

## **The Prophetic Stance of Association for Mission**

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, Superior General, *Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, Rome, Italy*

***"Widen the space of your tent,  
Stretch out your hangings freely.  
Lengthen your ropes, make your pegs firm;  
For you will burst out to right and to left,  
Your race will take possession of the nations,  
And people the abandoned cities."*(Isaiah 54:2-3)**

The Jerusalem Bible version

I want to begin with this quote from Isaiah, which speaks of expansion and the future, because it seems to me that after these two weeks of deep reflection on association, the time has come to take action and to shed light on the path to take.

At this point, we must look honestly towards the future. Since the year 2000, when I began my ministry of animating the Institute, I have frequently insisted on the need for us to be converted towards the future. This is essential at this new period in the life of the Lasallian mission – a mission that the Lord in His goodness has entrusted to us, to forge into reality, the project of salvation and universal love, which in our case, is oriented primarily towards the poor, the unloved, the excluded and the disoriented youth of our world.

To "convert ourselves towards the future" is to believe that God continues to will the salvation of all, and that He has chosen us in His mysterious ways, as instruments of salvation for the young. This is what gave, and continues to give, full meaning to our association, as you have seen in the past two weeks. It is interesting to observe that our last two General Chapters and the International Assembly have always linked association with the educational service of the poor, just as our Founder and the first brothers did at the beginning of our Institute.

Of course, this hope must come from a deep act of Faith, because what today's society shows us does not bring forth optimism and therefore does not engender hope. We are living at a difficult time in human history, with so many uncertainties and insecurities. Not long ago, I was reading in the *Corriere della Sera* -- one of the major Italian newspapers -- that in the past, the older generations after World War II were very optimistic, and put up with things because they were convinced that their children would live in a better world and would have greater opportunities than they themselves had had. This gave a certain dynamic impetus to their lives. Today, the majority of parents see with some trepidation what awaits their children, and many think that what the children will have in their lives will be worse than what they ever had in their own lives, because confronted with the multitudinous problems that the children will encounter, there seem to be no glimpses of the way out. And they have lost faith in almost all the institutions. It is a rather depressing picture.

But, we cannot not have hope, and we need to think of “widening the space of our tents.” Because our hope need not be based on such signs; our hope needs to be anchored on God. A “*God who wills that all be saved and come to the knowledge of truth,*” as our holy Founder often reminds us, which gave birth to the Institute and to the Lasallian Mission.

As St Paul says: *we must hope beyond hope* (Rom 4:18) because ours is *a hope that does not deceive* (cf. Rom 5:5), for it is neither based on human weakness nor the incertitude of knowledge but on the action of God. That is why I believe that we can speak of the prophetic character of our association, which today “widens our tents”, because it is an act of faith in the salvific action of God, and in the future of our mission, motivated by a great love and nourished by an invincible hope.

*“To live in hope is to have confidence in God and to persevere with fidelity in the faith. To hope is to have the capacity to see, even when our eyes do not see. It is to recover our capacity to dream of a better world for all; it is to question the structures and the inhuman ideologies which leave human beings wretched and miserable, and (it is) to collaborate actively so that a new and liberated world is born. To hope is to discover and to take in every day, the power of the life of the Risen Christ, who makes this world new again, with the power of the Holy Spirit.”*

(Silvio José Báez, OCD)

Our association for the service of the poor is a prophetic word. For 300 years, the Brothers have lived this almost exclusively. But today, with the invitation that Vatican II has offered for all the baptized to participate fully in the mission, the new interpretation of the charism as a gift of the Spirit to the Church is that it can be lived in different ways according to each one’s vocation. The wonderful process we have lived within this new understanding, at the level of the Lasallian Family, is reflected in Circular 461: *Associated for the Lasallian mission...an act of hope*. This makes us lead agents in a new reality and opens up to us a new path which I do not hesitate to call prophetic.

