

# BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS



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Superior General

**PASTORAL LETTER TO THE BROTHERS**

**To be living signs  
of the presence of the Kingdom,  
in a community of Brothers  
consecrated by God the Trinity**

December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008

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*To you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...God is faithful, and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1: 2-3; 9)*

Brothers:

This text from Paul, who we celebrate this year, speaks to us of one of the characteristics that define God's being: *God is faithful*. If in the Bible God is defined as love, he is also defined as faithful. This is without a doubt grounds for peace and grace on the part of God our Father and of Jesus Christ the Lord. Today we are living at an uncertain time in human history. We do not see the horizon clearly while political, social and financial systems are floundering. On the Church level, the sense of abandonment and indifference on the part of many, especially the young, concerns us, and on the Institute level we are raising serious questions.

Given this outlook, mitigated certainly by the numerous signs of life present in human history, in the Church, in religious life, in our Institute, and in the Lasallian Family, but perhaps not always in evidence, there is an implacable truth that should keep hope alive for us: God is faithful. This is true even though at times we might sense his silence. With Kierkegaard we can also express it in this way: *Do not let us forget that You speak also when You are silent. Give us this*

*trust while we wait for your coming. You are silent through love and you speak through love. Both in silence as well as in word, You are always the same Father, yours is the same paternal heart and you guide us with Your voice and you lift us up with Your silence.*

God the Trinity, whose glory is our ultimate end, does not abandon us. God is unchanging in the fidelity of his love and we are called to be living signs of his Kingdom, of that Kingdom of God where we all will be sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. *The Church has a single intention: that God's kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass (Gaudium et Spes 45a).* We Brothers, like the Church, are part of this project, just as the Founder idealized it when he invited us to be instruments of salvation for the young, especially the needy. As the Latin-American Bishops told us in their recent continental Conference: *What defines us the most are not the dramatic circumstances of life, nor the challenges of society, nor the tasks that we need to undertake, but above all the love received from the Father thanks to Jesus Christ through the anointing of the Holy Spirit (Aparecida Conference, number 14).*

But as we well know, this is not an individual project. It is a project about living as a community of Brothers consecrated to the Trinity and which includes all those who find inspiration in our charism. As the introduction to Circular 455, *The Documents of the 44<sup>th</sup> General Chapter*, tells us: *We, as Brothers and with other Lasallians dedicated to the mission of education, are called to address various needs so that the Reign of God proclaimed and realized in Jesus may transform*

*the world into one of hope, justice, peace, and communion among people.*

It can happen that we also feel, with Paul, the frailness of our efforts and the inconsistency of our witness, but this, far from discouraging us, should propel us to continue forward in the strength of the Lord. *Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal* (Philippians 3: 13-14).

As Jesuit Father Xavier Quinzá Lleó tells us, today in the field of sociology, there is much emphasis on the relationship that exists between the *horizon of expectations and the space of experience* in which we live. To see how both of these relate to one another is hugely important...The space of experience is what we are: our situation with all its dimensions. But it is very important to realize that reality is not just what we are, but what we want to do with what we are. For that reason it is of prime importance to awaken the dormant desires of the heart and to raise in us a true attitude of openness to what is new in order to prepare for the immediate future, within the definitive horizon of God's reign. *In any case the source of legitimacy of any human group is always rooted in the authenticity or the consistency of their practices of commitment. This includes when we are able to admit a lack of consistency between what we think and say, between our great declarations and the limitedness of our situation, this is not something compromised, but on the contrary it reinforces the authenticity of our life. We are authentic, because we know how to recognize inconsistency and yet we continue to*

*aspire to what is best.*

In this Pastoral Letter I would like to draw inspiration from Meditations 195 and 196 for the Time of Retreat of our Founder, that inexhaustible source which helps us to discover new richness which is always up to date. To be living signs of the presence of the Kingdom as a community of Brothers consecrated by God the Trinity, we really ought to be ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ, to participate in his Passion, to be looked upon as his representatives, to be united with Him as vine branches to the vine, to allow ourselves to be led by his Spirit, having recourse to prayer in the difficulties we encounter, imitating Jesus the Good Shepherd, and by following his Gospel. As you can see, these two meditations give us some very current and demanding guidelines that I would like to comment on.

### **1. To be living signs of the presence of the Kingdom: *The Kingdom of God is at hand* (Mark 1: 15)**

We all know of the importance of images in today's world, so much so that today communication in great measure manages public opinion; in this way food and clothing many times has a symbolic function of a lifestyle and what matters is not so much the quality of product but the *brand name*. We also know that the principal victims of such a system are young people, and the Founder has told us that young people learn more by what they see than by what they hear. A world like this needs signs to unsettle it. As Brothers we are called to be witnesses of a different world,

of an alternative society based on Gospel values, to be signs of life, fraternity, hope, the future, the Kingdom.

- **Continuing the saving mission of Jesus in building the Kingdom, as his representatives: *You are the ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5: 20)***

In order to be ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ, as the Founder invites us, we must first of all continue his mission; in the Gospel we find clearly that the center of the message and the activity of Jesus was the building of the Kingdom. This term is repeated 122 times in the Gospels and 90 of those times were said by Jesus himself. Jesus said what the Kingdom was in his message in the synagogue in Nazareth and in the response that he gave later to John's disciples (Luke 4: 18-19; Matthew 11: 3-5). The Kingdom involves overcoming all human alienation, the destruction of all evil, physical and moral, sin, hatred, death, disunity, inequality, and marginalization. It is about a year of grace from the Lord in which the Father's tenderness is made manifest. The Father and the Kingdom were the two great loves of Jesus, and they were the purposes that directed and energized his entire life.

The miracles of Jesus are a manifestation of the presence of the Kingdom: the sick are healed, grief is turned into celebration, death changes into a dream, sins become an occasion of grace. The Kingdom takes in the totality of reality, body and soul, just as our Founder sensed it when he made us teachers and not just catechists. It is a new order which involves God's intervention which has begun but is not fin-

ished. It is the now but also the not yet. As Benedict XVI says to us in his book on Jesus of Nazareth: *This unique reality which contains multiple desires and hopes for human beings is also expressed in the second petition of the Our Father: "May your Kingdom come." The "Kingdom of God" is life in abundance because it is not about a private "happiness", an individual joy, but a more just world, the unity of God and the world.*

The Kingdom is presented in a humble way as a seed or as yeast, and it is the children, the little ones and the simple who understand it the best. In fact, the mystery or the secrets of the Kingdom are revealed to them, as Jesus tells us in his prayer of thanksgiving to the Father: *I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike* (Matthew 11: 25). Later on, the three synoptic writers further clarify that *these things* refer to the *mysteries of God's Kingdom* (Matthew 13: 11; Mark 4: 11; Luke 8: 10). That is the reason why Jesus strongly affirms: *Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 18: 3). This is an invitation to invest in our role as teachers and to become disciples of our disciples. What Bernanos tells us is consoling and challenging at the same time: *We can all regain our childhood, but only through holiness.* That is why we can make our own the famous prayer of Father Grandmison: *Holy Mother of God, preserve in me the heart of a child, pure and transparent as a fountain.*

