it well with these words: *I think that today it is urgent to teach about human vulnerability at home, in school, in churches, at work, in marriage. There is nothing to be ashamed about in recognizing one's own mistakes, brokenness, wrinkles...no matter if you are a parent, spouse, teacher, vice-rector, or priest. Even God! The great thing about Christianity is to dare to say that God is fragile. It is to dare to say that within each human being, even the most wretched, “there exists a crack that opens to another universe.” The key to experiences in teaching, like the key to experiences in loving or to spiritual experience, is that of not having it all. What a wonderful vocation for today's schools! To invite each person to reach their own inner land. To allow each one to discover their own promised land. To encourage each one to voice their own story. To help each one to descend to the most secret truth about themselves.*

But this does not mean giving up on commitment for the good of our brothers and sisters. Today we hear talk of the end of history – an invitation to give up on utopia and commitment. What is spoken about is

personal intimacy and fulfillment, a belief with no regard for neighbor or history. The great values of our world today seem to be individualism, competition and consumerism. Along these lines, together with Manuel Díaz Mateos, a Jesuit who works in Peru, we could say that we are going from Amos, the prophet of justice, to Hosea, the prophet of mercy and affection. Whether we like it or not, we should be open to the signs of the times, which, for all their ambiguity, do show us the land where we can sow the Good News in the heart of the young people whom we educate.

Hosea encourages a dispirited, broken and wounded people with the gentle language of affection, forgiveness and grace: *So I will allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart* (Hosea 2: 16). God decides to heal Israel with great affection. Might this not be a call for us to take more seriously the wounds of the heart in young people in order to heal them? Is not the Good News, provided by Christian education, first and foremost an awareness of being loved, valued, blessed, a way of counteracting low self-esteem? And in a society where everything is bought and sold, do we not have to become gratuitous, which will allow us to develop the ability to contemplate, be thankful for, and be amazed at mysteries or beauty?

This does not mean the renunciation of justice. In fact, union with Yahweh is founded on justice and

law: *I will espouse you to me forever: I will espouse you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy; I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the Lord.* (Hosea 2: 21-22).

The invitation of Jesus for us to become like children is an invitation to open ourselves to the world, to grace, to tenderness, to caressing, to affection, since children are open to these things. There is no doubt that people today, the young people we teach today, above all need a word or a gesture that will get through to their heart and it is there that they will meet God and then open themselves to their brothers and sisters in need. The challenge is always to know how to unite this understanding and warm approach with the prophetic word and the rebellious gesture, all of which spring from the same love. Is this not perhaps the Lasallian message? *You must consider the obligation you have to win their hearts as one of the principal means to lead them to live in a Christian manner. Often reflect that if you fail to use this means, you will drive them away from God instead of drawing them to him* (Meditation 115.3).

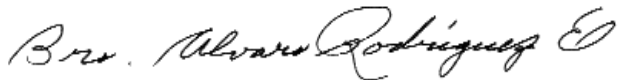
Conclusion

We know that our age, which we can characterize by its religious indifference, is, paradoxically, marked by an irrefutable spiritual thirst. Expressions of this phenomenon are conflicting and ambiguous. Not knowing where to quench the thirst for the infinite, one drinks from many cisterns, cisterns which often-times are broken as in the image of Jeremiah. Therefore, along with the poet Luis Rosales, we can say:

*We can go at night, at night,
We can go with no moon, no moon,
So that to find the source
It is only our thirst that will light the way for us.*

The world today, and particularly the world of the young, hopes that we might be able to share with them a renewed face of God, the fruit of our personal experience and of our closeness to him. What we have seen, what we have heard, what we have touched... to be for them a God-friend; one who loves all beings, the humble servant of his creatures, who came to serve and not to be served, one who is able to love gratuitously, to forgive unconditionally, one who is always close, who suffered as the poor suffer, who desires salvation, happiness, good fortune, peace for all, who raises our dignity and asks for our responsibility – the God of the Kingdom revealed in Jesus.

And from this experience we should offer to the young and the world, hearts willing to listen to them, understand them, put them again on their journey; communities able to welcome them and guide them; schools that are close to their concerns; a catechesis able to give meaning to their lives and to commit them to building up a world that is more fraternal, human, where solidarity is evident and participation is the norm, a foretaste of the Kingdom; a pastoral ministry in which the transforming presence and fullness of God is lived in the first person. This would be the best way of living associated with the God of the Kingdom and the Kingdom of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Bro. Álvaro Rodríguez E". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría
Superior General