
Being Brothers Today

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Presentation of the Document by Brother Superior General

In my first words as Superior to the 43rd General Chapter, I shared three certainties that encouraged me: the certainty that "the Lord guides and conducts history with wisdom and love," the certainty that "his presence is always close and is recognized above all in poor children and young people," and the certainty that "we have been called to participate in God's work." Along with these certainties that have encouraged me in my ministry with all of you, there is also the conviction that I have expressed since that time: "being a Brother is our greatest secret, our greatest strength, and our greatest treasure."

Being Brothers Today, the document that I am pleased to present to you, is one of the texts that we are writing with a view to the preparation of the 44th General Chapter in 2007. It is not only a text, but a process that invites us to look deeply at our certainties and our convictions about the mystery of being Brothers in the Church in the world today.

We make this document available to all the Brothers in the hope that it might serve to spark significant and sustained dialogue about what is most important in our being Brothers.

A Very Different Context from That in Which Emerged the Declaration (1966-1967)

There is no doubt that the *Declaration on the Brother in the World Today*³ constitutes one of the most important documents from the 39th General Chapter. That document also emerged from an interactive process that occurred between the two Chapter sessions, and especially during the second session. As it dealt with some problems relating to the vows, formation, the life of prayer or community life, it was noted that it lacked something like a *spinal column* that gave backbone to the tasks of the Chapter so that they could be structured and unified.

Among other issues, the Brothers back then wanted to clarify some points which to them seemed to be fundamental:

- what should be understood today by schools and by the poor?
- what apostolic tasks ought the Brother to assume?
- what was the meaning of religious consecration?
- what was the relationship between the Brother's apostolate and his employ?
- how to proclaim Jesus Christ to a heterogeneous audience?
- how to respond precisely to the calls of people in developing countries?

A Very Different Context Forty Years Later for the 44th General Chapter (2007)

Forty years later, we find ourselves in an Institute where many Brothers have lived courageously, sometimes painfully, this life journey of renewal that was proposed then. But we also find ourselves with a new generation that never experienced the previous situation, nor did they experience the changes introduced by that Chapter. Changes which in turn led us through subsequent General Chapters until reaching a new place which was recognized with great excitement by the Chapter of 2000.

It is from this new place that we Brothers, all of us, from yesterday and those from today, are called to think about what we understand by *Being Brothers Today*, starting from new questions and new realities that have emerged in this last forty years. In fact, the questions have changed; and today, among other things, we have to clarify some fundamental new points. Among others, we have to study the following:

- educational pressing needs in today's world and how to respond to them.
- the importance of the meaning of our Brothers' community, as our first association.
- the way to integrate today in our lives the constitutive elements of our vocation: consecration to God, community, and the educational and evangelizing service to young people, especially the poor and those who are at risk.
- the growing number of committed laity who participate in the educational mission and who are enthusiastic about the living spiritual tradition of the Institute with which they identify.
- associates who are already identified as such and those who are seeking new ways to be associated for mission.
- the creation of new structures for decision-making by Brothers and laity in the area of mission.
- pastoral ministry of vocations, the little visibility of the Brother's vocation in some local churches.
- the importance of community life that facilitates and supports an ongoing process of conversion among all the Brothers.
- support structures and mentoring for young Brothers.

In this context and with these and with other new questions, we are not seeking to define a new *spinal column* for our 44th General Chapter. But we do want the Brothers to have the opportunity, by means of an interactive process, to reflect on the mystery of our vocation and on the new role that our community, in terms of its being our first form of association, should have at the heart of the great Lasallian association for the educational service of the poor which we share with thousands and thousands of men and women on every continent.

Looking toward the 44th General Chapter, What Can This Document Contribute?

It is important to highlight what is different about this document in relation to the other documents that point to the General Chapter. In contrast to the reports that will reach the Chapter, such as those from the International Assembly,⁴ the *ad hoc* Committee on the *Rule*,⁵ the Intercapitular Meeting of Visitors,⁶ and the report of the Superior and his Council,⁷ this document is intended to

be a *working tool*, a text that is a witness and a sentinel which urges all Brothers to ask themselves about what it is that is most profound in their lives as Brothers.

The Brothers who worked on drawing up this document tried to respect the wishes of the 43rd General Chapter, facilitating an interactive process prior to the next General Chapter. In fact, this first draft was preceded by an interactive process that allowed the participation of a relatively small number of Brothers from every continent. The draft of those voices from five continents had no other purpose than that of causing an even broader interaction. First of all, among the Brothers in each District, Sub-District, or Delegation who will participate in the short CIL Session in 2006. Those Brothers will, in turn, prepare instruments for more interaction in all the Districts, Sub-Districts, and Delegations, so that before May 2007, all Brothers will have been able to read, react to, and enrich this text based on those meetings, to be integrated into the Capitular process.

The initial text that we propose today, therefore, is only the beginning of the telling of a story that will include the life story of all the Brothers. It is not a declaration of principles, nor does it represent a definition of the constitutive elements of our identity.

The Purpose of This Text

Since we are not seeking a new *Declaration*, this text ought not to be understood as a legislative text that will need to be studied with a view to legislate about our life. It is intended to be an inspiring and Gospel-based text that may stimulate a rich dialogue among the Brothers.

Just as the six Brothers who drew up this document entered into profound dialogue among themselves and with Brothers from the different Lasallian Regions, the Brothers who will participate in the 2006 CIL session are invited to participate in that dialogue of faith, sharing their experiences as Brothers, critically analyzing and confirming what the text has to say about being Brother in each continent.

During retreats, on days of recollection, during days of prayer, and at community and District meetings, the Brothers will be able to share what it is they experience as Brothers today, not only to enrich the descriptions of the five continental voices, but also that in prayer, in light of contemporary biblical icons that guide and organize our *being Brothers today*, they might encounter the source, ever new and refreshing, of the Gospel and of the life journey of our origins. That return to the sources of the Gospel and of the Founder should not only increase our conviction that the Spirit is made manifest in a very special way in the past, but that today also that same Spirit is leading us to new places we want to embrace with deep faith, passionate about God, the poor, and about young people.

The interactive process, then, is above all a process of community discernment that may help us to recognize where it is that the Spirit is leading us today.

In the past, we have been accustomed to legislative types of assemblies. Perhaps within the Institute we have less experience in the implementation of processes that involved community discernment. This is a privileged time in our history to open ourselves to the “inspiration and movement” of the Spirit, as Saint John Baptist de La Salle often said.

Toward the 44th General Chapter: The Relationship between This Working Document and the General Chapter

First of all, this community discernment, both critical and Gospel-based, ought to lead all of us not only to an awareness of the new promise and demands of our *being Brothers today*, but also see more clearly those factors that in our lives as Brothers give us more hope, those obstructions that we have to overcome, and the decisions that we should face for the purpose of permitting a reconfiguration of not only our personal lives as Brothers, but of our lives with our Brothers in community, and finally, of the community life of the Brothers in relation to the great Lasallian association.

This text, enriched in that way, could be the object of a deeper study at the General Chapter, including, of course, notes and observations of the capitulants that may emerge from the personal and community contributions, in the implementation of the interactive process throughout the Institute.

I ask the Lord that we might have the courage, the boldness, and the holiness that the Founder and the first Brothers had to face together the risks of the future with the certainty that it is the Lord who conducts history with wisdom and love, and who is present in our midst, associating us with his Work.

In the hope that this open and dynamic working document with accompany this interactive process of community discernment, and eventually culminate in the 44th General Chapter, I am

Yours in the Lord,

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría
Superior General

Introduction

Thousands of Stories of Brothers Today

We Brothers live very diverse stories in the world today. A young Brother who is completing his initial formation is sent to his first community where he works in a poor area of his country. A Brother at age 35, who somehow lost the passion for consecrated life, rediscovers new fire in an educational project that serves immigrant children. A middle-aged Brother lives his role with burning passion as a director of a ministry that works with children, young people, teachers, and catechists. A senior Brother continues his ministry in an educational project to support young volunteers and young Brothers. Thousands of stories. Stories of Brothers in community, in today's world, who live passionately the mystery of knowing that they have been called by the Father, and who walk with Jesus to make him present to children and young people who have been abandoned, faithfully following the incessant inspiration of the Spirit who consecrates them in the Church.

But in the Institute, other stories are lived that are very different. Stories of young Brothers who are discouraged and who are withering away in communities that are apathetic and without passion. Middle-aged Brothers who, tired and overworked, are motivated only by a vague awareness of professionalism. Senior Brothers who feel alone and betrayed. Brothers who leave the Institute discouraged or who are impassioned by a person or by another vision and place in the world or in the Church. Brothers who question themselves about the lack of new candidates for the community, or the growing increase of lay vocations, about the slow and irreversible aging of a community which in other times had an important role in the nation or in the city where it was established, about a source which seems to have dried up. In summary, others of us live stories that are very ambiguous: stories that run the gamut between *death* and *life*, stories that are overwhelmed by doubt and perplexity, but sometimes, too, stories of striking passion in favor of suffering men and women.

Why are our stories so diverse? Which are the variables that determined that one story may be a story of hope while another one becomes a story of despair or ambiguity?

In this working document we seek to reflect on our identity by telling our personal stories: the way they are unfolding, the way we want them to become in the future. What do we mean when we call ourselves Brothers?

Involved Together in a Process of Reflection

Brother Superior General and his Council wanted to create a process by which all Brothers, insofar as it is possible, could participate and interact with one another in a common reflection about what we understand by *being Brothers today*.

In naming the committee to design and carry out this process, care was taken to look for five Brothers from the different continents,⁸ and it was their task to begin a process of reflection that would be as interactive as possible, as requested by recommendations 37 and 38 of the 43rd General Chapter of 2000. A process that, from where Brothers are living now, would draw up a motivating and inspiring text. For its part, this text would not be an end in itself. We did not want to write a

new declaration in the style of the *Declaration* from the Chapter of 1966-1967. Neither was it our intention to search for definitions to determine new propositions and recommendations about our identity about which the next, the 44th General Chapter, will have to speak and legislate.

Toward the General Chapter: A Witness and a Sentinel

What we did want is that the text be like a *witness* that would speak the various forms in which the Brothers express their experience of being Brothers in the Church and in today's world. It would be like a *sentinel* that keeps vigil in the dark for the purpose of identifying the new language that is emerging among ourselves, new accents, new places where the Spirit is leading us in our history. We wanted to find new light and inspiration in the sources of the Gospel, as well as in biblical and contemporary images which could better open our daily lives to the transcendent mystery of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At the same time we wanted to recall those foundational images, in the journey of association made by De La Salle and his first Brothers, associated to live together and to proclaim the Gospel to the poor.

Furthermore, in light of the most recent theology of consecrated life in the Church and of shared mission with lay persons in light of Vatican Council II, as well as the centrality of the vow of association, we hoped to let Brothers today have their say. In this way, identifying together the biblical and Lasallian images that are bursting with living energy in our world and in the Church today, we should be able to give a reason for our hope.

We would try, therefore, to identify the shadows and the lights, the doubts and the new clues, the areas of our personal, community, Church, and professional lives that could demand study at the 44th General Chapter.

Our work, then, would conclude with the Chapter. Our text simply would reflect the process of reflection, searching, and sharing like a *witness* or a *cloud of witnesses*. It would point to the Chapter like a *sentinel*, to proclaim places where we believe the Spirit is leading us in this new millennium, and nothing more.

The Parts of This Document

With this perspective in mind, the committee proposed, first of all, to consult Brothers from each Lasallian Region, grouped as follows: Asia and the Pacific Rim, Africa and Madagascar, Europe and the Near East, North America and Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean. Their contributions make up the ***second part*** of this text: our present reality, the reality of being a Brother as we live it in the Church in the world of today. In the ***third part***, we direct our attention to our common roots, toward that which impassioned De La Salle along with his first associates, for the purpose of identifying what it was they understood about what it meant to be a Brother at the time of the foundation. Finally, in the ***fourth part***, the most interactive part of all since it is this part that will be developed with the contributions of many Brothers, we contrast the aspirations that we live in the present with the central values of our Gospel origins. This final section, therefore, will recommend a communal discernment process to be used by all the Brothers with a view of identifying our common horizon in the third millennium. Those three parts will be preceded by a ***first part*** that deals with the context in which our theological reflection starts.

The Context in Which We Ask Ourselves: What Does It Mean to “Be Brothers Today”?

Within a Process of Renewal

Inspired by the invitation of Vatican Council II, thousands of men and women in consecrated life began a daring and courageous journey toward conversion, based on what the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*⁹ identified as *adapted renewal*.

The Decree had already aimed at a “change of language” in order to understand consecrated life. Instead of accentuating the *search for perfection*, it focused on *perfect charity*, as the title of the Decree so clearly indicated. Instead of dogmatic, legislative, merely disciplinary language, it emphasized a biblical, Christological, pneumatological, ecclesiological, and apostolic background. It reaffirmed the value and the importance of consecrated life in the life of the Church, with its symbolic and prophetic role within. It left behind a negative anthropological view, looking toward the diverse cultures where we live so that corresponding adaptations could be made. The *adapted renewal* invited us to dream about a different type of consecrated life.

We Brothers, gathered together for the 39th General Chapter in 1966 and 1967, heard this call and accepted it.

Adapted Renewal in the Institute of the Brothers

How have we Brothers lived that invitation, and what are the results of that path of adapted renewal?