The relationship between the Kingdom of God and children should strike us very deeply, we Brothers who came into



being for them. The thinking of Jesus is a paradigm that we should live. In contrast to what psychology proposes to us, that we are given the means to become autonomous adults, distancing ourselves from the children we were, the entire life of Jesus was to become more and more like that of a child, if we understand the idea of a child who depends on his father. Not just in his adolescence when he says to his parents: Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house? (Luke 2: 49), but repeatedly throughout his adult life, Jesus would say: *My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work* (John 4:34), until the time when affirms: *I do nothing on my own, but I say only what the Father taught me. The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what is pleasing to him* (John 8: 28 - 29). It is no accident that his final words were: *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit* (Luke 23: 46). This relationship with the Father is one of the secrets of the Kingdom.

• **Participating in the death of Jesus: *I accomplish what is lacking in the passion of Christ* (Colossians 1: 34).**

The Founder cites this text from Saint Paul in Meditation 195, inviting us to *achieve and complete the work of our own redemption* (Meditation 195.1). No doubt we are all familiar with the phrase from Pascal that tells us that Christ suffers until the end of the world. It is not difficult to affirm this position when we look at the crucified of our own time who extend his sorrowful passion. This is all the more sorrowful when so many of these have the face of a child or a young person. *God on the cross rejected the masks with which*

*we try to conceal their faces: A pure act, an immobile engine, unchanging Divinity, impassive Power...Instead of that, as a kind of stumbling block and a scandal (1 Corinthians 1: 23), God has revealed the true divine being as a love that can be injured and even broken down by human ingratitude: a God who cries, sweats, and bleeds making his own the suffering, fear and desperation of all those who share with Him the condition of being victims on earth (A. Pieris).*

Elie Wiesel, in his book entitled *Night*, tells us the story of his first night in the concentration camp at Auschwitz. As he describes the terrible execution of a child, he shares with us the feelings of a 14-year old Jewish boy: *"Where is God? Where is he," someone behind me asked... "Where is God now? And I heard a voice behind me respond: Where is God? He is up there, hanging from the gallows..."* I will never forget that night, the author tells us, *I will never forget that time when they assassinated my God and my soul and changed my dreams into ashes.* François Mauriac, the French writer and a friend of Wiesel, tells us in the introduction to his book that as a believer he would have liked to have spoken to the friend of that other Israeli, his brother, because it seemed as if he was like the crucified one, whose cross has conquered the world. *That is what he would have liked to have said to that Jewish boy but he was only able to embrace him as he was crying.*

There is no doubt that the suffering of the innocent is a difficult mystery to understand, but what is most important is not so much to try to explain it but to avoid magnifying it in our own actions and omissions. As Father Cantalamessa, the preacher for the Papal Household tells us: *It is also not enough*

*just to not magnify the suffering of innocent ones, it is necessary to try to see that it does not exist! Facing the spectacle of a young girl frozen from cold and who is crying from hunger, a man shouts in his heart to God: "Oh, God! Where are you? Why don't you do something for that poor innocent one? And God answered him: "Of course I did something for her: I made you!"*

Unfortunately, we know that today the forms that violence may take against children are many: for example there is forced labor, forced marriage or military registration. The October 31, 2007 edition of *L'Osservatore Romano* talks about 250,000 male and female child "soldiers." It speaks of 275 million children who each year are victims of domestic violence ("with devastating psychological consequences that may mark them for life.") It speaks of 218 million children who are obliged to work, with the result that they cannot devote themselves to studies. It speaks of 126 million children who are forced to be involved in dangerous activities which are, therefore, intrinsically violent ones. In particular, there are 5.7 million children who are used to pay off debts, 1.8 million involved in prostitution and pornography, and 1.2 million who are victims of the trafficking of minors for that purpose. We cannot be indifferent to these facts and thanks to the efforts of Brother John Johnston, we have made the defense of the rights of children as one of our flagship causes.

The reality of young people is no less worrying. This year, in his message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, the Pope reminded us of the situation of so many young people who are obliged to emigrate and to live far away from their

families and countries, living in the difficult situation of a kind of double belonging: not to lose their own culture and at the same time to insert themselves in a new reality. The Pope makes an explicit reference to schools: *The difficulty should not be underestimated which the young people find in getting inserted into the educational course of study in force in the country where they are hosted. Therefore, the scholastic system itself should take their conditions into consideration and provide specific formative paths of integration for the immigrant boys and girls that are suited to their needs. The commitment will also be important to create a climate of mutual respect and dialogue among all the students in the classrooms based on the universal principles and values that are common to all cultures. Everyone's commitment – teachers, families and students – will surely contribute to helping the young migrants to face in the best way possible the challenge of integration and offer them the possibility to acquire what can aid their human, cultural and professional formation. This holds even more for the young refugees for whom adequate programs will have to be prepared, both in the scholastic and the work contexts, in order to guarantee their preparation and provide the necessary bases for a correct insertion into the new social, cultural and professional world.*

Another situation that extends the passion of Jesus in the world is the food crisis that has been evident in recent months. According to the international organization Action Against Hunger, the food crisis that has emerged from the substantial increase in the price of basic foods will effect more than 850 million persons in harsh and cruel ways, principally in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, which is where hunger is most prevalent in the midst of the abun-

dance and waste of the resources that are allowed in the highly developed world.

Furthermore, the World Bank itself, through its current president Robert Zoellick, has asked for coordinated and global action to counteract the effects of the food crisis since the increase of food prices is generating a shortage of supplies, hunger, and malnutrition around the world. According to the World Bank, there are 33 countries in the world that are facing the possibility of a social and political crisis due to the high prices of food and energy. This situation has led Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations to declare that he fears a "cascading crisis" which will affect the growth and security of the world if the crisis of food prices "is not managed correctly and urgently" (Cf. *Hunger in the World 2008*, Internet).

But it is Benedict XVI himself who has made a call to our collective conscience. During the Angelus message of May 25 of this year (2008), he said: *The Eucharist is a school of charity and solidarity. The one who is nourished on the Bread of Christ cannot remain indifferent before the one who, even in our day, is deprived of daily bread. So many parents are barely able to obtain it for themselves and for their own children. It is an ever greater problem that the International Community has great difficulty in resolving. The Church not only prays "give us this day our daily bread," but, on the Lord's example, is committed in every way to "multiply the five loaves and the two fish" with numerous initiatives of human promotion and sharing, so that no one lacks what is necessary for life.* We can ask ourselves, then, What can we do on the com-

munity level and on the educational level to relieve, at least minimally, the hunger of so many persons, among whom the majority here also are children and young people?

