

## **With Our Eyes Fixed on the Future**

Robert Schieler, FSC<sup>2</sup>

In one of our morning prayer-services last week, we were reminded of the words from our Rule of 1718 on the topic of "regularity":

Those who live in a Community should, above all else, love God and next their neighbor because these are the principal commandments given to us by God.<sup>3</sup>

In my conversations with you and during my visits to your Districts and Delegations, I have witnessed the love you have for our Brothers and our Lasallian Partners. You are "good shepherds" providing "pastoral care." Our Brothers and Partners are grateful to you.

Thank you for your presence at this important gathering. I am aware that the many obligations you have in your respective Districts and Delegations demand a great amount of your time. The General Councilors and I are most grateful that you honored our request and made it a priority to participate in these sessions in which we have begun to assess our response to the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter. Our reflections and conversations will certainly benefit the 2018 Intercapitular Meeting.<sup>4</sup>

In *Circular 470*, the General Council presented our vision:

Compelled by pressing needs, enlightened by the Gospel, inspired by our living memory, we transform lives through quality education for all.<sup>5</sup>

Based on that vision and with eyes of faith, we have considered our present moment, and with our vision fixed on the future, evaluated the ongoing realization of our objectives and strategies. As leaders of our Districts and Delegations, I concur, with my predecessors, "with the help of God we have to participate [continuously and] constructively in the creation of our future." Your presence here and your valuable contributions are helping us collectively to create our future.

You have highlighted the importance of conversation and dialogue at every level. Conversations broaden our views and our horizons; we have experienced this during our time together here. We shared examples of both existing and planned Beyond the Border initiatives. It is important to recognize that these are more than just particular projects of Districts, Regions, and the Institute. These are steps on the journey of our conversion to the poor, and they are just as important as the steps we are taking in the Lasallian formation of our Partners in our existing and traditional educational communities.

Some of you noted the importance of sharing information as a way to increase our knowledge of the Institute. The flow of information both to and from the Center of the Institute facilitates communication and the exercise of our ministry of pastoral leadership. Your Annual Reports<sup>6</sup> provide the General Council and me with insights into your Districts and Delegations; these insights permit us to serve you better. Our understanding of your realities depends, in part, on the prompt reception of complete reports.

The Council and I, for our part, send you materials designed to stimulate conversation and reflection about our life and ministry. We appreciate your efforts to provide times and structures for Brothers and Partners to consider seriously documents coming from the Center of the Institute. In this regard we are pleased to know that many Districts and ministries are using the annual Lasallian Reflections, which are based on sub-themes found in *Circular 470*.

You will recall that my first Pastoral Letter<sup>7</sup> spoke of our need to be conversant with trends that are impacting our world and Institute.

A trend worthy of attention is one that deeply embeds itself and slowly gains momentum over a long period of time; it has a wide impact irrespective of ideologies; it can have both explanatory and predictive power providing context and indicating a possible direction.<sup>8</sup>

As I try to understand both our Institute today and some of the emerging themes you identified – reflecting on where we may be going – I see four trends that might meet this criterion: (a) the formation of Partners for our shared Lasallian charism; (b) association for the educational service of the poor; (c) the recovery of the centrality of our vow of association; and (d) personal transformation.

The first trend that has embedded itself in our Lasallian culture and slowly gained momentum is the incorporation of our Partners in the Lasallian mission. And what a blessing this is! We have heard repeatedly, during these days, of the energy created when Partners are involved in our Assemblies and meetings. This trend began with the acknowledgment of the vocation of the laity by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and our own 39<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (1966-1967). We witnessed an evolution from the formal recognition of *Signum Fidei*<sup>9</sup> at the General Chapter of 1976 to the idea of “shared mission” in the Rule of 1987.<sup>10</sup> We see further development with the first lay participation at the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter of 1993 and the publication of the General Council’s document on Shared Mission in 1997.<sup>11</sup> As we continue, we observe in 2000 the creation of Regional and District Mission Councils and the 1<sup>st</sup> International Mission Assembly in 2006. Along with these, of course, are Young Lasallian and Lasallian Volunteer movements, greater presence of Partners in the International Association of La Salle Universities (IALU), and a host of other local initiatives of Lasallian association and formation.