To deepen these ideas, I would like to reflect on what I think are three fundamental points:

1. What do we understand by a “Prophetic Stance”?
2. What do we mean by Association?
3. The Prophetic Stance of Association: Brothers and Lay Partners United for the Mission.

### **1. What do we understand by a “Prophetic Stance”?**

This year my Christmas Pastoral Letter to the Brothers is entitled, “*Consecrated by the Trinitarian God: As a Prophetic Community of Brothers Passionate for God and for the Poor*”. In my sharing today, I would like to refer to my letter about the prophetic dimension of our Association. Because I think the call to prophetism is a call for all the members of our Family. Thus, in one section of my letter, I speak of a shared Prophetic Stance, since, as Vatican II affirms, the prophetic dimension is a patrimony of the entire People of God, without exception. (Cf. LG 12, LG 35)

But what does it mean “to be a Prophet?” To answer this question, it seems to me that it would be enlightening to reflect on the prophets of Israel. What immediately comes to mind is that when God calls someone to a prophetic mission, God consecrates that person then sends him/her forth. We see this in the vocations of Elijah, of Amos, and even more clearly, in those of Isaiah

and Jeremiah. In fact, the prophets have been imbued with a double passion: the passion for God and the passion for God's people. The passion for the God who consecrates and sends them as the ones who proclaim His message, and the passion for the people to whom they are directed, especially towards the poor and exploited, with whom they identify and whom they love deeply. Passion for God, and passion for the youth is also the invitation of our Founder, when he presents to us as a model the prophet Elijah in the latter's zeal for the Lord of hosts, and in his zeal for the sons of Israel, [which the Founder translates to us as zeal for the glory of God and zeal for the children entrusted to us, and who wishes that we live ever faithful to the covenant which God has established (Cf. Med. 202.1)]. The central point of a prophetic stance is neither ritual nor cult but rather truth, justice, and mercy. These should be the central point of our association.

#### • **Prophets of the God revealed by Jesus**

The experience of God as Father is at the heart of the Gospel. Jesus identified with the Father's Will, and this Will was no other than the Reign of God, in which all could hope for the fullness of joy. Indeed, it is truly about a Good News. Unfortunately we have not always been able to show this aspect of the face of God, and today there are still some who think with L. Feuerbach that *in order to enrich God, man must be impoverished; for God to be everything, man must be nothing*. This has nothing to do with the God revealed by Jesus Christ, who, as St. Paul says: *comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted (2 Cor 1:4)* Jesus intended His mission to be a service in which persons were foremost, and whom he accepted with tenderness and respect. Jesus did not only speak of God, but in revealing Him shared with us his own experience as a Son, and as the actual presence of God in history. In our association, persons must be the priority.

#### • **Prophets of Fraternity**

Precisely for the reason that in the Gospel, human relationships must reflect the face of God, our fraternal association constitutes one of the elements in which our prophetic dimension must clearly be manifest. But this (fraternal association) should also manifest itself because in today's world, we live a huge crisis at the level of the family -- a crisis which often expresses itself in loneliness and in an absence for many young people of any group with which to connect. That is why everywhere, especially among the young, the need to feel accepted, appreciated, and listened to by authentic models in life continues to increase. All of us must feel as brothers and sisters among ourselves and with the young whom we educate. Rather than consider ourselves as masters who from on high dispense truths, we must feel as Brothers, who accompany young people in their personal quests and concerns, as their older brothers and sisters.

#### • **Prophets of the Word**

The ministry of the Word is essential in the vocation of a Prophet, and there is always a link between the prophet and the Word of God which he must communicate. Yahweh touches the mouth of Jeremiah, a burning ember purifies the lips of Isaiah, Ezekiel eats a scroll that contains the message of God... The prophet is the man of the Word, in which God reveals Himself and his plan of salvation as well. Certainly, we have all experienced the transformative power of the Word in our existential journey and we must thank our Founder for making the Word central in

our spiritual and apostolic life. It is a Word which we are invited to make personal in our lives, by being one with what we teach.