To continue the passion of Christ is a mission that our senior Brothers can do very effectively. To know how to unite the suffering of limitations that comes with years or infirmity with its ailments and discomforts or to see possibilities diminish, is a way of participating in the saving passion of Christ and to unite oneself spiritually with all those who daily devote their lives in favor of children and the young based on the Lasallian charism. Many times the words of Psalm 22 still come to our lips: *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?* We know that He said them first. As Dorothy Sayers tells us: *For some reason, God decided to make man as he is, limited and suffering, subject to sadness and death, and he had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine. No matter the game that is played, in his creation he respects the rules and plays cleanly.*

As we ourselves experience personally, no one is immune to suffering, suffering that might manifest itself in doubting whether it is worth the trouble to continue on, or in the sense of the meaninglessness of life that some young Brothers experience, or in the frustration of work or in a mission that seems not to be reaching its purpose and which distresses other middle-aged Brothers. This type of experience may also be a kind of participation in the passion of Jesus. The English writer Edward Shillito, as he faces the tragedy of the first world war, speaks to us of a similar experience where he found the source of peace: *Our wounds ached,*

*Where can we find some balm? Lord Jesus, through your wounds we ask for mercy. If the doors are closed, you approach us and you need do nothing but show your hands and your side. Today we know what wounds are, do not be afraid; show us your wounds, we know the watchword...to our wounds only the wounds of God can speak to them and cure them and there is no God who has wounds, none but you. Show us your wounds, we know the watchword.*

But Passion and Death are not the last word. Jesus rose. This central reality of our faith makes it possible for us to rescue hope and the utopia of a better world, of a more evangelical Church, of an Institute open to the moving of the Spirit, of a Lasallian mission capable of touching the hearts of the young. Therefore we can opt for the plan of Jesus. *Jesus taught about open eyes, about absolute power taking on the suffering of others...God's authority made manifest in the authority of those who suffer, first of all of those who suffer innocently and unjustly, that authority in which Jesus, in the parable about final judgment expressed the entire history of humanity: Lord, when did we see you suffering? Amen, I tell you that what you did for one of these little ones you did for me (Matthew 25)...compassion that is verified dramatically in the encounter with Christ's passion. It is here where one follows Jesus, the suffering Jesus, or this following does not take place (J. B. Metz).*

- **Following his evangelical method: *I have come that they have life, and life in abundance (John 10: 10)***

As I read the second point of Meditation 196, I am power-

fully struck by the way the Founder invites us to read the Gospel based on the example of Jesus. Called to be he *col-laborators*, we must follow his method. The Founder tells us that we should *study the manner and the means that he used to lead his disciples to practice the truths of the Gospel* (Meditation 196.2).

To do this he proposed four concrete means to us. The first one is what we would call today in the words of Metz, *dangerous memories*, or if you will, the countercultural aspect that many Gospel truths contain. If we take the Beatitudes seriously, they may seem to us to be sheer madness and they contradict what the consumer society presents to us to day as desirable. The second means is that of the two ways, death which leads to sin, and virtues which opens the path toward God to us; virtues, the Founder tells us, such as meekness and humility that we find incarnated in Jesus. The third means moves us to a type of justice that is not content with external appearances, such as that of the Scribes and Pharisees, but one which should come from the deepest part of our being. Finally, and in comparison with the Beatitudes, the Gospel puts us on guard warning us where not to place our heart.

This didactic reading of the Gospel which the Founder proposes to us, makes us recall the central role that Scripture must have in our lives as Brothers, especially the Gospels, which in the words of the Founder, should be our first Rule. This year we have had the Synod on the Word of God – an invitation to recover this fundamental means in our search for God and in our listening to his will.



For Jesus the will, the ultimate plan, the motivating purpose of his life was always, as the Founder reminds us, *that all may have life, life in abundance* (John 10: 10), because it is the Father's will that none be lost (Matthew 18: 14). These words remind us of the book of Wisdom: *But you have mercy on all, because you can do all things; and you overlook the sins of men that they may repent. For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned. And how could a thing remain, unless you willed it; or be preserved, had it not been called forth by you? But you spare all things, because they are yours, O Lord and lover of souls* (Wisdom 11: 23ff).

To follow the Gospel method of Jesus means to have, like him, great ability to admire in the littlest ones the signs of life that we find along our journey. Jesus, considering an act of virtue, no matter how small, gets excited and feels the almost explosive need to express his admiration, as the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Blandino tells us. This is so considering the humble faith of the Canaanite woman: *Woman, how great is your faith!* (Matthew 15: 28); or in the case of the Roman centurion, in admiration, he tells the people: *I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith* (Luke 7: 9); he does not hide his admiration when he faces the sinner in Simon's house: *So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love* (Luke 7: 47), and he does not let go unnoticed the widow who offered her alms in the temple: *Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury* (Mark 12: 43); in the midst of agony, he gives hope to the repentant thief: *Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise* (Luke 23: 43). It is not so much the

moral value of these acts that is important, but above all it is the immense love that he had for each person.

Given this wonderful reality, how true are the words of the Latin-American bishops from their recent meeting in Aparecida: *The history of humankind, which God never abandons, takes place under his compassionate gaze. God has so loved our world that he has given us his son. He proclaims the Good News of the Kingdom to the poor and to sinners. We, therefore, as disciples of Jesus and as missionaries, want to and must proclaim the Gospel, which is Christ himself. We proclaim to our people that God loves us, that his existence is not a threat to men and women, that he is close with his the saving and liberating power of his Kingdom, that he accompanies us in tribulation, that he unceasingly encourages our hope in the midst of all trials. We Christians are bearers of Good News for humankind and not prophets of doom* (number 29). The question that we Brothers must ask ourselves is: With whom do we identify in our ministry – are we bearers of Good News for the young or prophets of doom?