To respond to these questions, let us consider some statistics, first of all. One year before the proclamation of the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, in 1964, we were 16,755 Brothers. Some forty years later (as of September 2005), the statistics indicate that there are 5,067 Brothers with perpetual vows and 449 with temporary vows.

For those who would like to measure the results of the process of renewal in exclusively quantitative terms, the results would be decidedly negative. Even more so if you consider that the average age of the Brothers has risen to 64.2 years. In some Regions, the average age is 78.4, as in the case of Canada, or 76.5 in France, and 67.7 in USA/Toronto. There are, consequently, sectors in which we are not only dropping numerically, but we are aging rapidly.

The Success or Failure of Adapted Renewal?

Based on that numerical point of view, we are justified in wondering what it means to be Brothers in our context. How are we perceived in the Church and in society? Some may wonder about the future of congregations of lay Brothers such as ours. Is it true that something is definitely dying and that this process of death is irreversible?

On the other hand, we know that statistics and numbers do not say it all. There are other indicators of “vitality” that point to something new that is being born. There are communities in which Brothers are living an authentic spirituality, a life of consecration to God and to the poor.

Communities that become signs of God's presence in their own space and time, communities that awaken the hearts of their contemporaries, men and women.

In fact, one only has to have a glance at "MEL Bulletin #20," dedicated to the May 2004 Intercapitular Meeting of Visitors and entitled "The Educational Service of the Poor," to realize the incredible creativity and courage of educational works and of our educational mission on all continents, specifically in Asia and the Pacific Rim, in the USA and Canada, in Latin America and the Caribbean, in Africa as well as in Europe and the Near East.¹⁰ We can clearly find these signs of vitality in the numerous "islands of creativity," new responses to educational urgencies of today, such as those that appear in "MEL Bulletin #4" on "Lasallian Educational Innovation," that is to say, those places and experiences that are living again a "foundational" experience, Brothers and lay people who are living again a "re-foundational" experience in today's world,¹¹ such as those cited in "MEL Bulletin #16" on "Lasallian Presence" in the world.¹²

Another obvious sign of vitality is the growing number of laity who discover in the Lasallian network the meaning of a lay vocation as teachers, the richness of fraternal life in our projects, and in the evangelizing mission that we share by educational service. In practically all Regions of the world there are centers of Lasallian formation, in which Brothers and lay persons together discover De La Salle's legacy, learning to drink from our own spring, to live the Gospel in our employ, supported by a fraternal community that sustains us.

See "MEL Bulletin #2: Lasallian Association: The Ongoing Story,"¹³ "MEL Bulletin #8/9: The Educator's Life Journey,"¹⁴ and especially "Bulletin #250: Associated for the Lasallian Educational Mission."¹⁵

One obvious fruit of this process of renewal can no doubt be found in the variety of forms of associates who understand their life journeys as being closely linked to the Lasallian charism, and a large number of forms of association for mission that are springing up on different continents.

On the other hand, the search for new forms of government in mission has led us to invent new structures, assemblies, mission councils. Structures in which we Brothers and lay partners share the responsibility for mission and, therefore, the power to make decisions.

Forty years later we can say that "the road to adapted renewal" certainly has motivated, driven, and led many Brothers and lay persons toward new places, some of which are places where the Gospel is lived in a radical way, and where the mystery of the "Brother's" vocation is again being discovered and lived jointly with the vocation of the "lay person" in the Church for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel by means of educational service.

From One Shore to Another Shore

Between shadow and light, between experiences of death and new life, we find ourselves not only individually but also corporately, in a transition in history in which we see ourselves driven to leave a known shore: in the language of religious life, a concept of the laity within the Church, and interpretation of the vows, structures of government, ways of fleshing out the mission. We are

going toward another shore, with a new language, with new interpretations and community and mission structures, which we still need to invent.

Given this threshold, and before we can make out the light of dawn, we wonder what it means to be a Brother in the world and in the Church today.

Being Brothers 40 Years Ago at the 39th General Chapter and the “Declaration”

In a certain way, we could say that that question has already been sufficiently clarified in the momentum that guided adapted renewal, when 40 years ago, the Brothers who gathered together for the 39th General Chapter (1966-1967) published a *Declaration* entitled *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today* in which they affirmed the following.

*The Brother is a baptized Christian who responds to a special and mysterious call from God. He consecrated himself totally to God and to God’s service by his religious profession, and he works to integrate, in the unity of a lifetime under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the following (constitutive) elements which the Brothers jointly accept. The Brother is granted his original and proper place within the body of the People of God.*¹⁶

*The Brother fully expresses his baptismal consecration as a member of an Institute that is exclusively lay, in virtue of his public vows . . .*¹⁷

*As they join a community . . . each Brother, whatever his role, contributes communally to the unique mission that the Institute has received from the Church.*¹⁸

*Communally, the Brother takes on a specific educational role, with special preference for the poor.*¹⁹

*He not only exercises the ministry of the Word, but he devotes himself to educating those who need help, being attentive to their culture, helping them become fully and truly human.*²⁰

*The school is the preferred tool for the exercise of the Brother’s employ, although not the exclusive one.*²¹

For the Brothers of that generation the identity of the Brother was not based on any one of these dynamics taken in isolation. The Brother was defined by his decision to assume all of them in a personal synthesis motivated by love,²² along the lines requested by Vatican Council II’s Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*. To speak of love here indicates, of course, a passionate and unconditional love for God and for the poor.

Those constitutive elements that were integrated into a synthesis over the course of a personal life journey in a community gathered for mission, were recognized in the context of great vitality of Church life, of great expectations for spiritual and missionary renewal within the Church, in the midst of great joy and also great anguish, the same for all men and women with whom we share

history, in a world marked by its possibilities and by its deep suffering, as recalled to us in *Gaudium et Spes*, *Gravissimum Educationis*, and *Populorum Progressio*.²³

That generation tried to respond to that question, keeping in mind a double yet unique movement. Returning to the *sources*, on the one hand, to the springs that give life, to the Gospel and to the Gospel lived and proclaimed in the situation of the origin of the community of Brothers who were associated with Saint John Baptist de La Salle,²⁴ and on the other hand, to the new evangelical calls of the Spirit in and through the signs of the times, recognized and discerned in the community,²⁵ that is to say, to the Gospel in our current situations.

Without a doubt, the *Declaration* was the expression and the articulation of an intense spiritual search on the part of many Brothers of forty years ago. Furthermore, it generated a rich adventure of hopeful creativity that touched the hearts of many men and women, young people and children, who were directly or indirectly associated with the Institute.

Being Brothers 40 Years Later at the 43rd General Chapter

Why, then, bring up that question again some forty years later? We bring up the question again, first of all, because each generation, in short, has to do it for the purpose of assuming its own, essential place in the Church and in society.

But there is another, more important reason. Changes that have happened in the post-Conciliar Church and in the world are such that we find ourselves 40 years later in a radically different Church and world. Perhaps for some, if not for many, *the place* that we occupy and *the role* that we have in the Church and in the world is not so obvious.

In fact, what we have experienced in these forty years as Brothers, on the different continents where the Institute is established, is much more dramatic, as the Brother capitulants from the 43rd General Chapter of 2000 have recounted so magnificently, yet moderately.

The great themes of that Chapter pointed, in effect, toward a “new situation” and, therefore, toward a new place and role for the Brothers:

- *new educational urgencies on all the continents.*
- *the decreasing number of Brothers and, at the same time, the expansion of the educational mission, to which many men and women are committed and are asking about their call to associate themselves with the mission.*
- *the growing interest in the life and spirituality of the Founder as our spiritual wellspring, for the purpose of living the Gospel more authentically from our employ and place in society.*
- *a reassessment, on the part of the Brothers, of our founding experience of association, the first form of association.*
- *the significance and the role that is expected of the Brothers among the various groups that are recognized as associates for the same and only mission. As a corollary to that, the strengthening of our vocational pastoral ministry.*
- *life structures and participation in decisions relative to mission.*

- *financial demands for this new situation in the history of the Institute.*

The clear reduction and the aging of the Brothers in a network of educational works and projects, both traditional ones and new ones, in which lay persons are clearly taking on main roles, necessitates our having to look courageously and boldly at the significance and the role of Brothers' communities, spread throughout the vast network.

However, if we understand that the consecrated apostolic life such as ours is in the very heart of the Church, as emphasized by the document *Vita Consecrata* in 1996,²⁶ then in order to speak about ourselves we will have to have, as a background, not only the urgencies of the world today, but in a special way the current situation of the Church. We can also say that without a doubt that the Church climate in which we live today in 2006 and 2007 is not the same Church climate as that of 1966 and 1967. So right away there is the first great difficulty in making this reflection, due to the very great differences in interpretation and assessment within the Church.

Being Brothers 40 Years Later in a Church in Crisis, or in a Church Closer to the Gospel?

For some, the Church is living in an historic era of splendor and efflorescence. Signs that support that optimistic and even triumphal view are the proliferation of charismatic groups, the participation of the laity in the life of the Church, the great power of the Pope's call, the great Masses, especially of young people, and the great pilgrimages, the surprising development of the Church in some young continents, like Africa.

For others, on the contrary, the Church is wracked by a profound crisis, characterized, for example, by the lack of credibility and the little influence of Christians in social and political life; by its separation from the problems that the world is undergoing and then drawing back into itself; by the rigidity of structures, the obsession with dogma and rites and the disconnect from what concerns and threatens human life, by the growth of a manipulative morality and by a paralysis to respond and act effectively in facing new and emerging problems in the scientific world. In short, the irrelevance of an institution that is facing the great trends in today's world, for example neo-liberalism, religious fanaticism, globalization, the impoverishment of the masses, intolerance, violence, and war.

Being Brothers 40 Years Later in a World Both Menacing and Defiant

Obviously, a systematic analysis of the signs that characterize the world today would go beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, following the reflections of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Congress on Consecrated Life of the USG and UISG held in 2004,²⁷ some of the possibilities and brokenness of the world can be identified. The challenges that were identified, then, constitute forces that we cannot underestimate:

- *globalization and world awareness with their possibilities and ambiguities.*
- *human mobility and the phenomenon of migration.*
- *unjust economic structures and new forms of solidarity.*
- *life both threatened and defended.*
- *pluralism and growing differentiation.*

- *post-modern mentality.*
- *the thirst for love and lovely disorder.*
- *the thirst for the sacred and secularist materialism.*

Being Brothers in This World and in This Church Today: Hope and Obstacles

In this world and in this Church, there are more than a few who perceive the situation of consecrated life to be in decline. A crisis that is made manifest in the dramatic decrease of men and women who choose to embrace the evangelical project of Jesus in religious communities that exist today. In speaking about it, they point out the numerous defections, aging, and the decrease in the numbers of candidates.

For others, the future depends on restoration. There must be a recovery of the theology of religious life, devotional practices, structures that the “adapted renewal” left behind. It is not difficult to find lay and religious persons in positions of authority in the Church who defend this way of seeing and who hostilely and relentlessly attack other ways of understanding consecrated life.

There are still others who, driven by the currents of adapted renewal of Vatican Council II, are letting themselves be led to new places where the Spirit is made manifest. From there, they reinterpret their consecrated life in the light of faith, Sacred Scripture, and the tradition of the Church. These are searching in light of new biblical icons and of an updated anthropological analysis, of a new language to speak about consecrated life, of new interpretations of the vows, of new ways of understanding authority, of new ways of living in community, of new structures of government. The Congress *Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity* (2004) is, without a doubt, a key event that points in this direction and that is inviting them to follow this passionate search in the Church.

In the same way that we were inspired by the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, we now want to let ourselves be inspired by this Congress. We want to put ourselves precisely in a frame of mind of impassioned hope. With a critical view, we want to discover in the Church and in the world at the beginning of the third millennium, the possibilities that point toward a re-foundation, recognizing also the obstacles that we carry inside us, both personal ones and community ones. Among these are, without a doubt, the aging of institutions and persons in some countries which in the past were sources of many vocations, the superficiality of discernment in our formation, work overload, infidelity or the lack of generous responses, the adoption of bourgeois ways, and being set in one’s ways. Not to forget about sexual and financial scandals, the abuse of power that takes away our credibility and paralyzes our projects. There are also personal and community blocks that are exacerbated by the fear of taking risks and which envelop us in defensive, self-assured, and conservative options.

We recognize that these obstacles are, often, reinforced by the hierarchy of the Church, especially in places where the prophetic dimension has been lost, with preference for docile persons and communities, with no initiative, easily managed. These are nurtured by society, when we uncritically take on its aspirations and values and customs.

In this ecclesial and social context, in the midst of contradictions that we live in the Church and in the world, we again ask ourselves what *being Brothers today* means.

Two Complementary Texts from the “Declaration” of 1967

#1 Renewal and Adaptation (Personal & Spiritual)²⁸

The renewal of religious life implies that certain practices be given new vitality and that certain apostolic works be transformed. More importantly, renewal demands a return to the sources to be found in the Gospel and in the origins of the Institute in order to recover in all its vigor the creative principle that gave birth to the Institute . . .

- *Even the best adaptations to the needs of our times will fail to produce their effect unless they are motivated by a spiritual renewal.²⁹*
- *To renew oneself spiritually means first of all that one must again be aware that it is only the Holy Spirit who brings about the renewal of persons and institutions.*
- *To renew oneself spiritually means that the Brother can recognize in his personal life as a Brother, in all the demands of human existence, in his vocation to faith and baptism, in his membership in the Church, in his commitment in the Institute . . .*
- *To renew oneself spiritually is to understand that the vocation by which one is called is a vocation to love . . .*
- *Finally, throughout the entire process of personal renewal, one must pay constant attention to the real situation in the world and in the Church today. To renew oneself spiritually implies a more intense effort to be present to the people of today . . .*

#2 Hopes & Desires of the People of Our Day³⁰

If the Spirit of God issues challenges through these teachings of the Church, the Spirit is heard also in the hopes and sorrows of the people of today, in the possibilities and the sufferings of our changing world . . .