### • **Prophets of the Poor**

We have the privilege of having been born for the poor. Hence, the reality of our present society cannot leave us indifferent when we know, for example, that every three seconds, somewhere on our planet, a child dies. We cannot close our eyes to the fact that today, they have begun to refer to the so-called *lost generation*, when referring to the jobless youth. We cannot look on with indifference when we see immigration laws becoming tougher and on many occasions, ignoring some basic human rights. Nor can we remain indifferent when we learn that hunger is increasing in the world and that wars and terrorism continue to create victims and that the numbers of the excluded are increasing. Nor can we just pass by and slip through the sidelines in the face of so many young people who find no meaning in their lives and who live in loneliness. Our association should make us creative about finding answers to the needs of the young who are poor. That was the call made to us during the International Assembly for the Mission and Lasallian Association in 2006 (Cf. Orientación Fundamental nº 5).

### • **Prophets of Humanity**

We can qualify the crisis we are living today as a crisis of humanity, because it impoverishes the reality of the human being when it reduces the latter to just one of its elements: i.e., self-realization, which is rooted in the ego, and rooted in competition, leaving by the wayside the aspect of relationships based on the “We” (and not the “I”) and on solidarity. As prophets who deeply love our young people and our world, one of our chief missions is to work so that those two fundamental elements of being human can be lived in a balanced way.

*How do we define the quality of our institutions or the success of our apostolic undertakings? If we follow the culture of the business world, we shall fall into the web of their values and their idols: efficiency, financial profit, targets attained, market quotas. This entire framework knows absolutely nothing of the wisdom of the Beatitudes. It functions in view of efficiency and not of ultimate productiveness.*

*Ciro Garcia*

### • **Prophets of the Reign of God**

#### **This means that we are called to**

**Proclaim:** Not only with words but above all, with our lives, the unconditional love of God and his plan of universal salvation for humanity. The Good News of God as Father-Mother and of ourselves as all brothers and sisters to one another.

**Denounce:** All that opposes the Divine Plan. Like the prophets, denouncing unjust relationships with the poor and false relationship with God through meaningless cultic practices. A denunciation that does not aim to punish but to convert.

**Discern:** The principal characteristic of Lasallian discernment is that its very center is reality, known not only in its outward appearances, but in its deepest essences as well, with the eyes of faith, with the eyes of God, and that this same reality should lead us to a collective discernment of God’s Plan for the salvation of youth.

**Intercede:** The prophet is always recognised by his great power to intercede. We can recall the example of Elijah, but perhaps the most moving example is that of Jeremiah, when although he felt persecuted and rejected by the people, he interceded for them: *But thou, O Lord, are in our midst, we are called in your Name; do not abandon us!* (Jer 14:9) We too are called to be intercessors before God for the children and young people whom He has confided to our care and for whom we have become associated.

## **2. What do we mean by Association?**

I will not dwell long on this matter, since it has been well reflected on sufficiently by you in the last two weeks and you have also been able to study the Circular on Association. I would just like to highlight a few salient points which allow us to see even better the prophetic character of our association in the Church.

The Founder and the first Brothers lived in the period of a Counter-Reformation Church and hence, a defensive Church, where greater emphasis was placed on institutional, rather than community, matters, resulting in the predominance of the hierarchical aspects of the Church. But the proximity of the poor and the work with the first schoolmasters led the Founder to intuit a servant Church from the perspective of a community ministry. On the other hand, his familiarity with the writings of St. Paul, especially seen in the Meditations for the Time of Retreat, led him to a mystical vision of a servant Church in which the Brothers, with their lay vocation are *ministers of God, and transmitters of His mysteries, ambassadors of Jesus Christ, and builders of the church*. Most certainly, this was a prophetic word for the Church of his time. Further, this vision also anticipated some of the intuitions of Vatican II.