The Gospel method of Jesus should also lead us never to separate the Word from life. We have a wonderful example in this regard in the life and spirituality of our Founder, who always knew how to enlighten historical reality with the Word, and this historical reality was also for him the God-enlightened space where God is made manifest. We could say that *the Word and life are the two Lasallian coordinates of our search for God, of his saving plan and of our charism. For this reason, there is no doubt that our last General Chapter urged us strongly to a daily encounter with the Bread and the Word, clarifying*

*that the Word of God is not limited just to the Scriptures but it is free and active in the lives of nations and individuals...Our daily prayer must be developed, then, as an exercise of a prayerful reading of the Word of God. It must be a type of reading that leads us, on the one hand, to discover the religious relationship that exists between history and the economic and social situations in the simple life of the people with whom we live, and the Biblical narratives on the other (cf. MTR 193, 194, 198). We need to discover what relations both have with our own life as consecrated men who seek together the glory of God in the educational and evangelizing ministry. Scriptures will be, in a renewed manner, our first and principal Rule (cf. Rule 6) (Circular 455, pages 12 - 13).*

In similar terms the working document for the Synod on the Word of God expresses it in this way: *The Word of God should be read while keeping in mind the events and the signs of the times with God has manifested himself in history. Vatican II states: "To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other" (Gaudium et Spes 4). She, therefore, in the midst of human endeavor, labors "to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age" (Gaudium et Spes 11). In this way, developing through all of her members the prophetic mission, it will be able to help humankind to find in history the path that moves away from death and*

*brings it to life (Instrumentum Laboris 58).*

Father Cantalamessa, in one of his Good Friday sermons in which he substituted for the Pope who did not preach on that day, citing Plato, said that *for the elderly philosophers are the teachers whereas for the young, poets are teachers*. He added that currently poets are not the teachers of the young, but songwriters are; and it is no longer poetry, but music. I agree with him and it seems to me that the words of a Guatemalan songwriter, Ricardo Arjona, who is based in Mexico and whose words deal with Jesus in the Gospels, are very pertinent and have always impressed and challenged me:

*Yesterday Jesus tuned my guitar  
and heightened my feelings: he inspired me.  
With paper and pencil in hand I note the song  
and refused to write.*

*Because to speak and write about Jesus is  
to be redundant, it would be better to act;  
then, something told me that the only way not  
to be redundant is to tell the truth.*

*To say that Jesus is action and movement  
not five letters that form a name.*

*To say that Jesus is pleased when we act and not when we  
speak,  
to say that Jesus is a **verb** and not a **noun**.*

The above has led me to search for some verbs that are repeated in the Gospel regarding the person and the mission of Jesus and I have made a list, certainly one that is incomplete and subjective, but it gives us an idea of where we

must aim our life as Brothers and our Gospel action: *to call, to see, to be moved, to love, to serve, to pardon, to teach, to believe, to trust, to pray, to carry, to welcome, to lose, to risk, to renounce, to give, to encourage, to heal, to clean, to open, to touch, to die, to rise...* Each of these verbs is a true life program. I believe that to conjugate them vitally would lead us to be *a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren (Vita Consecrata 22).*

- **Interceding for our disciples and for all those whom the Lord has entrusted to us: *Father...I pray for them...for those you have given me, because they are yours (John 17: 9).***

In today's spirituality, often there is a tendency to judge negatively intercessory prayer. This is perhaps because in the past this practice was overused. But it is an authentically evangelical prayer and its greatest expression is found in the priestly prayer of Jesus that we find in John's Gospel. There Jesus entrusts not only his disciples to the Father but also all those who, through them throughout history, will come to believe in Him (cf. John 17: 1-25).

I believe that this fully justifies this type of prayer which, on the other hand, is the one proposed to us by the Founder in Meditation 196, where after telling us when we run into difficulties in educating our disciples we should immediately have recourse to God in order to ask him for his Spirit, through Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, and he adds: *You must, then, devote yourself very much to prayer in order to*

*succeed in your ministry. You must constantly represent the needs of your disciples to Jesus Christ, explaining to him the difficulties you have experienced in guiding them. Jesus Christ, seeing that you regard him as the one who can do everything in your work and yourself as an instrument that ought to be moved only by him, will not fail to grant you what you ask of him (Meditation 196.1).*

The prayer of intercession is essentially apostolic. The Father who in prayer tells us: Come and experience my gratuitous love in the same prayer also tells us: Go, and share this love with your brothers and sisters, especially with those who are loved the least. It is a prayer which like that of the Our Father moves between the Father and the Kingdom through the mediation of Jesus and with the strength of his Spirit. In this sense, the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us very clearly that: *Christian petition is centered on the desire and search for the Kingdom to come, in keeping with the teaching of Christ* (cf. Matthew 6: 10-33; Luke 11: 2-13). *There is a hierarchy in these petitions: we pray first for the Kingdom, then for what is necessary to welcome it and cooperate with its coming. This collaboration with the mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit, which is now that of the Church, is the object of the prayer of the apostolic community* (cf. Acts 6: 6; 13: 3). *It is the prayer of Paul, the apostle par excellence, which reveals to us how the divine solicitude for all the churches ought to inspire Christian prayer* (cf. Romans 10: 1; Ephesians 1: 16 - 23; Philippians 1: 9 - 11; Colossians 1: 3 - 6; 4: 3 - 4, 12). *By prayer every baptized person works for the coming of the Kingdom* (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2632).

To work for the Kingdom immerses me fully in the history of humankind. It is not about evading anything nor fleeing from something but it is about commitment. Our relationship with God drives us to give ourselves totally to others. The Lord will not hold us back, he sends us. Therefore, *To pray is not to step outside history and withdraw to our own private corner of happiness. When we pray properly we undergo a process of inner purification which opens us up to God and thus to our fellow human beings as well (Spe Salvi 33).*

If intercessory prayer moves between the *Father* and the *Kingdom* and between our coming and going, it also moves between the *absolute of God* and the *limits of creatures*. It is the affirmation of that absolute and the recognition of our being received and dependent. But that absoluteness of God, far from intimidating us, gives us the ability to surrender ourselves. This is not about the God of philosophers and wise men, but the God revealed by Jesus. As Maurice Zundel tells us: *This is what Jesus gives us: a new vision of God, of that triune God, of that God whose life is an eternal communion of love, of that God who is God because he has nothing, of that fragile and threatened God, that disarmed God who waits for us in the background of ourselves...Jesus can, without denying himself nor being unaware of our weakness, call us to infinite greatness, but in God's way: rooting us in ourselves, not letting us be the center of the way we look upon things, guiding us toward the treasure within us, giving respect, in the life of others, to this infinite presence which consecrates and which gives inviolable dignity.*

Cardinal Martini, who was a significant presence at our last

General Chapter, in a conference on January 3 of this year at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, spoke about his personal experience with intercessory prayer, at this time of his life now that he is retired; he said that his principal priority today is to pray unceasingly for his brothers and sisters in Milan, those whom he had served as Bishop, but also for the people with whom he lives and for the whole world. The reason he gave for that is that the commandment to love your neighbor like yourself needs to be lived not only in action but also in prayer. I believe that this can inspire us all, but especially our senior Brothers, now retired from apostolic activity, to continue their mission which is no less effective and necessary. He humbly shared: *Naturally I know that my prayer is very poor and often times lacking and I have many distractions. It is a little stream that converges in the great river of intercession in the Church and with all good people everywhere. This great river of intercession, in turn flows into the ocean of the intercession of Christ, who intercedes unceasingly* (Hebrews 7: 25; Romans 8: 34). *And so my little intercession is part of an immense ocean of prayer in which the world is immersed and purified.*

## **2. In a community of Brothers consecrated by God the Trinity: We are one body in Christ, and individually parts of one another (Romans 12: 5)**