- *It is a world marked by human greatness and by scientific, technological, and economic progress; a world more and more desacralized and secularized; a world of social awareness, a more unified humanity, and the development of the means of communication; a world which aspires to make the benefits of an education accessible to all; a world experiencing a population explosion and aware of the ever-increasing importance of youth.*
- *But it is also a world in which life, liberty, and human dignity are more and more threatened; a world of loneliness and despair for many who are crushed by selfishness, greed, indifference, or the will to power; a world of social injustice and an increasing disproportion between rich and poor nations; a world of illiteracy and ignorance in which the young are neglected; a world of rivalry and wars; a world where God is missing or rejected and where persons, because they close themselves off from what they cannot see, are threatened by the thought of personal extinction.*

- *The world has more need than ever, even at the very center of human and temporal existence, for the witness given by those who are consecrated and who know and love God as a living reality. More than ever, this is the world in which an international Institute ought to live in order to serve and to educate all its many peoples.*

Our Present: What Do We Understand by “Being Brothers Today”?

The main actors of the process

The first and perhaps the most important decision that we committee members made, in drafting this document, was that of not putting ourselves in the center of the process as protagonists. We wanted, above all, to say a word to the Brothers, to all the Brothers. But we knew that in order to begin, we could not consult everyone. Therefore, we limited ourselves, first of all, to contact a reduced number of Brothers on each continent, with the expectation that their words would generate a response from others in their own Districts and Delegations.

Furthermore, we wanted to avoid at all costs an ideological approach by which the Brothers would defend their own favorite definitions about what it means to be a Brother. On the contrary, we wanted to focus on reality as it is lived by the Brothers.

To that end, we did not begin by proposing texts to be read, even Gospel texts. We invited the Brothers to read the text of their own lives.

Questions for reading the text of your life

The questions that were finally used on the different continents are basically the ones listed below, and they are the ones that we ourselves raised in our work as a committee.

- Some questions intended to explore the story of a personal life journey:
 - what is it that impassions me the most in my life as a Brother?
 - when have I felt most strongly that “original fire” that led me to say a “definitive yes” to God’s call?
 - where, when, and in which experiences have I most felt that I was a Brother?
 - what story could I relate, what would I say, how would I explain my understanding of being a Brother?
 - what is my sense about others as they experience, understand, and value my life as a Brother today?
 - what obstacles, wounds, fears, and questions mark my personal life journey as a Brother?
 - what faces of children and young people do I see in my mind’s eye when I think about my mission as a Brother?
 - to whom do I feel called to serve as a Brother today?

- Other questions tended to identify the core values of the community of Brothers:
 - in my life as a Brother, what is it that drives me to give the best of myself?
 - what do we do best as Brothers?
 - what leads us, motivates us, energizes us as a community of Brothers, and what is it that hampers us, slows us down, and kills our vitality?
 - with whom and for whom do I feel associated today, and how do I feel associated?

- Another series of questions have for their purpose to discern in the center of life, in the daily practice of the mission with those who are with me, what it is that indicates vitality for the future:
 - what are the signs, the indicators of vitality that harbinger innovation in our vocation as Brothers in the Church, and what are the obstacles to this innovation?
 - what are the challenges and the opportunities for our lives as Brothers?
 - what future do I sense for my life as a Brother?

Finally, we explored “*the founding icons*” of our life as Brothers.

By the word “icons,” we understand images that have symbolic strength or force to give meaning and direction to life. The *icon* is a strength or force that becomes a *window* that allows us, from everyday reality, to read what transcends these daily realities. A reading in faith of daily, world events that open us to the mystery of God in creation and in history. Thus, the *icon* would allow us to look and to read where affection, sensitivity, reason, imagination, the deepest drives and desires, conscious or unconscious, are articulated. We understand, therefore, that *icons* are very complex and that they are open to successive interpretations.

In the same way, we understand *Lasallian icons* to be scenes or events in the life of the Founder or one of the stories that he painted or described in his meditations and other writings, especially those based on the Bible, which he explicitly or implicitly cites so frequently. As a result, we favor those *biblical icons* like, for example, a parable or a story from the life of Jesus which the Founder focuses on is his statements about life and about the mission of the Brothers.

Finally, we look at the *icons of our lives* when we speak about other persons, Brothers, colleagues, students with whom we have related during events of our own personal life journey, as especially strong symbolic figures and places that continue to give meaning and direction to our lives, even when they are not physically present. Those persons and those events are all the more significant when they become references that point to those values which we consider to be central in the life of the Brother.

- The questions that we considered to use in order to explore our *icons*:
 - what are the times in my life, in the life and ministry of Jesus, and/or in the life or writings of the Flounder that represent living icons that continue to motivate and energize me?

- what Gospel story, which biblical images express most profoundly the life and the mission of the Brothers of the Christian Schools?
- what are the contemporary icons (persons, communities, works, etc.) that express my deepest aspirations and ideals?

Obviously, we did not send all these questions to all continents. Mindful of the diversity of cultures and languages, we tried to translate these questions in such a way so that we paid attention to the character of a language and to the sensitivity of a culture. Based on this sensitivity to language and to culture, other questions were drawn up.

Finally, based on the reflections that were sent back to us by the Brothers who were consulted, the members of the committee developed the following paragraphs.

Being Brothers Today in Asia and the Pacific (PARC): A Long Walk in Educating the Poor

Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest, and the weakest man you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to freedom for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you find your doubts and your self melting away.

Mahatma Gandhi

Who is my brother? Reaching out to the unreached

- In the street that is densely populated with shanties and garbage, *Niranjan*'s hair has been unwashed for months and his arm and legs are covered with sores. Only 8 years old, he has the eyes of an old man as he sticks his hands out to every passerby. Once he receives coins in his grimy hands and collects enough, he buys solvent, enough to make him "get high" and help forget his hunger.
- *Thanom*, 14 years old, goes to school from 7:30 am to 12:00 noon, and is required to do homework like the rest of his classmates. But after class, he misses out on being with his classmates because he has to report to work from 1:00 pm to 8:00 pm.
- *Myra*, 16 years old, goes around the streets at night waiting for her clients. What she gets in a day in return is not even enough to feed her 3 other younger siblings.

Who is my brother?

These children might have asked the question at least once as they walk and wander around the streets. We know very well their stories and many versions of these same stories are familiar to us in the different ministries in which we are involved. We hear their stories every day, and their faces

we can easily recognize. Some beg. Others peddle in the streets or are involved in petty theft, drugs, or prostitution.

As we walk with these children, youth, or even adults, we may be deeply shocked and wounded when we hear their stories. They speak to us. They awaken our sensibilities and reach the very depths of our hearts. And as we allow ourselves to be deeply moved and touched by these stories, we ask ourselves: what is happening to our world? how can this be? There is a gnawing feeling that makes us ill at ease with ourselves. There is a deep sense of wanting to be someone for these children, to do something for these children because we know that these are the same stories that allow us to be more compassionate and to break the distortions of child development.

In the midst of all these realities, we know Pacific-Asia is a Region of contrasts, i.e., rich/developed/underdeveloped, democracy vs. dictatorships, religious tolerance vs. intolerance. We should also note that the youth are experiencing more stress as the “achievement” mentality is foisted on them. Competition in the field of education has led to suicides in the more industrialized nations of Asia. In some sub-regions, there is inequality in the system with affluent students going to better universities while poor students are left to state-run schools where standards are much lower. In the face of tension, many young people resort to drugs and are involved in juvenile crimes and prostitution as a form of counter-culturalism. Surely, many young people will ask us: “who is my brother?”

The United Nations reports that in our Region, 60% of the human race (40% of whom are below 15 years old, 2.9% of whom are Catholics) live on only 15% of the planet’s land surface. They are the ones who are greatly vulnerable, defenseless, and suffer the most from extreme poverty. Among the 3.5 billion people in Pacific-Asia, three-fifths live without sanitation; one-third without safe drinking water; one-quarter lack adequate housing. One-fifth live beyond the reach of modern sanitary facilities; one-fifth of the children do not get as far as grade five in school, and an equal number are undernourished. Unless some miracle happens, some 60 plus students (out of 100) below the age of 12 are going to be poor. Why? Just because people not finishing primary education will likely earn one-eighth of what people with secondary or tertiary studies do. Certainly those students are going to ask us: “who is my brother?”

More positively, there are movements, small but widespread and significant, all over Pacific-Asia, both in society and in the churches, which are carefully critiquing the existing systems, exploring alternative ways that could help humanize the stories and faces of children experiencing poverty in different forms. In their own way, they have responded to the question: who is my brother? They take lessons in equality and cooperation from the history of indigenous peoples, and mobilize to challenge the dehumanizing culture of modernization, secularization, consumerism, technocracy, and Church and State power. They work to shape free and responsible culturally-integrated local churches and theologies, and to foster the new awakening of women, youth, and lay people. Not to mention, they have taken advantage of Asia as the birthplace and home of the major religions of the world. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam originated in West Asia; Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism came to birth in South Asia; Confucianism, Taoism, and Shintoism belong with East Asia. The most noteworthy fact is that they all have an all-embracing sense of the transcendent and of the depth and mystery of things.

We are Brothers: Sinners yet called by God

As we walk again and again with these children, youth, and adults, we cannot help but re-affirm the name by which we are called – Brother – and continue to ask ourselves these questions:

- where is the Spirit leading us?
- what is God trying to tell us?
- what steps can we take to respond to the pressing issues and concerns of our Region?
- what else can our existing institutions do in the face of this reality?
- what are the alternatives that we can adopt to be more responsive to the Spirit?
- what would De La Salle be telling us, if he came to visit us in our Region?

As we walk with children, youth, and adults, we experience our own limitations, vulnerability, and woundedness. What limits us and makes us vulnerable and wounded is not to be found in the vision that we desire to achieve or in the mission of our Founder, but in the concrete reality in which we find ourselves. Sometimes we find ourselves carrying the burden of existing institutions on the one hand, and the burden of personal habits, attitudes, and behaviors on the other. We get caught up in our own different works, and we get too busy in our responsibilities that our ministry becomes just another eight-hour or eighteen-hour job. When the daily routine sets in, we go through our set patterns of activities without reflecting on why we do what we do, making life wearisome and burdensome.

Many times we are placed in administrative positions; and this takes us away more and more from directly serving the young, especially the poor. Many times we become lazy, undisciplined, and complacent that prayer and community life are forgotten and do not make sense anymore. We also wonder whether our vowed life is worth keeping amidst a world where secularism, consumerism, individualism, and materialism are the norms that the world holds very deeply as its central values. Many times, unwittingly, these worldly values have also become part of our own lives as Brothers.

As Brothers, we know we have failed in many ways because of our disillusionments, by our personal habits and attitudes, by our silence in the face of poverty, by our apathy in the face of social ills, by our tolerance of our own self-indulgence, by our lack of good example, by our own vain self-seeking, and by our lack of faith in God.

Yet, we know that we Brothers have been walking in this Region since 1852. We have walked and extended our ministries as far as Japan, China-Hong Kong, Singapore, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia and, recently, Cambodia. We have a long tradition of running good schools, and some of them were the best in Asia. Some still exist today. On the other hand, in the last sixty years, we have moved toward responding to the many diverse forms in which the many needs of the poor are heard. We know of Brothers who reach out to the unreached, teach in adult night schools, do relief work, are involved in alternative educational programs for the poor, counsel juveniles, work in soup kitchens, assist in centers for migrant workers, manage centers for aboriginals, promote inter-faith dialogue, share our resources with the poor, share the mission with our partners, among other things. Yet, we ask ourselves, is this enough? Are we doing everything that is required of us?

We know we are required to be more attentive to new calls of duty, without being afraid to chart new courses. We know we are invited to continue our walk, to renew and be creative in our responses in the field of human and Christian education, especially of the poor. We know we are required to break down or at least call into question projects and institutions, including the Church, and even our own way of life as a religious. We know we are Brothers continually called by God.

We are Brothers: Men of faith, men of zeal

We may find ourselves beating our breasts and saying *mea culpa*, but the cries of the poor and the youth scandalize us so much that we can no longer afford to just kneel down. The needs of the suffering children and the youth, the thirst for knowledge, opportunities to serve, to be compassionate and be generous, the good example of our own Brothers, and our love of the Founder are just some of the many things that bring out the best in us to be men of faith and men of zeal. At the same time, we cannot be deaf to what Scripture tells us to be: find the lost sheep, be the Good Shepherd, be the Loving Father to your prodigal son, come and follow me, take up your cross, give food to the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, invite the stranger to your house, clothe the naked, look after the sick . . . Surely, these are words that convince us that we are called to be Brothers: to be men of faith and men of zeal.

Brothers: Outnumbered but not without hope

We know too well that we are few in numbers and we can only do so little. With the exception of Australia and Vietnam, we are a small group of less than 50 Brothers in each of our sectors and across 15 countries. We are aware that we are not as young as before. When we look at our vocation picture, it can be discouraging. At the same time, we find ourselves sometimes ill equipped and not trained properly to the many calls in our Region. We know we only comprise 8% of all the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the world, but 23% of Lasallian students worldwide are entrusted to our care, 23% of the lay teachers, and 15% of the schools.