Today, we find ourselves facing a very similar situation in the process of association which we Brothers and lay colleagues are living in a Church as People of God and Church as Communion, travelling as pilgrims on earth, in which we also feel called and sent, like the prophets, to accomplish *the work of God*, being instruments of salvation, brothers (and sisters), friends and guides of the young whom the Lord has confided to us. That is why I consider that the most important things in our association are not the structures, or the measures to ensure a certain efficiency, but a goal: answering the needs of the children and young people, especially the poor. What matters most are persons. This is the concrete way we give glory to God, the God of Jesus Christ, who wills that all be saved and have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10) This is the prophetic witness of our association.

## **3. The Prophetic Stance of Association: Brothers and Lay Persons United for the Mission.**

*On the shores of another sea, a potter settles down during his later years. His eyes become dimmed, his hands tremble and the moment to say good-bye has arrived. Then the initiation ceremony begins; the old potter offers to the young potter his best piece of work. That is what is required by the tradition of the American Indians of the Northeast; the artist who is retiring hands over his master-piece to the new artist. And the young potter does not keep this perfect piece of pottery to contemplate and admire; rather, he smashes it to the ground, breaks it into a thousand pieces, collects the broken pieces and puts them in his lump of clay.*

*Eduardo Galeano*

I think the quotation above can be viewed as a metaphor applicable to the process of association that we are living at this time. Brothers, laypeople and all other Lasallian members are asked to smash this marvelous vessel that we have inherited, pick up the pieces and mix them with our potter's clay, to live a new stage in the plan of salvation of the youth; and to live this moment as a special moment of our secular history, in which we must be open to the Spirit, *who like a fresh breeze blows where it pleases and we do not know where it comes from and where it is going (Jn 3:8)* This new model, which is born as a response to the plan of universal salvation and to our vocation of being instruments for this salvation of the young, especially the poor and the most rejected among them, is a model lived together within the Church as People of God and Church as Communion. This is certainly a prophetic word that we are called to proclaim and give witness to, and a word that may more easily reach even those who feel marginalized, or alienated, from the institutional Church.

What can this mean for Brothers in the light of our vow of Association read in the prophetic mode?

Personally I think that the Founder, wishing to answer God's Will in his regard, had to offer to the work of God, service that consisted in "the establishment and guidance" of a community, made up of persons freely associated by God, for the service of the poor and abandoned youth, and constantly inspired by turning to the living God and to the work and glory of God and by the lived experience of fraternity. That was the origin of our vow of association for the educational service of the poor that, thanks to the decision of our last General Chapter and its ratification by the Church, has been restored as our first Vow. We can thus talk of the centrality of this vow for us today, just as it was central for the Founder and the first Brothers. Therefore, in the light of this vow, we must read the meaning of our other vows, as a definitive denunciation of the idols of the system, in the three most dominant areas of human life: economics, politics, and the erotico-cultural.

In economic matters, our *vow of poverty* should denounce the absolute value that our consumerist society gives to money. Poverty chooses the person as the most valuable and keeps material things in their proper place. That is why in his own era, St. Vincent de Paul affirmed: "*I cease being poor once things are more important for me than persons.*"

Our vow of poverty has to do with the coming of the Reign of God. The service of the poor does not flow from some generosity added to the goal of the vow of poverty; it is an integral part of it. Living in poverty means, in the positive sense, to feel captivated and possessed by the desire for God and to spend oneself totally so that "*his Kingdom may come,*" especially among those who most await it and among its intended primary beneficiaries: the disinherited and the marginalized. To be prophets of the poor is to forge history together with them, to free them from their alienating situation, to give them hope and liberty, to announce to them the salvific message of Jesus, from within, aware that "what is not taken up is not saved". That is why we are associated as Brothers.

In the area of politics, our vow of obedience relativizes power and opts for the service of our brothers and sisters, in accordance with God's salvific project. As we know, one of the key characteristics of the prophetic mission was to respond faithfully to God's plan, to make it

present again, and to give it new dynamism. This is also our mission, which we express especially through our vow of obedience. Like Jesus, we have in our vow, two poles that attract: the Father and the Reign of God. To forge the will of God into reality is to commit ourselves actively in the construction of the Kingdom. God's plan is a plan for the integral liberation of all people; it is a plan of total love for humankind, beginning with the marginalized and the underprivileged and extending to all humanity. This is also why we are associated as Brothers.