To seek God's glory, to procure the glory of the Trinity as the final objective of our lives as Brothers, is a recurring idea of the Meditations of the Founder. Using the word search function in *Word*, I found this idea repeated 17 times. Therefore, the headline of our vow formula, inherit-



ed from the founding origins, is not something that has come down to us by chance. In many texts we found a similar echo. For the Founder it was clear that as persons consecrated by and for the Trinity we need to procure the glory through our association for the educational and evangelizing service of the poor who are young and, through them, of all young people. This is why he tells us: *Your profession commits you to teach children the science of salvation, and you are bound to do this with total disinterestedness. Do you do this with the sole view of procuring the glory of God and your neighbor's salvation? Declare to God that you will never have any other intention than that* (Meditation 108.2). In the Collection, as he comments on the virtue of Faith, he tells us: *Let your first care be... to sacrifice everything, honor, health, and life itself, for God's glory and interests* (*Collection of Various Short Treatises*, pages 66 - 67). We know very well that God's glory and interests are that *all have life and that no one is lost*. It would be interesting to bring up the idea of what are the priority interests of our communities and if they respond to this Gospel ideal that the Founder presents to us. Is it a reality for us, as the Founder asks, that *we should not be here* (in community) *except to bring one another to God* (Meditation 113.2).

Not only personally, but as a community we are called to participate in the death of Jesus, to follow his Gospel teaching, to intercede for our disciples and for all those who, at some point in life, have been or will be involved in our life journey, without forgetting the needs of the world. We will develop two meditations in which we will find three privileged moments where this can happen.

- **Shared synergy in the heart of Christ: *I am the vine, you are the branches* (John 15: 5)**

How can we bring one another to God? Again in Meditation 113, the Founder tells us that to achieve this we must *be united in God, and to have but one and the same heart, and one and the same mind* (Meditation 113.2). This is also what he proposes to us when he invites us in Meditation 195 to be united to Jesus in our ministry as branches are to the vine. United to Jesus in our ministry in order that it be effective; united to God in community to give witness, the centrality of love our lives.

In his *Explanation of the Method for Making Mental Prayer*, the Founder cites the Gospel text of the vine and the branches when he speaks of the presence of God in the midst of the Brothers and, after asking for the grace to be closely united with them in spirit and mind, he concludes by asking Jesus, as the apostles did in the Cenacle, to send his Spirit in order to be led by it and thus participate in its zeal for the instruction of the young people confided to our ministry. Love of God, love among the Brothers, love for young people. Love is most important for us.

Father Radcliffe, in a wonderful essay on Eucharist and the Religious Life, cites the Irish Benedictine Mark Patrick Hederman, who wrote that *love is the only force that is sufficiently boundless as to force us to abandon the comfortable refuge of our well-armed individuality, to strip us of the impenetrable shell of self-sufficiency, and to have us go out, clambering naked in the danger zone beyond, the melting pot where*

*individuality is purified to become a person. He adds: Only love breaks our hardness of heart and gives us hearts of flesh.*

Saint Paul tells us that *what counts is faith working through love* (Galatians 5: 6). We are called to live a life of faith shaped by love and a love shaped by faith. So it is that *Jesus reversed the relationship between God and humankind as it had been forged by religious tradition... The great revolution of Jesus is having opened another way to God for humankind, different from the sacred: the secular way of relating to one's neighbor* (J. Moingt, *The Man Who Came From God*).

The Trinity, whose relationship and union we should replicate in the day-to-day living in our communities, is above all a mystery of love. God the Father, Abba, is the fundamental revelation that Jesus makes to us. The Father is revealed as tenderness and mercy. God the Son, Jesus, love made flesh, who does not tire of telling us again and again that we ought to love one another and that he lays down his life in love. God the Spirit, Love, who gives unity to our being, opens us up unconditionally to others. The essence of the Gospel is reduced to love. The response of Jesus is unequivocal when he is asked about what is most important. Therefore we can make our own the forceful wish of the Founder, when he tells us: *Entreat the God of hearts to keep your heart and those of your Brothers one in the heart of Jesus* (Meditation 39.3).

Brothers, when we have experienced the love of our Brothers in community and we have tried to reciprocate that love, possibly then we have lived in the Lord's presence in a very special way, the Lord who accompanies us on our

journey. It is an experience that we should never stop trying to experience again, in spite of difficulties we might encounter. Because once there is fire, the flame can always be reignited. In this sense we can interpret the wonderful thought of Albert Camus: *Not to be loved is unfortunate, not to know how to love is a tragedy. When one has had the good fortune to love intensely, one's life is spent in seeking again that ardor and that light.*

- **Community concerns: So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows (Matthew 10: 31)**

Human beings are inquisitive by nature or, rather, they are an ongoing interrogative. As Father Arrupe, whose stature has increased over the years, said quite profoundly, *the greatness of humankind lies in the inability to set limits to its interrogative nature, since human beings themselves are questions and they are self-questioning... There is no experience of God that can snuff out completely our condition as questioning beings, restless people, not satisfied with reality that continues to shape us. There is no reason to hide anxiously that our experience of God is one of questioning, open, problematic... The important thing is that we learn how to make something of those very personal reactions, which come from the deepest part of ourselves, that we learn how to make them an authentic experience of God which is made up of questions and silence; questions that do not judge, but which require that we wait humbly and in silence* (Pedro Arrupe, SJ).

These questions, inherent to our nature, creative and pro-

gressive in scope and which encourage searching, are not limited to the personal sphere. Today, as communities, we raise serious questions and issues among ourselves and at times even doubts. Mark Taylor, commenting on the thought of the philosopher Jacques Derrida, tells us: *The great religious traditions are deeply perplexing because they call into question certainty and security. Faith untempered by doubt can become a moral danger. Fortunately, he also teaches us that the opposite of blind faith is not unbelief but a different kind of believing that embraces incertitude and allows us to respect others, those we do not understand.*

I have the impression that the questions we ask ourselves today in general have to do more with looking inside ourselves and the desire to survive than with going outside our mission, and our effort to respond to the needs of the young and the world. I think it worth the trouble to analyze our community questions. The first type of question tends to paralyze us, and the second type tends to lead us to act, to give of ourselves, to give life freely.