In spite of this reality, we acknowledge that in more ways than one we are blessed and full of life. We cannot let age and numbers define who we are as Brothers. We may be outnumbered but not without hope. We are very aware that we live in a crucial time filled with much hope and filled with so much passion in our lives. We cannot stop now. We cannot stop walking in educating the poor. There are still many faces of poverty that continue to scandalize us and await the best in us.

The children, especially the poor, will always be with us to call us to be Brothers. The Lord will always be with us to call us to be Brothers. After all, that's what defines us: the call of the Lord amidst the ministries in which we are involved. In the depths of our hearts, we know that the call of the Lord will be like a wellspring from which our passion will continually emerge and flow. As the night falls, we know that we have walked with these children, the youth, and even adults, and have done our best when we are able to sit at table and break bread with them, as Brothers and companions along the way. And as we give rest to our legs and doze off into the night, we wonder: "did not our hearts burn within us while he (they) talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

Being Brothers Today in Latin America and the Caribbean: Associated for the Service of the Poor

We are men of this time in this land.

Being a Brother of this time, identifying myself with Jesus, the Lord of time, of all time . . .

We Brothers from the Lasallian Region of Latin America feel deeply that we are men of this time and of this world. We feel deeply called to be men of this Latin America with its own socio-economic, political, and cultural characteristics. We live globalization, the free market, neo-liberalism, capitalism All these ideologies and movements are focused on the *ego*. Making myself richer, without thinking about the have-nots, the poor. The mentality of capitalism is that the poor are a nuisance. From there comes the conviction that the poor should be allowed to die of hunger . . . and, if not, we kill them. That is the reality that challenges us.

We live at this time in this world as in a great human, cultural, and spiritual deterioration, in the absence of the meaning of life that might satisfy the deepest aspirations, amid a growing rift between the few who have much, and the many who more and more have less.

In light of this reality, we build our identity as Brothers. The Brother today is someone who experiences, faced with the signs of injustice and prevailing sinful structures, an *emotional indignation* that leads him, like Jesus, to proclaim loudly that conversion is an imperative for human beings today. To live an *emotional indignation* is to be on the same wavelength with the suffering of humanity, and to find yourself oriented in the Gospel sense to the fight for dignity of human beings, proclaiming by his activity a practical commitment in favor of the poor.

It is in this encounter with the poor where, as a Brother, “I again meet the living Christ who leads me to question the why and the how of my consecration, letting myself be touched by reality, with a view to being an alternative to a dehumanized world.”

“The chains of poverty that can be observed in different places in our Region become a strong call to attention so that we take on decisively our prophetic mission as Christians and as consecrated men. Listening to and sharing the cries of the marginalized is a first step that involves us more deeply in the search for alternatives that will allow us to be agents of life.”

Living in this time and in the world of today leads us to “discern the why and the how of the times, to incarnate ourselves, to build projects for these times,” building our identity as a “counter-cultural sign with an evangelical lifestyle” so that, as Jesus did, we proclaim the Kingdom in the midst of the poor.

In this sense, it is of great concern that we sense that sometimes our “Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools seems to be stagnant, more identified with the status quo than with the values of the Kingdom.”

At this time and in this land, we are Christian, religious, consecrated men of faith . . .

When we say, “Lord, show us your face,” the Lord responds to us: “Look at the face of your impoverished brother [and sister], look at the reality in which you live, look at the signs of the times.”

The Gospel is for all time, the Lasallian charism is very much rooted in the Gospel; and it is a gift from the Lord for different times, especially for times of great change and crisis and in which the little ones and the weak are in danger of being marginalized.

Our challenge is always to conform one’s own life to following Jesus Christ in community living, in prayer, and in mission. To live God *as the absolute*, to be *like Jesus*, to live a process of shaping our own lives so that we can say: *“I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me.”* It is specifically Lasallian to look upon everything . . . to do everything . . . attributing everything to God. This is what leads to a reading in faith about what I do, what others do, and about events.

“We follow Jesus, who took on the task of freeing humanity from all the enslaving poverty of men [and women]. In the same way, we find in De La Salle, that faithful disciple who continued the mission of Jesus, in the commitment to human, social, and Christian education of poor children who suffered abuse from a cruel and discriminative society. In the same way, we, when we are next to the poor, recognize Jesus in them . . . We commit ourselves to a liberating educational task.”

To be seekers of God, to live in his Presence, to recognize that we are loved by the Beloved, encouraged and led by him, leads us to say *“I adore in all things, Lord, the way that you are leading me”*; and this leads us to live his Presence gratefully in our lives. *“I look back and I give thanks to God for what I have lived. My story is the story of Salvation.”* It is the conviction of the one who can say: *“I was able to feel within my heart the words of my Beloved in the words of my friends, the poor, in the signs of the times, and in my own words. I have succeeded in verifying that God speaks to me in my heart. Each person has become someone sacred.”*

This experience of feeling deeply loved is what drives me to give the best of myself. Our lives will continue to have meaning as long as we are signs of the transcendence of consecration for the educational service of those who need it most, that it is worth dedicating one’s life to this service.

Based on this profound experience of God, the God of Life, the God of Love, the God of the Kingdom, we become brothers and teachers, in the broad sense. *“What truly impassions me in my life as a Brother is, first of all, to be brother to another. It is the living out of the strong fraternity without meanness, without envy or ambitions for power: only the desire to be a Brother to my brother and to unite forces in the interest of building the Kingdom of God.”*

We live a spiritual experience which is committed daily to a liberating love. *“Very important to me is the daily greeting and welcome, warmth and disinterest in relationships, making others feel important for God and for myself, helping others discover in their own lives the loving presence of God, proclaiming the Good News to them, helping awaken in their own hearts the desire to seek God in order to meet with him.”*

Word, community, and reality are the three pillars of our Lasallian way of understanding how we are to follow. Community and the Word have been the basic ways for understanding our lifestyle and educational service of the poor in a new way. On this journey we live the centrality of the mystery of the Incarnation, the force of the Word of God, the saving presence of the Lord in all the people we meet.

But also, in the midst of this reality, there is concern for the many who are spiritual orphans, knowing that sometimes we are individualists and we do not know how to share our faith, which sometimes we have a tendency to *let stagnate*. There is also concern about the scant time for personal and community prayer that is heard from various Brothers, or forgetting about living out the religious part of our lives due to the implantation of world values and productivity in our relationships.

At this time and in this land, we are educators.

*To be a Brother today is to be someone who risks
being with the poor, loving the poor who are the
sacrament of Christ.*

On a continent where the structural situation of social injustice produces poverty and death, it is clear that the response of our life, of our mission, of our presence is read based on this reality. “The faces that come to mind when I think about my mission as a Brother are the faces of marginalized children and young people, orphans due to war and violence, hit by misfortune and poverty, those who are victims of social injustice.” To be a Brother is to continually seek new forms of apostolic ministry, to go to new places where the most needy are, to be sensitive to them, and to try to find a way to respond to them. The Brother, in the light of faith, with a burning zeal for those whom God has confided to him to teach, is invited to let himself be moved by the educational needs of poor children and young people, and to respond to them freely, following the spiritual, pedagogical journey of De La Salle. *This is the original fire: to work in direct service of the poor.*

“What motivates me to continue being a Lasallian religious educator is the principal design of freedom inspired in the desire of God to free humanity by love and for love. That idea and the feeling that my life belongs to God, the God of life who invites me to a fuller life, myself, others, the poor.”

“. . . the original fire that was mine was to re-live continually the break from the bourgeois world from which I come and attend to street children.”

That is our passion: passion for the poor, for those who suffer, a passion that has its roots in Jesus Christ and in De La Salle. Being Brother . . . “it means being sensitive to and taking action when faced with the reality of the marginalized.” When the poor are at the core of what we practice, we feel alive. When they are the object of our sleeplessness, efforts, and projects. When they feel that we care about them and they sense that the only thing that moves us is their wellbeing and their happiness.

We Brothers feel called to inspire education and the development of impoverished areas, and from there, from the place of the poor, to plan and to program educational activities in service of justice. Together and in association with our partners, we want to become a community that seeks to give important roles to lay persons and to open discussion about the place of the poor as a critical component of service in school life.

Facing this reality, we are concerned about the actions of some Brothers who are doing, doing, doing, totally focused on themselves, feeling unsatisfied, and without real enthusiasm: to recognize the gap in what we do and do not do to become effective agents for change in the midst of this reality that touches our lives. When the Brother is totally absorbed by what he does, he gradually loses his sense of being a consecrated man . . . This is the cost we pay for the great amount of carelessness in not treasuring our spiritual and fraternal life.

Also, “it seems to me that one of our weaknesses as Brothers is that we deal with a lot of theory. We need to be bolder in making a true social commitment.” This lack of boldness and institutional creativity is, sadly, the experience of many.

At this time and in this land, we are men of community and association for this service.

*I have special appreciation for the community /
institutional value of mission. It is not about doing
what I think is best but about all of us discerning each
one's place, everyone's mission.*

“What impassions me in my life as a Brother is the spirit of fraternity that happens daily, in which the experience of God generates gestures and signs: an atmosphere of family and of home, where the community discerns in favor of children, young people and persons who are at risk.

Being Brothers today means to be profoundly Christian; and this does not mean giving priority to structures, which are necessary. But above all it means to love and to allow oneself to be loved based on our option for a simple, fraternal, and spiritual life in community, our knowing how to live the spirituality of the Incarnation, centered on the Word and in community discernment based on faith.

Faced with this, it is our experience that “the majority of Brothers work in a school with bland educational service,” “without raising questions,” “in a comfortable place,” “reinforcing the structures of injustice in society,” a community that “glories in the success of our former students who shine in high positions in government and in business.” Faced with this reality we feel that our vocation, our life, our mission, is surrendering.”

Constructing the Brothers' community today means to be on a journey of conversion that leads us, among other things, to a more proactive understanding of life, to a greater focus on the joyful gift of constructing things, relationships, projects, the mission, the daily life. This involves being a protagonist of one's own conversion, overcoming the obstacles that threaten this process, like power seeking . . . which lead us to intrigue, greed, and the desire to surpass another

For many Brothers today, the journey toward conversion implies abandoning positions of the lack of courage for changing District structures, for making possible a process that may lead to association between Brothers and laypersons for the educational service of the poor. For others this conversion has to do with leaving positions that do not believe in lay persons³¹ and do not live an open and available, rooted and incarnated Lasallian spirituality. Our future and our vitality depend on this, because no one associates with a group that is not passionate about something. The revolutionary passion of the Brother is to contribute to social change, by means of education, to fight for institutional change in the educational service of the poor. It is clear that the work with laypersons must have the same axis, given the fact that if sharing the mission does not have as its aim serving the poor better, and community involvement in low-income areas, it has no meaning at all.

“Friendship and love that is personalized and that treats each human being as a person, a very beloved child of God who needs to be heard, a prolific friendship that means that those involved are looking in the same direction, with the same energy and strength, and we call this association for the educational service of the poor.”

“I prefer that God take the lead, and I will follow him. My hope is that God will lead us to know the next step and that we will have the bravery and the courage to do this together, guiding one another.”

To live truly the community life that we Brothers want today means that it should start from supporting us in breaking away from situations of community division, from a lack of trust and credibility in our Brothers. “What hurts me the most is seeing my Brothers not happy, living tepidly, without passion, lacking personalized mentoring, doing things mechanically, dealing with each other mechanically, praying mechanically, in states of aloofness, indifference, authoritarianism, silence, avoidance, of dealing with one another as employees.”

It is a challenge for our time to be able to mentor Brothers who are in painful or conflictive situations, who have not gotten over hurts from the past and who want to throw all this on the community. There are situations of immaturity that stop us cold; they are our major limitation. There is resistance to being helped and mentored, and this leads to locking oneself in one’s room.

On the other hand, we see that many of us Brothers do not have many concrete gestures to express our *fraternal tenderness*, perhaps because we have become very practical, busy, and cold. Those who are suffering keep quiet about it. There are Brothers who feel that they are *rejected and forgotten*. We Brothers, as a group, tend not to be very careful and attentive about ourselves. Our affective expression is limited, and there is very little commitment to do it.

Finally, we also recognize that we feel that we are Brothers when we welcome into community those young people who feel that the Lord has called them to follow him and we offer them the opportunity to come and see. We are delighted to propose our vocation to young people and to serve as a guide for them.

Men with dreams, aspirations, and hopes

*The horizon is the future that is coming to us:
incarnated spirituality, careful attention to
communion, formation, mission, communities . . .
this entire list is God who opens himself to us in
new words that must be spoken.*

Among the Brothers overall there is the great conviction that Lasallian religious life is not a reality that has been given once for ever. It is still becoming, being built, and dialogue is the starting point for these collective constructions. Therefore, we must “see ourselves as men who are journeying, with our limitations, but journeying . . . that is the vital stance of a Lasallian religious.

Among the Brothers overall there is the great conviction that the future is in our roots. “I see no other future for the Brother of today other than that of *returning to the origins*. In those origins is the challenge and the birth of our commitment. De La Salle saw the poor, and he turned toward them. He discovered God in the poor, and he embarked on his service to education.” “My hope is to see God in the midst of my Brothers, and the Brothers in the midst of educational communities, and in the midst of young people. In the midst of innovation and creativity, in the midst of the poor, the simple, the needy.” Perhaps this journey will lead us to restructuring, to the abandonment of certain works, and to incarnation in new works. That journey leads us to respond creatively to a selfish world, educating in solidarity and justice. Only then will we have a future.