In the erotico-cultural area, our vow of chastity denounces partiality, which separates sex from love, and makes us turn to the love of Christ, who is present in every human face, especially in the poor (cf R.5). This *vow of chastity* is a prophetic word of fraternity, because by loving Jesus profoundly, we open our hearts to the world. No one is left outside. In a world that creates boundaries which exclude immigrants; in a world where the circles of relations are increasingly smaller; in a world where a culture of control reigns – our unconditional and welcoming love for all is one of the best ways of showing the face of God and His universal plan of salvation. By our chastity, we have to work in such a way that in human relations, we can move from separation, division, hate or indifference into union, fraternity, love and concern for others. This is also why we associate.

In the beginnings of our Institute, gratuity was part of our name: Brothers of the Christian and Gratuitous Schools. It was a gratuity that surely had economic connotations, but it also involved an attitude of the spirit, which we should not lose in our lives. We have reinforced that gratuity for most of the history of the Institute with our *vow of stability*, one of the first three vows professed by the first Brothers and which to this day, constitutes our fifth vow. We commit ourselves to remain in the Institute not for the economic benefits or for other intellectual, spiritual or whatever opportunities the Institute could give us. We vow to remain in the Institute because, freely called by God, we would like to glorify Him through the educational service and evangelization that He has entrusted to us. A service that we ought to live out in absolute gratuity because we too have received His gift in absolute gratuity. *You have received freely, so give freely also* (Mt 10:8). For this also, we associate.

This is the prophetic, “rebellious” value of our consecration. Denunciation, renunciation, proclamation. Through our five vows, we humbly but fearlessly oppose five fundamental options for the idols of the system: individualism, money, sex, and a betrayal or lack of a lasting and radical commitment. We commit to a shared project lived fraternally for the poor. (Association for the educational service of the poor). We commit to people, especially to the young whose dignity is ignored. (Poverty). We commit to service for all, but especially to projects that seek, through education, to respond to the needs of many young people who continue to be excluded from social benefits (Obedience). We commit to love, certainly universal, but more intense, especially towards the young who are unloved (Chastity). We commit to gratuity and fidelity, entrusting our lives fully and not bound by time or by other commitments (Stability).

- And for the lay partners: what type of prophetic stance?

*Christ, the great Prophet, who proclaimed the Reign of God by the witness of His life and the power of His Word, completed his prophetic mission up to the fullest manifestation of glory, not only through the hierarchy teaching in His name and with His power, but also through laypeople whom He consequently constituted as His witnesses; and He gave them the gift of faith and the power of the word, (cf. Hch 2, 17-18, Ap 19,10) so that the*

*virtue of the Gospel should shine in the daily life, both of the family and of society. (LG 35)*

Firstly, the prophetic stance in one's life stems from a clear Lasallian identity, which comes from a recognition of a gratuitous call of God which sends one to a mission, fed by a double passion for God and for the young, especially those farthest from salvation.

I would like to emphasize that the call is gratuitous and presupposes both preparation and a response. Hence, the importance of formation. This is not only about intellectual formation, but about a formative process which helps one to take on a Lasallian identity (through both narrative and affective forms), to deepen one's spirituality, to identify oneself with the mission, and to cultivate the sense of belonging to a community for the human and Christian education of youth.

A very important prophetic word comes from the growing number of women in the Lasallian association. Their presence and the historical role they play will doubtless help us build a more human and more fraternal/sisterly society, and change our mental frameworks to situate us in history in a different way, to reorganize our social, political, religious and economic life in a more intuitive and affective manner.