Bishop Amédée Grab, OSB, President of the European Episcopal Conference, said during the Symposium on Consecrated Life (Rome, September 2005): *For years we have asked ourselves the question: Why is the number of vocations to the consecrated life going down in different European countries? What is the cause of these defections? How can we face the phenomenon of ageing in our communities? How can we bear the weight of the work of pastoral ministry which is always beyond us? How can we save the contemplative dimension? Why is there so much tiredness? How can we restructure and resize our works?*

*What do we do with obsolete buildings? How can we join together religious orders that are unable to be self-sufficient? How can we expect vocations to the religious life from families without children or from single-parent families? How can we invent a new pastoral ministry of vocations program and present this vocation in an attractive way? Is it to be expected that a religious order, having completed its mission, will disappear? Does consecrated life have a future? These questions are legitimate and important ones but they do not constitute the only perspective. Furthermore, to spend time exclusively on these questions runs the risk of closing us in on ourselves until we collapse (CIVSCVA, *Perfectae Caritatis, Cuarenta Años*, PCI, Madrid, 2006, 297). The founder of the San Egidio community, Andrea Riccardi, addressed similar words to us at a USG (Union of Superiors General) meeting.*

I am thinking especially of our young Brothers and I am wondering how can we open horizons for them to find meaning in their lives? How can we rekindle the interior fire that encourages them in their commitment in favor of justice and in service of the poor? How do we quench the thirst for spiritual searching? How do we help them, and with what moral authority do we do this, to become detached when their interests, are possibly reduced to searching for short-term values and low-cost happiness?

Our questions and issues should be aimed at preference for the mission, they should be focused on service and on creative commitment; on openness to the needs of the world and of the Church; on ingenuity and availability to join forces with other religious or lay persons to carry out com-

mon projects in favor of young people, the poor, in defense of the rights of the child and of justice; on our efforts to collaborate with all persons of good will to resolve the great problems that afflict so many of our fellow human beings, such as immigration, hunger, lack of affection, the new and the traditional kinds of poverty; on facilitating a dialogue of life with other religions to assure peace and to defend the values that give meaning to human existence. Is it not fundamental to seek the *Kingdom of God and its Justice*, knowing that everything else will be given to us *in addition*? Don't we often focus our issues on these additional items and neglect the essential which is to collaborate in the building of the Kingdom?

The essential is not to know if we are going to survive, the most important thing is to know if we are contributing to the creation of a world that is more human, starting from Gospel values. What is important is to exploit the dynamism of our founding charism, to know how to take risks while looking ahead. The most important thing is not to know if we have a future, the most important thing is that our present has meaning, that our life is worth the effort, that many, thanks to us, discover the face of the Father and his maternal tenderness, that the Gospel be proclaimed to the poor and that young people find in us the support they need. It is nothing other than what the Founder proposes to us in Meditation 196, as he reminds us that our mission is to give life, and to give it abundantly, when he adds: *This must be your goal when you instruct your disciples, that they live a Christian life and that your words become spirit and life for them* (Meditation 196.3).

- **In tune together with today's reality: *He saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them...and he began to teach them many things (Mark 6: 34)***

*The worst thing that could happen to us believers is to live as if God can never surprise us* (Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury). That is why it is important that we are in tune with today's reality and that we are open to the moving of the Spirit which the Founder reminds us about in Meditation 195. The Spirit *enlightens everyone coming into the world* (John 1:9), makes us docile instruments in favor of our disciples, *leading them to love and to practice the good that you teach them*. To lead them to love in a world often marked by lack of affection and by indifference, we may often need to fill a role as substitute of a home that no longer exists or is in shambles.

Certainly the world today does present us with serious problems. I feel that it is up to us to live at a difficult time in human history, but also it is a fascinating time in which we are opening new paths, knowing that the Lord, as in the Gospel story, may seem to be asleep, but is actually accompanying us in the boat. In spite of everything, we need to be convinced, as Sheila Cassidy tells us, that *although hatred may rise to the enveloping flame with each new oppression, it soon dies. It collapses as rapidly as we saw it rise, while the small and constant light of love continues burning implacably. The truth is that, even though love may be weak and hatred intense, nevertheless hatred is brief and love is long-lasting.*



The stance of Jesus was: to see reality, to be moved, and to act. I believe that this is also part of the Gospel method that we should follow. As the Founder tells us in Meditation 196, citing Saint John: *Jesus Christ, speaking to his apostles, told them he gave an example to them that they might do as he himself had done* (Meditation 196.2).

1. *To see reality*, means to keep up to date with what is happening in our world, to read newspapers or see or listen to the news, not just out of curiosity but to discover God's action in our history. Not in a theoretical or distant way, but we need to touch that reality and see to it that the young people we educate touch it also. Without concrete experience, the greatest virtues just turn into smoke.
2. *To be moved*, means to make our own the grief of our fellow human beings, for example, of those hundreds of immigrants who in recent months have drowned in the Mediterranean as they were looking for a better future for themselves and their families. To be moved is to "suffer with," to be sensitive to all forms of injustice, poverty, suffering. To be moved is to feel a wounded heart when we see that there are so many children and young people who are living in absurd and inhuman situations. Jesus was not afraid to show his compassionate side when he faced the multitude who were like sheep without a shepherd (cf. Mark 6: 24), or when he encountered the widow of Nain who was burying her only child (Luke 7:13) or before his friend Lazarus, when he was moved to tears (John 11: 35)...
3. *To act* is the final and the most important step. Without action, the seeing and the being moved are reduced to good intentions and sentimentality. This is about

the final results, being like Jesus, the man-for-others, and going out of ourselves and our own personal interests. Here we need to also situate gratuity which has so much meaning in Lasallian spirituality and teaching. As Benedict XVI tells us, *Our relationship with God is established through communion with Jesus—we cannot achieve it alone or from our own resources alone. The relationship with Jesus, however, is a relationship with the one who gave himself as a ransom for all (cf. 1 Tim 2:6). Being in communion with Jesus Christ draws us into his "being for all"; it makes it our own way of being. He commits us to live for others, but only through communion with him does it become possible truly to be there for others, for the whole (Spe Salvi, 28).*

### **3. Lasallian Icons: The Kingdom of God is among you (Luke 17: 21).**

One of the greatest riches of our Lasallian spirituality, inherited from our Founder which he lived with exceptional strength, is the invitation made to us to discover God in reality. That God of the thousand faces that always surprise us. The expression, with open eyes and burning hearts, coined by our last General Chapter, really is not something new for us, it is a suggestive way of summarizing a secular tradition that characterizes us.

#### **• Africa**

This year I had the good fortune to visit the African continent and to discover those divine faces that raise questions for us today: the God of the poor, the God of celebration,

the God of children, the God of the simple, the God of song and of smiling faces.

As I told the African Brothers, to visit their continent has always been for me, over these years, an invitation to return to the essential. There are so many things that tend to distract, dissipate and diffuse us... When you witness the fight for life, for the necessary minimum, for human dignity, many of our intellectual constructs and our stepped up needs for consumerism, tend to fall down. It is for that reason I am convinced that Africa is for us a very special icon in which the Kingdom of heaven certainly is present with the potential of the mustard seed even though appearances may seem to hide this.