There is a great awareness that *the Institute of the FSC is at the service of the poor and the need is very great*. Like Jesus and like De La Salle, we Lasallians of today and tomorrow have to commit ourselves seriously and effectively in the fight against material and marginalized poverty. We run the risk of being admired by society but being fruitless for the Kingdom. I see myself opting for the outskirts, for small towns or cities.

This time and this world challenge us to live counter-culturally to the *secularist culture* and the *current relativism* that leads to a lack of meaning in life, to despair that is evident in many. This is accentuated by the lack of a true formation that leads us to be disciples of the Master each day, that leads us decisively to love the poor of our time. We live at a time of relativism that presses us to continually review our lives.

We need to make the journey. It is hard for us to move from reflection to action as regards the preferential educational service of the poor. There is a lot of thinking and a lot of talk but very little ability to make decisions, to take risks for the Lord and for those who cannot hope, the poor, according to what Pope John Paul II told us. We like to have a lot of comforts . . . It is hard for us to be lacking in anything. It bothers us to have to eat day-old bread . . . We feel that this moves us further away from the Lord, from the why of our vocation in the Church, from the poor. Saint John Baptist de La Salle assured us that if we do not love poverty and the poor like Christ himself did, we remain as perfect strangers to them.

Being Brothers Today in Europe and the Near East: The Promise of the Dawn

In the countries of Europe and the Near East, crisscrossed and cleared by so many pioneers and builders, our Lasallian history, inspired by Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers, established a long and distinguished tradition. The story also offers to the Brothers of today an increasingly complex legacy with which to cope. It is the legacy of an Institute that, after embodying and enriching, for more than three centuries, the characteristic features of the apostolic religious life, is struggling, in our own countries, to retain the attractiveness of its younger days. However, we continue to live our educational mission passionately even though daily life, in those societies in the whirlpool of change, puzzles us as much as it energizes us. We strive to be open and to integrate innovations in a profoundly transformed social, cultural, and ecclesial context. It is upon this road, where many of the original pathfinders, following the steps of the Founder, completely trusting in God and humanity, that the responsibility for the present and the required boldness for the future have been handed down to us.

We continue on our way, consecrating our days and energies to the human and Christian growth of children and youth. We know how much they count on us to help them to display their generosity and abilities, and to be with them when the difficulties and uncertainties of life assail them. The passing on of profane and religious knowledge remains central to enabling them to grow and shape their lives. Our availability extends beyond these moments to other equally essential ones, though less formal and more random: our patient presence, our compassionate listening, our courageous words, and our witness of a life linked to Jesus Christ and rooted in his Gospel.

These aspects fill our memory, inform our prayer, and energize our activity. However, the pause that the preparation for the next General Chapter is giving us leads us to acknowledge a tiredness, which we share in all confidence. We feel that our feet are dragging in the mission shared with our Brothers, those in our local communities and in the communities in our Districts. When the end of an agreement, a difficulty, not to say failure, forces us to take a broader view of our present circumstances or our common future and of our educational works, nagging worries suddenly arise. These regularly intrude into our fraternal sharing, our community discussions, and our prayers. Indeed, we really suffer in the face of the obvious diminution of our number, of our slightest upset or our loneliness in the mission. It is acute when the Church seems indifferent to our apostolic life. Finally, what wounds us still more is our inability to respond personally or as a community to requests. While in fact we have a lively sense of the need for our Institute, certain ones of us are tempted to renounce or even abandon it.

Individual and community frailty can be added to these obstacles. However, we courageously continue on our way. Nevertheless, sometimes it seems quite uncertain. Even the grandeur of the apostolate shared with our partners and our taste for evangelization is unable to overcome this frailty. Even the faces of the children and youths no longer provide us with the motivation that empowers us to overcome disappointments and resist unfavorable winds. Bit by bit, the life to which we witness is giving way in the face of the assaults of individualism and to the attraction of consumerism and those western models that almost exclusively sacralize success and personal fulfillment.

When confronted by moments of doubt or discouragement, we know that our lives remain supported by a memory and a promise that always quicken our human and Christian resources. This is especially true when individually, in community or as a District, we engage in a reassessment of our undertakings, and a discernment of our programs; it is also true when the essential courage to respond to new appeals is required of us. Such is the major challenge of our times, as in few other moments in the history of the Lasallian mission.

We have to take up this challenge while being careful not to confuse memory and remembrance, promise, and projection of the future. Whilst remembrance would run the risk of fixating us in the past, memory nurtures the action required for the present times. This memory is that of Jesus Christ and, subsequently, of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers. They lived their careers as an authentic existence. Rather than following a path traced out according to social and ecclesiastical models of success, they agreed to leave behind the familiar so as *“to cross over to the other side”* where they found young people in distress, teachers needing formation, and public figures to be persuaded. It is this memory that renews more lasting concern for wayward youth, more intimate relationship with the God of the Covenant, and closer association with our Brothers. As for the future, our wish to control it will only serve to produce fears and illusions, whereas the promise of the Gospel ties together those expectations and abilities that, though distinct, are present within us.

At nightfall, in those hours offered for recalling the memories of the day and greeting the promise of the dawn, we are joined by grace in an encounter actually taking place. The disciples walking to Emmaus were aware of and had to accustom their eyes to the gloom in order to perceive the unexpected light of the Risen Lord. We, like them, find ourselves in a night-mantled moment of our community history, which for some, is quite personally experienced. We maintain that, for each of us and for our Institute, this is a God moment. More than before, in these times of bright light, we open ourselves to meet Christ in the faces and stories of the young people entrusted to our care, with unshrinking preference for those who are far from our social, cultural, and religious world. More than before, in these times of greater certainty, we open ourselves to contemplate Christ acting through other voices and other hearts in our lay partners. More than before, in these times of great security, we open ourselves to receive Christ in those young Brothers who are drawing us along new paths. Even more, our light, our certainty and our security are in fact Jesus Christ who meets up with us along the way in Word, prayer, and Eucharist.

We Brothers of Europe and the Near East see ourselves in those pilgrims making their way toward the village of Emmaus. It is at a modest inn, far from the splendor of the Temple in Jerusalem, that we are invited to an encounter that spells out for us again the direction of our existence. We agree to open ourselves before Christ, placing on the table the daily grind of our lives, our fears, and our limitations. Our eyes then see more clearly the reasons to rise up and set out again with joy, reasons that include those numerous men and women responding to the call of the Lasallian mission and the crowd of children and young people seeking witnesses, human and divine. As was the case three centuries ago, certain mornings have a taste of Easter for those who believe in the promise of dawn.

Being Brothers Today in USA and Canada

In John's Gospel, the third resurrection appearance occurs at the seashore. In the post-crucifixion despair that submerged their hopes, the fishermen went back to what they knew. An unexpected visitor appears, and from the distance of a football field, calls out, "Friends, have you caught anything?" The answer is a disenchanted "no." He urges them to try again, starboard. They give it a go, and their haul is tremendous. Then they know that the visitor is Jesus. When they come ashore, Jesus says, "Come, have breakfast." Around the charcoal fire, he serves them a hearty meal of bread and grilled fish which he had prepared while they were out on the water. It is around this fire that Jesus challenges Peter to be the new good shepherd, to tend and feed his sheep.

It was also around this campfire that Jesus gently and firmly calls each of them back to the commission they received in the Upper Room. "You are to do as I have done for you." In this iconic moment on the shore, we Brothers of the USA/Toronto Region see ourselves reflected in the men who gave themselves to a dynamic life of brotherhood and mission. We see ourselves in the men who faltered under the weight of discouragement or disenchantment. We see ourselves in the men who responded to the Master's urgings to try again, who accepted his invitation to break bread together, and who rekindled their wholehearted zeal.

We see ourselves in Peter. It is around the fire that Peter's fervor and resolve breaks and he denies Jesus. It is around a fire that Jesus forgives and frees Peter to rededicate himself. Our history as Brothers is a resurrection story. Jesus, who invited us to share his life, drew each of us to the fire. Like the first followers, we need to be gently and firmly reminded of our consecration.

"Friends, have you caught anything?" "No," they answered.

Faced with the inevitable disenchantment of apostolic and community life, it is tempting to give in to despair. To be swallowed by emptiness or a bland sense of stagnation and apathy. Whatever the root cause – whether it is loneliness, feeling forgotten or under-appreciated – we allow our disenchantments to consume the original passion we felt for our vocation. We don't feel the immediacy of the Upper Room at all. Perhaps we've retired to our own rooms or have camped out in the TV room.

Even forty years after Vatican Council II and the 39th General Chapter, many of us continue to report a subtle form of *"identity theft."* We are declining in numbers, have fewer Brothers in apostolic work, and have less influence than before. Further, in the deserved emphasis on empowering our colleagues, many Brothers report feeling lost in the Lasallian Family Tree, as though *Brothers* are merely another branch of Lasallian identity. It is not uncommon for us to struggle with the questions: *"how are you different from our other teachers?"* or *"why be a Brother when I can marry and exercise the same ministry?"* Sometimes, under the influence of secular culture, we are tempted to act like bachelors, with affluent tastes and independent lives.

In some communities, there is a destabilizing divide among the faithful: those who practice “faithful dissent” and those who consider themselves of the “faithful remnant.” This mirrors the local Church condition where divergent views on ecclesial leadership contribute to a fluid credibility that undercuts our common purpose and evangelical fervor. We are not untouched by this crisis of confidence and clarity.

Outside of vigorous efforts in the parishes and schools to foster and promote vocations, the prevailing sentiment in society seems to regard religious life as quaint and a throwback to less enlightened times. Boys don't perceive our life as a passage to manhood, and men don't view Brotherhood as a satisfying vocational option. The cruel irony is there are no longer enough priests to celebrate Mass in many parishes, and youth have less access to Catholic education. Catholic institutions – health care, universities, social service agencies, and so on – struggle mightily with preserving and augmenting the core values of the disappearing founding religious orders. We often feel caught in a vortex of forces out of our control.

The acute reality for our Brothers in their twenties and thirties is there are so few same-aged Brothers with whom to share life. Perhaps that underlies one Brother's comment that “we have a tendency to go our own ways and I do not excuse myself in this regard.” The lack of new Brothers has opened community life to dangers of sameness and stagnation. Potentially meaningful exercises like the Community Annual Program have fallen prey to repetition.

In some quarters love for the mission, which inspired a life of sacrifice, has been replaced by love for a life that is safe and buffered by comfort. The upshot of this comfort and complacency, as one Brother observes, is that “it is easy to stop even looking for the needs, or seeing the ones that are right before us.” One cannot avoid doubting the loss of the prophetic dimension of our vocation. Another asks, “is it possible that we seek the approval of the very society we are trying to transform and inspire by Christ's message?”

Our hopes have taken a beating. In some ways, we have retreated into personal and communal behaviors that are not transformative. In this way we are not unlike the disciples who, in the aftermath of Jesus' brutal and dehumanizing death, retreated to their nets. Even there, they are met with frustration. They have no success. But Jesus does not abandon them to their misery. He goes to them and invites them to re-appraise their situation. There are many signs that Jesus is standing on the shore beckoning for us to try again.

“He fastened his coat about him and plunged into the sea.”

When it dawns on the disciples that their visitor is no mere fishing consultant but their Lord and Master, they make haste to come ashore. Peter, who raced to the tomb on resurrection morning, plunges in, determined to be in the presence of Jesus sooner than later. Peter's untrammelled passion to serve Christ takes flesh in us Brothers in myriad ways. “I don't need an alarm to get up,” says one Brother, “I really look forward to the start of the day. Many of my friends don't have the same reaction going to work . . . They live for weekends and vacation time.” It's the exhilaration of the teaching moment that makes the plunge into the often muddled and messy world of students easy.

To be sure, we seem to be at our best when we “go somewhere new, where life is not so easy, where we’re forced to be more creative, more aware of God’s daily miracles.” This unity as a community of poor disciples of Christ allows us to put flesh on the gift we have from the Holy Spirit. We are clearly our best working shoulder to shoulder with our Brothers. We are at our best when we shamelessly plunge in and “risk externalizing our interior life, namely, sharing our love of God with those to whom we minister.”

We consider this sanctified gift of teaching and proclaiming the Kingdom a pearl of great price. We are passionate about continuing in the footsteps of the first apostles and bringing heaven to earth, building a genuine community of love where all are welcome and all are challenged. We love the structured teaching moments, such as the reflection before commencing the lesson; and we love the unexpected nudge of the Spirit, when we “realize that it is not random scheduling that has put this student in my class . . . It is no longer just about the page in the textbook; it’s about him personally, and about what he thinks and how he feels. It’s about getting into the young man’s view of life, and showing him that he is not alone.”

Our answer to the dearth of new Brothers is an aggressive unleashing of the charism and vision of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. During Lasallian Volunteer retreats, one Brother explains, “I consistently feel a most profound sense of being a Brother.” Our answer is living as men of hope. We find this hope in the “depths of the heart” (a phrase the Founder uses forty times in his writings), in our communion with Christ, the one to whom we have made a total offering of ourselves. This mystical beginning point is our anchor. When we moor our life to the interior supports [interior prayer, spirit of faith (simple attention), presence of God, interior recollection] we cultivate a “center of strength and stability that opens out on a sea of peace in spite of what is happening around me.” Finally, the laughter in our communities is perhaps the most authentic sign of our unequivocal hope. Men of hope laugh. Men of despair don’t dare.