The second trend is our association for the educational service of the poor. This trend is in fidelity to the origins and purpose of our Institute. As the 1967 Declaration reminded us:

All the organs of government, of decision making, or of dialogue in the Institute are equally obligated to enter into this conversion to the poor, in such a way that all the

decisions taken and the structures put in place will reflect in fact the truth of our return to the poor.<sup>12</sup>

Twenty years later, in their 1986 message to the Brothers, the delegates of the 41<sup>st</sup> General Chapter said:

Our conversion will not be true if we do not commit ourselves more to the poor. In this realm, it will not suffice for us to encourage works, which welcome all types of marginalized and delinquent populations. In addition to the imperative need to expand this kind of work to the limit of our possibilities, the Institute's first obligation continues to be to invent a new type of school for the growing number of abandoned young people.<sup>13</sup>

Brothers, let us redouble our energy and creativity to this founding purpose of the Institute.

The third trend developing over the past half century is the recovery of our vow of association for the educational service of the poor. In his CIL presentations,<sup>14</sup> former General Councilor Brother Patrice Marey, FSC,<sup>15</sup> recalled that a general opinion among the delegates to the 1966-1967 General Chapter of renewal was that our two specific vows lacked meaning and should be done away with! However, some of the delegates disagreed and wanted to emphasize the vow of association. Ultimately, it was judged premature to do so at the time; rather, it was considered "better to wait for the Institute as a whole to show a certain amount of support for the idea" of restoring our vow of association. That time finally arrived during the last two General Chapters.

We must be very conscious of the integral link of our consecration to our life in community and our life of prayer. Article #12 in the *Rule* is fundamental. Each Brother has the personal responsibility to integrate in his person, his consecration, his mission, and his life in community.<sup>16</sup> This issue of integration was also highlighted this week. Although we all have the task of accompanying one another in this regard, this especially involves our formators and you and me as leaders.

The fourth trend is our own transformation or going beyond our personal borders to places that challenge our comfort zone. As leaders, we should frequently ask ourselves if our vocation and our formation programs are leading us to Jesus and a decision in favor of him and his Reign. Are our formation programs forming young men in their fundamental relationships with God, with others, and with themselves? Do we facilitate an encounter between the young men and the poor – their true guides to Jesus and his Reign?

What I shared last year in my Pastoral Letter<sup>17</sup> about transformation applies to our formation programs as well.

To be transformed, first we must meet people who are different, not our family, friends, and neighbors who are like us.<sup>18</sup>

This involves crossing borders and experiencing life on the peripheries. Moving to new environments, whether within our own Districts or beyond, may provide the impulse for the more fundamental transformation that Saint John Baptist de La Salle urged:

The change that must be wrought in our case is an internal one. We must be completely transformed by the light and fullness of grace, and by the possession of God's Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

When we speak of structures and re-structuring, the issue is not only about geography and institutions, but it is also about the "re-structuring" of human beings. One Brother suggested to me that one of our duties as pastoral leaders is to encourage the re-structuring of hearts.

I think the recognition of the vocation of the laity and their formation in the Lasallian charism, our recovery of the vow of association as central to our identity, and the renewed commitment of the educational service with the poor are all linked to our own transformation and are pointing us to a revitalized future, a future that is still to be revealed and that will more than likely be different from the present.

I am not a prophet, and I do not know what the future holds. However, as I contemplate the signs of our times and look back to the origins of our Institute, I see that the Founder is still inviting us to a new way of being Church. An historian of French church and society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has said:

De La Salle's creation was more radical than anything we have seen so far, since he refused to allow any of its members to be a priest. Its members would remain lay Brothers, despite the fact that they would renew the vows of religion every three years and would observe a strict rule and community life. What lay behind this reworking of existing models was determination to educate young boys from poor social groups . . . , insisting on using French as the language of instruction in subjects chosen essential for their practical value to their pupils. Such a dramatic departure from the educational practices of the earlier Orders and Congregations evidently calls for an equally startling break with some of their key features.<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Brothers, since the renewal General Chapter of 1966-1967, we have journeyed through two generations of change and commitment. Concerned about our survival and even more about the continuation of the mission, we steadfastly and consistently maintain a sense of purpose: our Lasallian association for mission. This sense of purpose inspires us to remain a vital force in our world and church. This sense of purpose still inspires young men to consider our way of life. They – like us in our youth – want to be part of something greater than themselves. May we encourage one another, our Brothers, and our Partners to make the gift of our vocation an exciting and rewarding option for young men.