The British musician Peter Gabriel said that *if the world could have one father, the man we would choose would be Nelson Mandela*. He is a complete symbol and a love song for human dignity, justice, and forgiveness. The Institute in Africa through human and Christian education is rendering an enormous service for the development of the continent and I hope that from our classrooms will emerge men and women with the ideals and the strength of Mandela. Returning to Rome after each of these three visits, I thought that it would be a complete loss if we did not exploit to the full the wealth we have in our hands. Because reality is urging us to act. Africa should be a priority and an ongoing challenge for the Institute as we assure its future which is above all in the hands of our African Brothers, associates and collaborators to whom we need to yield the stage, rather than by speaking for them.

In 2009 the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops will be held. The title for this Assembly is: *The Church in Africa in Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*. In the preparatory working documents for this Assembly we are presented with the serious problems and the many hopes which we have to address in dealing with the African reality. One section says: *In the majority of African countries, in spite of progress recently achieved, the rate of literacy continues to be among the lowest in the world. In many places, the system of education is continually deteriorating, the health system is in disarray, and social security is still non-existent. With the absence of order the weakest are always those who are most threatened. In the same way, in the area of demographics, one cannot be silent in the face of the imbalance among a population that is witnessing a record annual tax increases and resources that continue to be not just unusable, but completely exhausted. The immense resources of Africa are in direct contrast with the abject poverty of its poor* (15). Furthermore, we know, unfortunately, that the two phenomena that I highlighted earlier, immigration and the food crisis, are particularly present in many countries on this continent.

*In addition, the hopeful signs of the renaissance of a productive and dynamic Christianity and the coming of new societies are more and more evident, namely, the notable increase in Africa of the number of Catholics, priests, and consecrated persons; the growing number of African missionaries within and outside of the continent, and the creation of a national consultancy platform for them; the vitality of African liturgy and vibrant Church communities; the creation and restoration of Dioceses and Church territories; the growing role of the Church in the*

*promotion of development on the continent, especially in education, health, the fight for the appearance of legally constituted states in all parts of the African continent; and finally, in spite of its weakness, the great credibility that the Church continues to have among African people* (6). The fact is that from 1978 until 2004, the number of African Catholics went from 55,000,000 to 149,000.000, according to statistics published in the *Anuario Pontificio*.

On the Institute level, challenges and hopes are also present. Each of the Districts, the Sub-District and the Delegation that we have in the Region have been sent a letter, after the visit, highlighting challenges and hopes, and we concluded the visit with a meeting of the entire General Council with the Visitors of RELAF, in which we were able to summarize these hopes and challenges. For now, I would just like to highlight the signs of life and the experiences that impacted me the most, and in which I recognized God's hand and through which I discovered the Jesus who looks at the multitude, is moved by them, and multiplies the bread and the fish to feed them. This is the best Gospel icon of Africa today. Once again, this involves seeing, being moved, and acting.

### • **Young Brothers**

Without attempting to touch on all the reality I encountered, I am thinking of the young Brothers and about the effort to be made, which should be a priority, to give them a quality formation. I was struck by their ability, their educational concerns, the responsibilities they are assuming,

their desire to serve, their hope for apostolic experience, especially in catechesis. The houses of formation that we have on the Regional or District level are the result of efforts made in recent years, and they represent for us a great hope and a priority. But I would like to recall especially my experience in one of the Novitiates, where the novices devote a half-hour each day to mental prayer, within an atmosphere of contemplative silence and deep spirituality. This is reflected later on in their joyfulness, their fraternity, in the serious way in which they approach their studies and in the fraternal greeting they offer to each Brother as they exit the chapel. Certainly, the sense of the sacred, which is so rooted in these people, is not synonymous with spirituality, but it could serve as a stimulus for it. In this area Africa can offer much to the entire Institute.

### • ***Our Employees***

Throughout my visit, I was also impressed with many of the persons who take care of the needs of our Brothers in the communities. Sometimes these people pass by unnoticed, but I believe that they should have a place of honor in our hearts. Their simplicity, spirit of service and sacrifice, their loving attention and above all their fidelity at all cost are exceptional. Many of them have been working with us for many years. Due to the tight financial situation, they do not always receive the salaries they deserve, but they are always there, attentive, available, humble, respectful, and willing to serve. Certainly they merit our appreciation and they are for us a reason to give praise, as Jesus did: *"I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although*

*you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike” (Matthew 11: 25).*

### • **African Children and Young People**

Finally, I would like to say a word about African children and young people, who, for their part, also make manifest God's face to us in their smallness and frailness. Africa has a youth population which perhaps represents its richest potential. I encountered thousand of them in our primary, secondary, technical, and agricultural schools, centers for street children...The poverty in which they live generally is in contrast with the happiness and smile they manifest. They all merit to be remembered but I would like here to share some of the encounters that impacted me in a special way.

I think, for example, of the students at De La Salle Holy Cross-Junior School, in Johannesburg, from the well-to-do class. I have a very happy memory of the Gospel service they did on the occasion of Lent. This was interspersed with time for prayer and silence. I thought that it was a wonderful manifestation of the importance given to catechesis and evangelization within one of our schools. It was a very moving experience for me.

And what can I say about the kids from the Akwaba Center for street children in Abidjan? These are kids who have been through extremely hard and difficult experiences in their short lives. At the end of the assembly that they prepared for the visit, I commented to the Brothers that perhaps we were standing before the country's future leaders.

Their self-assurance, their vivacious intelligence, their knowing how to work together, their ability to lead and to be obedient really impressed me, and I greatly appreciate what the Institute is doing in this work. I experienced something similar at the Children Discovery Center (CDC) in Nakuro, Kenya, where children have an extraordinary knowledge of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, their songs show a strong sense of what they want for their future, and where I was amazed at the order and the cleanliness of their very simple dormitories.

I could go on at length about the experiences I had during my trip, because there were many others and they were rich and varied. I would just like to mention, briefly, the large-scale and well prepared Eucharistic assemblies organized by the students in Madagascar at different places, the mission carried out in the hands of Brazilian and Mozambican Brothers in Mangunde, the excellent service given to young workers in Conakry, the zeal of our Brothers in Chad in spite of difficulty, the young volunteers in Cameroon with a deeply Lasallian and committed spirit, the different Lasallian groups that animate our mission in Congo, the new initiatives in West Africa, the reopening of the Art School in Nyundo, Rwanda, the leadership of the young indigenous Brothers in Nigeria, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the wonderful educational works in Kenya, such as that in Marsabit, where the Brothers during the half-hour of personal mental prayer preceding Lauds, are accompanied by a good number of students, almost all of them nomads, who come to visit the Lord and they discover a facet of the Brothers' prayer life. Or the Mwnagaza Center in Nakuro,



which offers young people after their high school years, studies in accounting, food and beverages, computer training, fashion and design, tailoring, information technology, and cosmetology and hair styling.