Michel Sauvage³² commented that the Founder’s bold answer to the crises of 1691 and 1694 was community vows, “re-creative acts of hope.” When the Founder and the early Brothers were at their weakest, facing opposition and sure defeat, they re-consecrated themselves to God and an unknown unfolding of history. In 2006, we consider this foundational moment an icon for our reenergization. In particular, the Heroic Vow of 1691 not only showed their commitment to the schools but their commitment to one another. We identify with the resilience of the original Brothers, and we consider their story a “*precious deep story*”³³ that inspires us time and again. We relate to their pragmatism and creativity, qualities we witness in our culture when at its best.

Energizing examples of this pragmatic creativity abound. In addition to long-standing initiatives, we are looking for new opportunities to extend our ministry and finding new responses to the educational needs of the poor in *San Miguel* and *Cristo Rey* schools. We are linking many of our present institutions and their Lasallian communities in a new form of collaboration. The fidelity to our original inspiration is refreshing. One Brother exclaims, “I no longer do spiritual gymnastics trying to figure out ‘*who are the poor?*’ To me, it’s clear and unambiguous.”

This almost reckless hospitality of the prodigal’s father resonates in our “precious deep story”; and we witness more of us “working on the fringes and taking risks which our partners, for financial and family reasons, cannot. This brings us together as a community and inspires more risk and

more reliance of God.” We are witnessing in our Brothers a radical hospitality that is an opening of the heart to risk and a welcoming of the poor.

“Come, have breakfast.”

Hospitality begins, of course, with an invitation. One of our special experiences is re-encountering the invitation of Jesus in others, most especially in our students and our Brothers. We think of these moments as the original fire that drew us to Jesus and to the unique life and mission of our Institute.

These moments often surprise us. Before an exam, “I was nearly overcome with a powerful sense of God’s presence in them.” The invitation is unexpected. “They see us as real, and they can share their hearts with us. I feel it when they come in my room and ask if they can talk.” The invitation emerges as we “work with the slower students or those going through personal difficulties,” and our response is appreciated. “Brother, thanks for understanding when I was going through a tough time earlier this year. You were the only one who noticed.” We rarely pass on this invitation because “we relish the chance to be generative.”

We know that this invitation is mediated by our stance as community. One Brother comments that frequently students often no longer see me; they see “Brother” and drop my first name, because the Brother’s individuality is subsumed by what makes us one. When we gather together for retreats, for Chapters, and convocations, or for the pronouncement of vows we feel a stirring in the depths of our hearts and an awareness that the *Rule* is alive. “It is together they seek God and together they find him.”³⁴ The love and support of one another’s endeavors and aspirations are moments of grace that re-invite us to a wholehearted living of our consecration. We hear the invitation of Jesus when we mount a unified response to the crises of our day, live a life punctuated by fun, prayer, affirmation, and accountability. Lastly, the invitation sounds most like Jesus when we “spend time together affirming one another as brothers in ways that rise above expectation, judgment, and duty. Sharing our experiences, successes, and failures in attempting to live the life of *Brother*.”

We continue to hear Jesus in the people who don’t have a seat at the table of social and economic privilege. We know the privilege of a “blue ribbon” education is not truly accessible to everyone in our society. We know that we have in our heritage a power, not unlike that of Jesus who knew the woman with the blood disorder was willing to risk the crush of the crowd to be healed. “The power of Christ is an amazing gift in our life and ministry. We have the power within us through Christ to transform the world and to create miracles.” This invitation to respond is often taking the form of founding initiatives. For one Brother, the “co-founding of a San Miguel School has been the defining moment of my life as a Brother to date. Launching *San Miguel* involved many of the same emotions for me as joining the Brothers: apprehension, excitement, having to trust God that somehow this all makes sense, even though at times it doesn’t seem that way.”

These moments of invitation mingle elements of our lives that are at once mystical and historical, transcendent and temporal. One Brother reveals, “When I committed heart and soul to working directly with the poor, I experienced a liberating freedom.” Founding *San Miguel* was a time of beginning something new yet so very Lasallian. The experience of founding seems to strike a

profound chord in Brothers. It brings to the surface the precious deep story of our Founder: “prayerfully discerning, willing to go where we would rather not go, being willing to do what we didn’t start out to do, stepping out on nothing but faith, being willing to be taken to court if need be, moments of doubt when we wonder whether our work is from us or from God, being willing to give away what we have in order to take Providence at its word.”

“Then feed my sheep.”

After feeding the disciples, the Lord looks Peter directly in the eye and tells him in new language to feed his sheep. Peter must have felt in the depths of his heart a liberating energy and fire at least as strong as when he first set down his nets to follow. This time though, the Holy Spirit rather than the physical presence of the Master would guide him.

In *The Brother of the Christian Schools: A Declaration*, we read: “It is urgent that every Brother make his own the decision of Saint John Baptist de La Salle to go to the poor with the heart of a poor person.”³⁵

In light of this 40-year-old statement, De La Salle’s decision to found schools for the abandoned required a holy boldness. Without question, Saint John Baptist de La Salle’s passion to feed and tend was a prophetic and subversive move. The schools De La Salle and the first Brothers established had to weather legal and personal attacks, and it is easy to see why. They threatened the monopoly of the existing order, guarded vigilantly by parish priests and guilds. This is another icon for us to reflect on because “he never forgot that compassion and love sometimes demand confrontation.”

Many of us feel the urgency that stirred Saint John Baptist de La Salle to set aside his own agenda and embrace the risk of living in the uncertain world of the poor. With only the promise of the holy presence of God, we desire to unleash the power, quality and energy of our association.

So, while we are busy imagining individual and collective responses to Jesus’ commissioning, we pray for courage. Courage, born of hope, characterizes our response. As one Brother relates, “The hands on the candle as we recite *as far as I am able* may not be as steady as they once were; but the candle still burns with the intensity and passion of that *original fire*.”

Being Brothers Today in Africa

The fire which burns in us, enralls us, and gets us moving at present is our life as Lasallian Brothers. This can be summed up by faith, fraternity, and service. Our life of faith is lived in full fraternity. It is expressed at present by our pastoral ministry among the young people from poor backgrounds in our schools and in our neighborhoods. It shows itself also in every initiative in educational matters (studies, projects, activities), especially for adults with whom we share the mission of Christian educator and their accompaniment (the formation of teachers and catechists).

When this goes along in complete harmony, in the joy of being and of living “together and by association,” it kindles more in us our faith in God and in humanity.

Obstacles in the way

It is the ensemble of all these events and activities which makes us Brothers today and makes us decide to continue to be Brothers.

But, alas, it does, without saying, not always go that way. Several obstacles often turn up on our path. They come first of all from our human person: weaknesses. We are often filled with discouragement, fear, inadequacy, an impulse to abandonment or flight when facing the heavy task of educating the poor. The mission seems to us gigantic and difficult, gratuitous and demanding, unselfish and sometimes unrewarding in the eyes of others. Faced with such a mission, which demands a lot of energy and devotion, several questions and doubts arise in our minds. Who are we really to go toward others and bring them the Good News? Why then should we concern ourselves with others, when we could well be building our lives in a different way?

Obstacles come also from members of the Institute and from the Church . . . “the lack or absence of requirements of *Rule* in community life, in the apostolate, and sometimes in the personal life of the Brother. There are divisions, examples of counter-witness in our surroundings: the spiritism, pedophilia, homosexuality and heterosexuality, alcoholism of some religious or men of God . . . recourse to evil practices and beliefs (sorcery or black magic) in the care and interpersonal relationship of Brothers. Confusion and ignorance about the true role of the superiors (Visitors, Councilors) is to be found in the thinking and habits of some Brothers. There is fear of the future among Western Brothers who try in a conscious or unconscious manner to lead the Institute in a given direction in order to hold on to leadership or, better still, to program the Institute’s death throes.”

African society cannot be left out of the picture. It too brings us its share of obstacles. Poverty – a famine, illnesses, the fragility of families, insecurity – makes us powerless before the magnitude of the problems to which it gives rise. Civil wars, tribalism, corruption and bad government discourage the efforts being made and the initiatives being undertaken and cause us to lose hope in striving toward the Kingdom of Heaven. Announcing the Good News becomes difficult and discouraging. “*We believe we are working in vain.*”

But the obstacles also come from the world in general: globalization. The materialistic and liberal model from the West is exported throughout the world in its cruelty and its fascination. The world has gone from the century of light to the century of speed and today to the century of the instantaneous. The world of electronic (*zapping* or *clicking*), the world of “*use once and throw away.*” Sameness and permanence have no longer any place or any meaning. Everything, immediately, in less than no time, all together, let’s consume and move on. As in “*all things pass, nothing remains,*” let us live our time and profit from it. This is present-day philosophy. Steadfastness in the will or remaining in a single and constant position throughout life has become the exception. Everything moves with the world. It becomes more and more difficult, not to say impossible, to announce one’s religious beliefs out loud or to remain a practicing Catholic. Our “visibility” in the eyes of the public suffers from this. Our Catholic religious reference points are crumbling away. People have got a taste for other things.

The courage to continue

De La Salle cleared a path for us. He had the same weaknesses, doubts and fears facing the unknown, emptiness or the uncertain. But he also had them when faced with the obstacles coming from his family, his Brothers, the ecclesiastical authorities and other teachers.

However, against the members of his family, he believed in ordinary people and surrounded himself with his teachers to start a Brotherhood. Against insecurity and the harshness of social life, against the withdrawal of some Brothers, he believed in Divine Providence to the extent of pronouncing the three Heroic Vows. Against the rejection by his Brothers and in his flight to the south, he believed in the confidence of God. In his doubt along the way, he took refuge in God (abandonment). And against the hostility of the Writing Masters, he believed in his apostolate – the educational service of poor children – and kept up the aims of his schools.

But before De La Salle, several men of faith bore witness with their lives. The Bible offers several examples of these figures:

*At the very heart of the unhappy and miserable condition of his society, **Abraham** accepted the mission of leaving his family comforts to go toward the unknown, the uncertain.³⁶*

***Moses**, in spite of being conscious of his social situation – an immigrant in a foreign country – was chosen by God and assured of his presence which guaranteed the success of his mission going beyond every human possibility.³⁷*

*What to say of **Jeremiah**? He was faced with his smallness, his incompetence, not being up to the task which awaited him.³⁸ The presence of God again showed itself here.*

*And **Jonah** . . . in his flight, because he is not certain of being credible. God ends by catching up with him and turning him back to his mission.³⁹*

*In the New Testament, **Peter**, in spite of his denial (his loss of faith) caused by his fear when faced with death,⁴⁰ ends up turning toward the Lord to become later on the head of the group of apostles and, then, of the Church.*

Should one really lose hope? We do not think so. As the Bible shows, God watches over us and changes human weaknesses, even the powers of evil and of death are transformed into good for the conversion of men and women and thus leads humanity back to good, to Paradise.

In the middle of vocational darkness, of missionary night, the dawn which brings the light is about to break. The signs of hope are there. It is up to us to open our eyes and see the signs of God. These are the occasions for us to advance and to remain faithful.

The young are our future.

The poverty of Africa unveils for us the abundant presence of the young poor in our midst . . . these young people are poor and unhappy but full of energy and with a thirst for learning and growing. In a word, they want to live and change their environment.

These young people who are swarming and that we meet everywhere in Africa: children who are illiterate, badly taught or with no schooling, child soldiers, child “witch doctors,” child refugees, displaced or quite simply abandoned. All these deprived young people, victims of all kinds of violence but open to the future, in search of meaning in their lives . . . all these young, we say, are calling us. Where can we hide in order not to see their faces? Are not our hearts on fire when we are faced by these young people?

There are also those young people who arrive in our communities and seek to live in Brotherly association with us, those young who still come knocking at our doors in order to follow Christ as disciples of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. There is, however, a lack of people to accompany them and lead them, and along with them, help to discern what the Holy Spirit wishes them to understand. These young people also call upon us and help us to believe in the slow but gradual emergence of an authentically African Institute.

But there are also the many things which are being done and are moving in the Institute. Something which comes into our minds is the different initiatives and innovations which are going on across the Institute as they are related to us in the *MEL Bulletins*.⁴¹ We also remember the title of another work entitled *The World Is Changing, So Is the Church*; we will freely add, *and with it the Institute as well*. What interests us beyond this title is the idea of taking into consideration what kind of world it is which is given us as the terrain of our mission. The Brothers are preoccupied with the search for responses, more or less adapted to the world of the poor and in particular to that of the young. The Brothers are, therefore, remaining faithful to the Founder and the mission of the Church, while taking into account the changes in the world.

Poverty opens our eyes to see God in the faces of thousands of African children. The children and young people of our schools, villages, and neighborhoods need to be taught, accompanied, directed, and counseled. In fact, the necessity for the school and for the formation of teachers is undeniable in all of Africa, called by UNESCO “*the continent of illiteracy*.”

Experiences of human weakness (powerlessness, fragility, discouragement . . .) help, in our prayer, to turn us back to God. In the Eucharist, they help us to keep going and to draw on new energies which make us say more than ever: “*De La Salle today in Africa is us*,” and his spiritual itinerary deserves to be lived.

The obstacles are, for us, challenges to be taken on. Putting them in the hands of the Lord enables us to be in a position to say to him daily, like Mary,⁴² “*Fiat*” to this humanly impossible mission. God calls us, puts his hand on us, protects us, and sends us out to others. He remains faithful.