Brothers, how often others see us more clearly than we see ourselves. In responding to the Second Vatican Council's call for religious Congregations to return to their original inspiration

and sources, a Jesuit priest in a keynote address earlier this year to a national Congress of Lasallian educators observed:

My own sense is that the entire Lasallian Family has done a remarkable job in the past four decades. The return to the original impulses of your founding revived a concern for the education of the economically marginalized, as well as new concerns for the poor in the Southern Hemisphere . . . .

Arguably the most impressive of the many ways in which the Lasallian Community took stock of itself and “adapted to the times” . . . was the expansion of precisely who was included in the Community itself. The proportion of Brothers involved in running the Lasallian schools dramatically shifted, with a much higher percentage of lay colleagues in the classroom and administration.<sup>21</sup>

He concluded his remarks with these words:

My best advice is that the Lasallian Community emulates the leadership of its Founder. The Lasallian Community is primed to take a leading role in that prophetic return [to its sources]. Why? Because you are a tradition built on a non-hierarchical understanding of church witness.<sup>22</sup>

Brothers, the vision we have for our Institute still has its time. It is pressing on to fulfillment and will not disappoint. It may be delayed, but it will surely come. It will not be late.<sup>23</sup> As men of hope and prayer, let us play our part in realizing the vision.

Thank you.

## Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered on 8 June 2016 as the closing address at a meeting of Brothers Visitor / Provincial, which was held at the FSC Casa Generalizia in Rome, Italy.

2. Brother Robert Schieler, FSC, was elected Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools at the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in 2014. He earned a doctorate in educational administration at the University of Pennsylvania.

3. “Rule of 1718” in *Rule and Foundational Documents* by John Baptist de La Salle (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), chapter 16, article 1 (page 68).

4. The Intercapitular Meeting of March 2018 is a regularly scheduled gathering of all of the Brothers Visitor / Provincial from around the world at the mid-point between two General Chapters (in this case, the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter of 2014 and the 46<sup>th</sup> General Chapter of 2021).

5. *Circular 470: Toward the Year 2021, Living Our Joyful Mission* (Rome, 2015).

6. The Brothers Visitor / Provincial are required to send a written Annual Report about their Districts / Provinces at the end of each calendar year to Brother Superior and General Council in Rome.

7. Brother Robert Schieler, FSC, *Pastoral Letter: The Vision Still Has Its Time . . . .* (Rome, 2014), pages 15-16.

8. John L. Allen, Jr., *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 9.3.

9. The *Signum Fidei Fraternity* is part of the Lasallian Family; and its members, who are adult lay Lasallians, are associated in small communities that associated with a Lasallian District / Province.

10. “A Shared Mission” is the heading found between articles #16 and #17 in *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987).

11. *The Lasallian Mission of Human & Christian Education: A Shared Mission* (Rome, 1997).

12. *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (Rome, 1967), #34.4.

13. *Circular 422: Documents of the 41<sup>st</sup> General Chapter* (Rome, 1986).

14. Centro Internazionale Lasalliano (FSC Casa Generalizia in Rome, Italy).

15. Brother Patrice Marey, FSC, (1933-1992) was an Assistant Superior General (1966-1976) and a General Councilor (1976-1986) of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. To learn something of his life, consult *Circular 434: Decease of Brother Patrice Maurice Marey* (Rome, 1992).

16. Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 2015), article #12

17. Brother Robert Schieler, FSC, *Pastoral Letter: A Gospel Adventure, Outside the Camp* (Rome, 2015), pages 28-31.

18. Jean Vanier, “In the Heart of the Poor” in *L’Osservatore Romano*, #22 (29 May 2015), page 13.

19. Meditation #152.2 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994).

20. Joseph Bergen, *Church, Society and Religious Change in France: 1580-1730* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), page 118.

21. Cf. Robert Massa, SJ, “The Lasallian Tradition and American Culture: What Is to Be Done?” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (2015), pages 35-51.

22. Cf. Robert Massa, SJ, “The Lasallian Tradition and American Culture: What Is to Be Done?” page 14.

23. Cf. *Habakkuk* 2:2-3.