I think it is also very important to note that our presence, small in some parts, gives us the opportunity to direct ourselves towards, and to work arm in arm with, children and youth of various cultures and religions. I think this is one of the most beautiful experiences of the universal prophetic stance that we are called to live today. This is not only about a mission *ad gentes* but rather, about a mission *inter gentes*, in which what is most important are a) open, trusting and calm dialogue, b) mutual respect and c) the effort to work together in a more just and fraternal world.

It is not enough to accept religious and cultural pluralities and to be tolerant of these. There is something even more important, as Cardinal Martini tells us in presenting to us a challenge which he considers the most urgent of our civilization:

*Learn to live together as different but sharing the same geographical and social territory, learn to live together without destroying ourselves, without making ghettos among ourselves, without devaluing each other, or looking at each other as enemies or with mere toleration for one another. We have to do more, encouraging one another and helping one another so that everyone is helped to answer God's individual call to each one: Muslim, Hindu, Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant. This is very difficult, and perhaps it is the chief problem of today and tomorrow.*

And for Brothers and Lay Partners?

I have one recommendation. Do not be afraid of the structures of the new association in its various levels, such as in the Council and Assembly for the Lasallian educational mission. And do not reduce these structures to the purely functional. They should be structures that allow us to proclaim the prophetic word and more, that allow us to perform prophetic acts, responding creatively to the problems that the youth face today, especially the youth who are poor, the less loved, those who have more learning difficulties, those marginalized, and those forgotten. Let us hope that these structures will allow us **to see** the world with God's eyes, full of compassion and



tenderness; **to listen** with God's ears, to the voice, to the cries, to the anguished wailing of the people; **to feel** with the heart of God, and his innermost depths of mercy, and then and only then, **to proclaim** the word of God – a word of conversion and solidarity capable of transforming reality.

## Conclusion

I want to end these reflections by sharing with you what I also said to the Brothers in my Pastoral Letter, recalling the words of one of our modern day prophets, some time before he was murdered. *We must see with eyes wide open and feet firmly set on the ground, but with the heart also full of the Gospel and full of God.* (Monsignor Oscar Romero, 27 August 1978)

To have wide-open eyes and hearts aflame is what our last General Chapter also asked of us. And the call to have wide-open eyes makes us realize that we live at a difficult time in human history, as I have already pointed out earlier, and at a delicate moment in the life of the Church. We may have all noticed this, especially during the past year. Personally, I don't think this is a negative moment, but rather, a moment of grace. The prophets worked in similar situations and in times of crisis. The process of association which we are living should be for us a fresh opportunity and should awaken in us a huge amount of creativity. As Einstein said:

*We don't expect things to change if we always do the same thing. A crisis is the greatest blessing that can happen to persons and countries because a crisis brings progress. Creativity is born of anguish, just as day follows the dark night. It is crisis that gives birth to inventiveness, discoveries, the great strategies. Without crises, there are no challenges; without challenges, life is a routine, a slow agony. Without crisis, there is no merit. It is in crisis that the best of each person blooms, because without crisis, every wind is a mere caress.*

The example of the process lived by Elijah, as Dolores Aleixandre says, can be a paradigm for our association. Just like him, we are invited to be constantly on the move:

- *From high places to low places:* to direct the king to go and visit the poor widow, from the altar to the vineyard, from the top of the mountain to places where injustice thrives
- *From sufficiency to receptivity:* The route of Elijah through the desert, his sleeping under the bush and his complaining of fatigue: his example tells us to get up and continue walking.
- *From orders to requests:* from attitudes of power to stages of reciprocity, of receiving, of learning
- *From triumph to the experience of limits:* these limits tell us that we are in a time of Grace because what is born of poverty will be linked to the Gospel
- *From being the main actor to being in the background:* When Elijah feels alone, he learns from God that there exist many people who are also faithful to God.
- *From a God of the hurricane to the God of Silence:* Silence evokes the mystical.... our life, loaded with words and documents, needs more than the silence.

I end just as I began, inviting you all to live in hope because we are certain, as St. Paul says, that God who began the work, will bring it to a good end.