Yes, we see our life as Brothers as persons accompanying children and young people in situations of poverty. It is not a case of our life as a “solo.” We see it as “together and by association” with

our Brothers in the Institute, and we are convinced that the Institute still has fine days ahead of it. This is why we do not hesitate to invite young people to become Brothers like us.

We live while taking on, for our part, in all our life as sons of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, what our *Rule* stipulates on the consecrated life:

*The Brothers generously and with joy devote their time, their physical well-being, their security, their intellectual and spiritual gifts, to all those who may have need of them.*⁴³

Synthesis

The synthesis presented by each group of Lasallian Regions (all five of them) reflects the voices of some Brothers who live the mystery of their vocation in the world and in the Church today. Just as what was shared by these voices from five continents cannot adequately represent those Brothers who responded to the invitation, neither should we think that the world is represented by a single voice.

At best, we can state that these voices are a cry of faith and of hope, an impassioned cry of those Brothers who ardently seek God and who love the poor unconditionally. It is possible that other Brothers do not identify with the picture they have presented. It is important, then, that each one listen to these other Brothers tell their story, in order to identify in themselves their own core values and to share the biblical and Lasallian icons that most vividly help them to transcend our present time.

The invitation to tell the story of “how I live” and “how you live” the Brother’s vocation today carries with it the pressing invitation to listen to the stories of others, also to those from other very different cultures, and to let yourself be challenged by them, in order to later recompose your own story, based on the lights and the sensitivity which they have awakened in you. The Spirit speaks to each one of us, not only from our own history, but also from history and from the stories of other Brothers.

Some Questions after Reading the Texts

General Reactions

- What is emphasized in these continental voices regarding: spirituality and an authentic Gospel experience, community life, association, the laity, the poor, the educational service?
- What do I find most shocking, moving, and challenging in these continental voices?

With Regard to the Description of My Region

- What do I agree with or disagree with?
- What description resembles the most my own experience of community, or District?
- Keeping in mind my own experience, what is missing from the description?

- How could these texts nourish my commitments and my personal or community evolution in the future?
- Which biblical icons in the description of the Region do I find most striking?

Regarding the Description of the Other Regions

- What is similar and different in the other Regions with the priorities and concerns of my District?
- What resonates the most within me?
- Which invitations and opportunities propel me to the future?
- What dangers lie ahead in the living out of my vocation?

Our Roots: The Passion for God and for the Poor at the Heart of the Foundational Journey

We Brothers who make up the team to allow Brothers in the world today to say what it is they understand by *being Brothers today* are convinced, as were the Brothers who wrote the *Declaration* of 1967, that

in the writings, the life, and the work of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, their Father, the Holy Spirit is revealed in a privileged manner and that they ought to draw from these sources the living principle for their guidance today.⁴⁴

Therefore, it is our understanding that De La Salle’s life journey, with his first associates, constitutes a significant *founding icon* for us. That is to say, his person, the events and the “evangelical crossroads” of his life are, therefore, a *window* that helps us to transcend in space and time the realities that we live today on the different continents.

Therefore, it seemed important to us that the very questions that were sent to and considered by some of the Brothers in the twenty-first century in Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, Europe and the Near East, Africa, Asia and the Pacific, were questions asked by De La Salle and the first Brothers who, along with him, associated together, so that what they lived together could be told to us in our common founding journey that occurred in France at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century.

In their name, and starting from what De La Salle left us in his autobiographical writings, and in the other writings for the life of the community and for the work, we can get a little closer to what we understand to be their common experience. As *we ask De La Salle these questions*, we will try to be in touch, with profound respect for the movement of the Spirit in our lives today, from our roots, with the adventure that leads us, from commitment to commitment, to a place that we had not imagined at the beginning.

There are memories that are dangerous, memories that challenge. Memories by which previous experiences break into the very center of our lives, giving birth to new and dangerous insights about the present. For a brief time, they shed a blinding and hardy light over our problematic assumptions about reality, showing us the banality of our pretended "realism." They burst through the norms of our habits and accepted structures of possibility with certain submissive characteristics. Those memories are like dangerous and incalculable visits of the past. They are memories that demand our attention. Memories which, in a certain way, contain the future.

Johann Baptist Metz

What is it that impassions me the most in my life as a Brother, and when do I feel most strongly "that original fire" that led me to give "a definitive yes" to God's call?

There have been times and stages in which I seemed to have lost completely *that original fire*. I think especially about the difficult years from 1712 to 1714. How much darkness I felt after the final judgment in Paris. I felt abandoned by everyone. Abandoned by the Brothers with whom I had been associated, abandoned by Nicholas Vuyart, my closest friend and colleague for so many years and in whom I had such trust, abandoned by the Church authorities who had placed so much trust in me. I headed south, where I believed I would be able to find refuge among the Brothers who would care for me and protect me. It was like another Exodus experience. Or maybe even like an exile. Grenoble was a place of hope in ruins. It was there that the Brothers from Paris found me, by means of a letter that touched my heart.

They reminded me that God had called me and consecrated me and gave me gifts and talents. They demanded that I look with eyes of faith on the critical situation that the Community was going through, and the risk of its disappearing altogether as a coherent and autonomous Society. They not only revived my memory, the place of the original fire, the revealed to me that we have a *common memory*: "my work, our work, which is God's work," building up the Church among the most abandoned and poor. In short, they reawakened our *dangerous memory* of Exodus and of exile, the hope that had united us and that had launched us on a common adventure many years before. They made demands of me. They demanded in the name of the commitment that I had made as an associate, that I obey the Body of the Society and return immediately to Paris.

I was deeply moved. In Parmenie, discerning where would be the new place the Spirit was leading us, I again recognized that the Lord was present in the Community. That no matter the place nor the time, even during the worst times, God was calling us. That each of us, gathered in community, in the deepest sense of the word, in approaching Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, each one of us and all of us together are inflamed by the powerful force of his passion for the Father and for the poor. The voice of the Brothers, then, was the effective sign of the voice of Jesus telling me that I was not alone, that no matter where we were together, he was present, giving us the power to proclaim the Gospel. There, in that place, in the midst of solitude and silence that word resounded and hope was reborn. I knew that I would find a lot of difficulties, but I also knew that nothing nor

anyone could take that deep sense of peace from me, the gift that God gave me on the hills of Parmenie. I returned with my heart burning once again.

The account of this experience today, revives not only my memory, but the awareness of my *places of memory*, the places where I had strongly felt that *original fire*.

First of all, there is a feeling. A latent fire between the coals, in the intimate conversations with Nicholas Roland, my friend, my spiritual director. The impassioned fire I presented in the unforgettable interview with Father Nicholas Barré. During the many feelings that surfaced as I was helping the teachers. During calm nights of prayer. During turbulent nights filled with doubt. Until the time when it was obvious to me that God wanted me to be among them, with them, and with the poor.

Secondly, there is a promise. When we decided to call ourselves Brothers and not teachers. When we decided to be Brothers and not clerics, Brothers, as we felt we were children of the same Father. Brothers of Jesus and brothers of abandoned children, of children without hope, of their parents with no means to help their children. Brothers to their brothers and sisters. Not priests, doctors, teachers. Simply Brothers.

But probably, if I must speak of a special moment in which I most forcefully felt that fire, I would speak of the retreat and the Assembly of 1694. There were thirteen of us, and together we shared our anxieties and our hopes, together we read the Scriptures, we prayed and we discerned where the Spirit was leading us. Together we celebrated the daily Eucharist. Finally, together we committed ourselves; and we said “yes.” We consecrate ourselves to you. We consecrate ourselves, together and by association, to one another. We consecrate ourselves to keep, together and united, schools for the poor. And we commit ourselves to an indestructible covenant. The covenant that God made with the poor.

That Trinity Sunday will always be engraved on the *collective memory* of the thirteen of us. From that *place of memory*, the invincible force of hope would be re-launched. That is what associated us with God’s plan, with the God of the poor, for the purpose of creating a prophetic project, transforming the world of the abandoned, the excluded, the marginalized, the desperate. That Sunday crystalized what had already been lived as a promise for three years before, with two of my first and beloved associates, Nicholas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin. From now on, we 12 Brother associates understood ourselves as being consecrated by God to follow him as brothers of Jesus, to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom in the Church and in the world of the abandoned.

This is the original source, the powerful spring, the place from where the passion of God and the passion for abandoned children and for young people with no hope springs forth with unforeseeable innovation. This is the center, the threshold, from where the powerful force of Jesus comes to unite us and to send us to proclaim the Gospel to the poor.

What are the obstacles, wounds, fears, and questions that mark my journey as a Brother?

So many obstacles throughout the journey, from beginning to end. Misunderstandings of some our own family members and close friends. The short-sightedness of some parish priests and bishops

who wanted to control us. Tensions with the guilds of charity schoolteachers, with the Writing Masters. The injustice felt in so many judgments for which we had no defense.

So many obstacles from an institutional Church hierarchy incapable of feeling and having pity on children and young people who were excluded, more concerned about classifying, controlling, and treating people like objects. So many obstacles from a society and government indifferent to the needs, hunger, the lack of hygiene, education, housing, of so many children and young people abandoned to themselves, with no means for training, learning to read and write, finding a decent job in society.

Obstacles from a medieval culture closed in on itself, fascinated with the classical past and incapable of embracing what was new in art, science, politics, and philosophy.

Wounds also. First of all, not our wounds but those of children and young people, of their families without the means to see to their education. Wounds of the teachers with little preparation or who followed methods and taught courses and proposed practices that did not touch lives, that were not useful for life.

Wounds caused among ourselves for reasons of personal ambition, due to ignorance, due to a lack of an evangelical life. Wounds due to the persecution by some parents, priests, some bishops and judges.

Fear, certainly. Fear of staying on with no security, without financial support, without official recognition and support in society and in the Church. Fear of not being visible, of not being seen in our role among the poor. Fear of being seduced by the ambition of some, of seeking holy orders in order to have a recognized and prestigious status in the Church. Fear of living in poverty. Fear of living with the poor. Fear of despair that threatened us and that overwhelmed us each day, especially during long periods of fighting civil cases.

Doubts and questions. How many times, especially during dilemmas when we had to make decisions, together, about our community life or about our work, questions would come up about the clarity of God's call. Was he really calling us to this very austere lifestyle? Was he really calling us to be an evangelical Community of poor people among the poor? Was God calling us to live without worrying about financial security, or about official recognition from society and from the Church? Sometimes we felt these questions like pressures that came in diverse ways. Sometimes there was pressure that came from outside the community. Sometimes we questioned ourselves from within, if it would not be easier to yield to these pressures and accept holy orders, to put ourselves under the authority of parish priests. What we were living, was it really evangelical, inspired by the Spirit, or was it moved by a hope that would lead us on courses in spiritual life that were unhealthy and sick?

Our work among the poor. Were we really doing the best we could to help abandoned children and young people? What professional and religious preparation did we have to ensure the quality of methods and content in school and in catechetical centers?

As superior, I myself had my own fears and questions. Am I mentoring my Brothers so that they grow in faith and in zeal? What is the passion that really moves me? Is it a passion for God and passion for those who suffer? And so many other deeper questions from within.

What are the faces of children and young people that you see when you think of your mission as a Brother?

This is my favorite topic. When I think of my mission and the mission of the Brothers, thousands of faces come to my mind.

Certainly, there are the unforgettable faces of Roland and Barré, whose passion deeply touched my heart. The faces of laypersons concerned about the education of the poor, of leaders in local city government. The faces of bishops who trusted in the dream that drove us to seek out the poorest among us.

In my own mission, the faces of so many Brothers, Gabriel Drolin, Nicholas Vuyart, Ponce, Barthélémy, and through them the faces of so many children in Rheims, Guise, and Laon, in Paris and in Rouen . . . in Grenoble and in so many places where, during my visits, I could enter into direct relationships with the Brothers and with children and young people. These visits moved me to believe that they had no proper civic or civil behavior. That they did not know how to behave with one another. That it was very difficult for them to accustom themselves to personal and team work. I was eager to help them, by concrete practices in school, to behave like civil, Christian men, and to enter into contact with culture, to have access to society with a decent job.

For me the Brother's mission appeared little by little by means of the many talks I had with them, especially with those who demonstrated talent for the work. Together we developed and compiled our very best practices. I assured them that behind each of these practices that appear in the *Conduct of Schools*⁴⁵ there are faces of Brothers and faces of children.

Little by little, through the years, I could name the Brothers whom I knew personally, like a shepherd knows his sheep: Robert, Dionysius, Mathieu, Hubert, Placid, Joseph . . . I knew their family situations, their talents and weaknesses, their needs. I kept in touch with them by letters and by visits. I paid more attention to those who needed it most. I invited them to do the same with their disciples.

Our mission was made clearer. Like Jesus in the midst of his disciples, we who represent him make him present. Here in the classroom, with our disciples, we are the sign of Jesus amidst his disciples. What a mysterious synthesis between the mystical experience of the union of each Brother with Jesus, united with his Brothers in community, and the common mission to which they have been called. United together in community with Jesus, each one is sent to his disciples to be the mediator of grace for them.

How could I not recall here in a special way the face of Gabriel Drolin whom I loved deeply for so many years, so different as he was from me and at the same time so close. The face of Nicholas Vuyart, whom I admired from the beginning and in whom I had unconditional trust. The face of

Barthélémy with his great talent for maintaining union among the Brothers, and for the government of the Society.