Brothers, at a time in which interdependence and solidarity have intensified in the Institute, we all need to sense a special closeness to Africa. On the Institute and Church levels, Africa represents a great hope for us. I hope that at this time in history we do not fail to keep this appointment. Because, we should not forget, as the next Assembly of Bishops on Africa reminds us in the working document, that *the situation today in Africa cannot but touch our awareness. At this time, Africa is more than ever dependent upon rich countries, and it is more vulnerable than any other continent to the maneuvering of those countries who try to give with one hand and then take double with the other, and that tend to strongly condition the development of political, financial, social, and even cultural life of African countries. In the building up of the world, Africa is deliberately excluded, only being remembered when its poverty needs to be shown or exploited. Therefore, what is it that must be done to give a light of hope to the barrier that threatens the socio-economic horizon of Africa?* (Number 8).

### • **Ingrid Betancourt**

I know that at first glance this does not seem to be a Lasalian icon, but her stance toward her children seems to me to be deeply significant, charged as it is with that love filled with tenderness which the Founder asks us to have towards

our disciples. This is the reason I place it here as an inspirational icon for us of the power of love. I have been very impressed by the statements made by Ingrid Betancourt, after recovering her freedom, but also by the letters she managed to send during her captivity. Furthermore, her explicit and repeated references to Christian faith, about the power of prayer, her filial recourse to Mary, as an inspirational force that gave her the courage to overcome enormous difficulty, all seem to me to be a model of a society which in many parts of the world corners these values in a supposedly private area. I was also moved by the stance of the two children after their mother was freed.

In the May 2008 issue of the *Unánimes* magazine from the District of Bilbao, there are some extracts from some of the messages sent by Ingrid during her captivity. After writing that *the memory of my children sustained me*, she sent a word to each of them. She wrote to her daughter Melanie: *My springtime sun, my princess of the constellation Cisne, whom I adore, I want to say to you that I am the proudest mother on earth and if I had to die today, I would be satisfied with life, giving thanks to God for my children.* She wrote to her 18-year old son Laurence, whom she had left when he was only 12 years old: *My angel of peace, my king of blue water, my spring of joy. Everything that comes to me from you is balsam for my soul, all of it calms me down, all of it give me pleasure.* She then makes the following educational reflection: *Not only because of what is learned intellectually, but through human experience, the people around nourish one emotionally in order to have more control each day over oneself and, spiritually, to mold a greater character of service to others, where the ego is reduced to its min-*

*imal expression and one grows in humility and moral strength. This is what it means to live, to grow in order to serve.*

These statements are all the more impressive since they were written six years after having begun the nightmare of her captivity, and at the same time she wrote: *Life here is not life, it is dismal waste of time: I live or I survive in a hammock suspended between two poles...Here nothing is your own, nothing is lasting, incertitude and deprivation are the only constants...*

No doubt we are all aware of the statements she made after her release, because of the great media coverage. With her freedom came the ability to smile, to pardon her torturers, to thank her liberators, and above all her call to not forget those who are still in captivity. There is no doubt that all these expressions were motivated by a great love. We can recall the words of Victor Frankl, as he faced a similar personal experience: *One thought left me paralyzed: for the first time in my life I understood the truth that so many poets have affirmed in their writing and which proclaims the ultimate wisdom of so many thinkers. Truth: that love is the ultimate and the greatest goal to which a human being can aspire. It was then that I understood the meaning of the great number of secrets that poetry, human thought and belief try to communicate: man's salvation is achieved in love and through love (Man's Search for Meaning).*

Might this statement be for us a call to update what the Rule of 1718 had asked of us: *Love your students tenderly* (Chapter 7: 13), and to make real in our lives what the Founder told us: *The more tenderness you have for the members of Jesus Christ*

*and of the Church who are entrusted to you, the more God will produce in then the wonderful effects of his grace* (Meditation 134.2). Love, which cannot be reduced to our relationship with young people, but which also has to characterize all our relationships, beginning with those with our Brothers. Again the Founder, who suggests this with his own example when he wrote his final letter to Brother Gabriel Drolin in 1716: *I assure you that I have great tenderness and affection for you and often pray to God for you...I have been greatly encouraged by your last letter, and the assurance of your wholehearted affection gives me much joy* (Letter 32).

### **Conclusion: God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts (Galatians 4: 6)**

In Meditation 195 the Founder speaks to us repeatedly about the Spirit of Jesus Christ which should animate our ministry and so he asks us *to give ourselves frequently to the Spirit of our Lord to act in your work only under his influence, so that our own spirit may have no part in it* (Meditation 195.2) and that our teaching *be given life by his Spirit and draw all their power from him* (Meditation 195.3).

The Father and the Kingdom were the two reference points of Jesus, his two great loves. Driven by the Spirit, Jesus moved between these two coordinates which we should make our own. In this regard the Founder tells us: *It is also by the movement of the Spirit of God that all those who today proclaim the kingdom continue to speak* (Meditation 3.2). We want to be living signs of that Kingdom as Brothers consecrated to the Trinity.

We should, Brothers, let ourselves be led by the Spirit of God, to be faithful to his inspiration, to be instruments in favor of the young and his witnesses before all those with whom we relate; having the certitude that it is by loving that we can fully make him manifest, since He poured out completely God's love on us as Saint Paul tells us, and the first fruit of the Spirit, we also know from the apostle, is love (cf. Romans 5: 55; Galatians 5: 22).

This is why I invite you, as we conclude these reflections, to ask the Spirit to transform us in Jesus, with the certainty that *to know Jesus Christ by faith is our joy; to follow him is a grace, and to transmit this treasure to others is an assignment which the Lord, when he called us and chose us, has entrusted to us. With eyes illuminated by the light of the risen Jesus Christ, we can and we want to contemplate the world, history, our people...and each person* (Aparecida Conference, number 18).

To help us in this task, I propose a prayer that was sent to me this year for the Feast of Pentecost, by Father Ángel García Zamorano, a Missionary of the Sacred Heart and a friend of mine from Guatemala:

Come, Divine Spirit  
let me be molded like Jesus.  
Renew me, strengthen me, change me,  
to be, think, and to live like Him.

Purify my *eyes* to see you  
in everything good and beautiful,  
in joy and in sorrow,  
where there is hope and a thirst for freedom.

Open my *ears* to hear you  
in the muffled clamor of the poor,  
in the stifled cries of the excluded,  
there where your Spirit emerges.

Give me *hands* to work  
in order to serve those in need,  
and to unite them with those who dream  
and who occupy themselves  
in forging another possible world and Church.

Revive my *feet* so that  
I do not grow tired in seeking you,  
as I move in your direction,  
and "*do good things.*"

Heal my *heart* to feel you,  
to be moved by the sorrow of others,  
and to discover your silent presence  
where there is love and solidarity.  
Transformed, I freely choose  
to make the Kingdom present,  
animated by the same "spirit"  
that animated Jesus. Amen

Fraternally in De La Salle,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Bro. Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'B' and 'E'.

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría  
Superior General