Through these faces, the faces of the poor, I invited the Brothers to recognize daily the mysterious face of Christ.

In my life as a Brother, what is it that most drives me to give the best of myself?

No doubt it is because of poverty, human suffering, as in places where God is not present. Because it is from these places where many times we are awakened by an inner light, by a star that enlightens us.

I am referring, of course, to the gift of faith. Not only a dogmatic faith of intellectual consent, nor simply an ecclesiastical faith of submission to the doctrine of the Church, but to the mysterious light of the faith that leads us in the world and in history and makes us see reality from another angle.

What helped me the most was the faith of members of my family, of my mentors and of my Brothers who progressively brought me out of myself, many times without my being aware of it, of my way of seeing and understanding reality. They helped me to look at everything based on God's plan, to try to do everything from the center of God's work and to abandon myself completely to his mysterious design of salvation. Along with that gift of faith, and awakened by it, there is hope and an impassioned love for God and for those who suffer. That is the dynamic that drove me to create, invent, and seek solutions.

What drives me most to give of myself is also the Community of Brothers. Brothers with faith and with passion. Brothers with talents for education. Brothers passionate about prayer and about the educational service of the poor. Brothers who know how to forgive, who know how to trust, who know how to follow their inspiration, who know how to obey and to abandon themselves to God's saving plan.

Although it might be difficult to accept, I am also motivated and driven by difficulties and obstacles. Many of them were places of exodus that drew me out of my security. Places of movement toward a kind of exile, toward new, unknown lands where God was leading me and toward which I had to go stripped of everything. So many times those uncomfortable places were special times of grace. To be able to say with Saint Paul that in my weakness is my strength and to be able to listen to God's mysterious invitation, "my grace is enough for you."

Yes. Without a doubt. The crossroads, although painful, were places that drove me to accept the beautiful vocation with which God graced us and to which God called us for the good of the poor. These places purified false or incomplete motivations, and they embraced new dimensions and evangelical demands.

Without that faith and that passion for God and for the poor, we are dead members of the vine, branches that do not bear fruit.

What is it that directs, motivates, and energizes us as a community of Brothers, and what is it that impedes, slows down, and kills our vitality?

I think that we said it clearly in the *Rule*.⁴⁶ It is faith that directs, motivates, and energizes us, abandoned totally to a compassionate and provident God who calls us and sends us to abandoned children and young people. Along with faith, impassioned love for this Provident God and for the children and young people confided to our care. This seems to us to be of the utmost importance.

The loss of that gift, of faith and passion, is what slows us down, impedes us, and leaves us without vitality. When the work is done without a spiritual horizon, or when religion closes in on itself, when it is reduced to sentimentality or rationalism, without passion for those God has entrusted to us.

It is as simple as that. A spirituality without a mission or a mission without a spirituality will kill us. Gradually, we move toward a personal and corporate death; and we become dead branches on the vine.

What do we do best as Brothers?

When at our best, we Brothers are able to help each other look at reality, critically analyzing the obstacles that children and young people find in society and in the Church. We are able, then, to find the most appropriate responses, invent the best programs, the most relevant methods. We are, therefore, even in a stronger position to defend what we do. We are able to depend on each other, to support one another in order to ensure that our ministry really produces results.

When at our best, we help each other in our times of doubt, of misunderstanding. We accept our differences. We love one another. This is our treasure.

When at our best, we help one another to integrate our life of prayer and our professional life. Prayer and work. When at our best, we know how to structure our community life and our professional life in such a way that we can more easily change ourselves into those apostolic mystics or mystical apostles, who do not fail to keep their eyes on Jesus when they are looking at their daily work.

When at our best, we know how to discern and to embrace God's places and moments. Those that involve success and those that involve failure. Those of growth and those of decrease. Those of creative activity and those of passion happily suffered.

But let us not forget that we do not always operate with the best of feelings, motivations, and convictions. There are also the worst of times. Above all, we have to recognize that life is not marked only by the best and the worst of times, but it is marked mainly by the ambiguity of everyday life, where most often we, between the "sparks," unconsciously nurture a sleepy faith, a hope in ruins, and a dispassionate charity of the love of God and humankind.

These times are not without their own grace. Those dark nights are privileged places of grace that lead us to a closer union with God, when we are accompanied by a wise community that knows how to support our covenant commitments.

Foundational icons

- What times in my life, in the life of Jesus or in the life of our Founder, are for me an icon that continues to motivate?
- What Gospel story expresses most deeply the mission of the Brothers of the Christian Schools?
- What are some of the contemporary icons (persons, communities, works)?

The formative icons of my youth

I will begin with the last question first, my contemporary icons.

The icons of my youth had a profound effect on me. Certainly, in the first place, some members of my family, my grandmother, my parents, some of my aunts and uncles and brothers and sisters. But I remember with special affection Nicholas Roland, a priest and an apostle who was so impassioned by God and by the poor. His dedication to the foundation and to the growth of the community of the Sisters of the Child Jesus was, without doubt, the force that strongly attracted me to him. He and his closest friends felt a passion, and they lived in a world that I scarcely knew and felt.

But there were other signs in my days of youth. In the seminary, some teachers, spiritual directors, and companions left an indelible mark on my overall life of prayer. None of these, of course, could compare with the impact that Father Barré had on me. Like Roland, Father Barré was a man who was burning with love for God and the poor. His creativity and his passion for proclaiming the Gospel to the poor led him to found the community of the Sisters of Providence. My contact with him was brief in duration, but his influence was prolonged in history by the biblical icons he left planted in the inner recesses of my heart. A Jesus who was poor, a Messiah who was consecrated without power, without a place to rest, but sent to proclaim the Gospel to the poor. That icon burst in on my reality, and like a piece of good news with unforeseeable innovation, it sparked a critique of reality as I understood and lived it; and it opened it to a *dangerous memory*, that of Jesus, who died and rose; and it was there that hope was born in feeling a call that invited me to embrace the life and ministry of Jesus with the first young teachers and with the poor.

These contemporary icons and that biblical icon revealed other ones to me. Among them, that of a poor, impassioned teacher, Adrian Nyel, who had come to Rheims to begin a school project with which I did not feel totally identified. Charity schools for poor boys, similar to the ones set up for girls by Father Roland.

What a mysterious and confluence and convergence of icons! Nyel, along with Gabriel Drolin and Vuyart, Barré, and the mysterious poor Jesus, consecrated and sent to proclaim the Gospel to the poor. Icons that clash, that shake one up, and that enlighten. Provocative icons.

Defining icons in early adult years

Now I can respond to the question about the foundational icon, the founding icon that continues to be for me a source of life: the text from the *Gospel of Luke* about the Son of Man having nowhere to lay his head.⁴⁷

But these were not my only icons of persons. Nor was the passage from the *Gospel of Luke* the only biblical icon. The icons of my youth had their own dynamic that helped me to understand other contemporary and biblical icons throughout my journey with the Brothers. Toward the end of my life, looking back, perhaps I could say that another more significant icon was appearing, a more basic icon. A living icon with many layers of meaning. The community of associated Brothers to keep together the mission that the Church was entrusting to us.

The three of us, Drolin, Vuyart, and I, met together privately in 1691 to consecrate ourselves and commit ourselves. This was the first icon that opened my entire story. Looking back to that unrepeatable place where I felt called by God, although unaware of it at the time, to unite myself to the Brothers to take on the mission of Jesus as poor. Looking ahead, to live on bread alone if necessary, in order not to abandon that Society that God was establishing for the benefit of the poor, even if all others were to give up on the project. The three of us, some years later, in 1694, gathered in Assembly and consecrated ourselves definitively to God for the purpose of keeping, together and by association, the evangelizing project of the Christian schools for the poor. This icon is, without a doubt, the one that strongly pervades our collective journey: looking back, taking in all the steps that we had taken unawares until reaching this radical place of covenant; and looking forward, because from this “iconic place” each day starting again in personal prayer, each year while on retreat, and often during assemblies, that mysterious force that tears at the heart itself of the secret and the wisdom of the mystery: the Holy Trinity. Urging, therefore, the God of hearts to make each of us one, only one, in the heart of Jesus.

Icons in the cycles of the liturgical year, especially during the assemblies

From this icon all the biblical icons that we were reading throughout the liturgical year were illuminated, such as those that appear in the *Meditations for Sundays and Liturgical Feasts*. Especially, no doubt, those icons that celebrated the time from the Rogation Days until the Ascension, Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday. The parable of the friend who arrives in the middle of the night and who pleads insistently with his friend, the insistent prayer of the widow, the prayer of consecration of Jesus for his disciples, the apostolic community united and empowered by the Spirit, the profound and unfathomable mystery of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*see Appendix A*). These biblical icons made us understand what many years later I wrote in the *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*,⁴⁸ from whence springs prayer and the employ of the Brothers, what is the center, the spiritual well, the source of living water for this community of Brothers.

The most significant icon

This fundamental everyday icon helps us to discover that God is present everywhere. That in each place we are gathered as a community, to pray or to work, each Brother from his inner core points

toward that center. That there is no geographical, relational, or personal place that is not aiming toward that center where all our strength converges, and which is the transcendental center from where all God's power comes. That, gathered together in community, in the Eucharist, we draw near to that mysterious center in which all things are reconciled in Jesus.

The community is not, then, a sign in itself. It is a sign of that transcendent center which is the Risen Jesus, in whom everything culminates and in whom everything acquires new life. Therefore, let us remember that neither physical space, nor the temple, nor life, nor the physical body of each Brother, nor an established community, nor a school work are absolutes. Jesus is the center, the icon that opens our reality to the mystery and the saving plan of God.

From that place we read the Scripture every day. Not just any text, but the one proposed by the Church in her liturgical cycles to enter progressively, by means of "the mysteries" and the "Gospel maxims," which reveal, in mind and in "the virtues," the evangelical practices of Jesus. Little by little, transformed by the strength of grace, we are evangelized with and by those whom we want to evangelize, in that way entering into the mystery of Christ, present within us and whom we represent each day in our ministry. Mystery in the ministry. Our community gradually becomes a sign of Christ to which we are united and which we represent. Here is the whole secret and the treasure of our being Brother to the other Brothers in community.

Biblical icons in the Meditations for the Time of Retreat

Finally, there are other privileged biblical icons. Those that we discovered toward the end of our common journey in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*.⁴⁹ Diverse icons that point toward the only icon of God's saving plan realized fully in Jesus. The mystery of the creative and saving act of the Father, who graces us with his light and associates us with his work as workers, rural workers, city workers, ministers. The mystery of reconciliation in Jesus, with which he associates us as his ambassadors, his disciples, his ministers. The mystery of the angels sent to the heart of the world to companion the weak. The evangelizing mystery of the Church, in which he associates us with bishops as architects and as a community of apostles to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom. The mystery of the impassioned love of God and of Jesus Christ with which he associates us as prophets. The mystery, active eschatologically in history by our roles as responsible administrators, realized at the end of time, to which we are associated as faithful servants (*see Appendix B*).

*A multitude of icons, from the same place.
A multitude of icons, one single center.*

Questions for personal reflection

- What general impression remains after reading the itinerary of De La Salle with his first Brothers in the foundational journey? What do you find surprising, shocking, joyful, or sad?
- When you consider what passions you as a Brother and what impassioned De La Salle and the first Brothers, are there any similarities, any differences? When have you lost and/or rediscovered the original fire that impelled you to say "yes."

- When you consider your “*crossroads*” and De La Salle’s, are there any similarities, any differences? Have you ever experienced “the dark night”?
- When you consider the obstacles, wounds, fears, and doubts narrated by De La Salle and your own, are there any similarities, any differences?
- De La Salle identified his own personal biblical icons. Which icon best describes and organizes your own spiritual journey?
- In what ways do the “*core values*” mentioned at the heart of the “*dangerous memory*” of our beginnings critique or confirm our values today?

Our Future: Where Is the Spirit Leading Us in This New Millennium?

Discerning in Community

You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things.

Pope John Paul II

The ***second part*** of our document *Being Brothers Today*, “Our Present,” was done based on the interaction of many Brothers who wanted to share stories by means of which they told us what they understand by the term *being Brothers today*. Obviously, the stories about the origins continue in the stories of today. We hope that this narrative reflection, of the present and of the origins, will awaken new interventions on the part of Brothers of all ages who would want to share their journeys, what they most value in them, the icons that encourage them in their inner lives.

In the ***third part*** of our document, we tried to consider some of the most significant icons of the foundational journey based on the roots of that first form of association for mission. In that way, we tried to approach what Johann Baptist Metz calls *dangerous memories*. Memories that not only recall a past but, in a certain way, already contain the future. Incalculable visits to the past that burst in on the center of our history, shaking our unquestioned convictions, inviting us to open ourselves to new horizons.

Keeping in mind those memories and those icons of the past and of the present, we want, in this ***fourth part*** of our document, to invite all the Brothers to share again. This is the most interactive part of the document in that it will not be complete until the Brothers participating in the May 2006 CIL Session⁵⁰ have had the opportunity to enrich it (*see Section 5, “Final Notes”*) and, above all, until, in Districts and Delegations, during annual retreats, on days of recollection, we Brothers can reflect together about the *places* where the Spirit is leading us.

An Exercise of Communal Discernment

We understand, therefore, that the present text is incomplete and only intends to begin a process of reflection that will bring about new reflections. Therefore, rather than presenting our own conclusions as a team, we decided to suggest a communal discernment process. This process, or exercise, of communal discernment could include the following steps:

Naming our experience

In this *first step*, we attempt to name our experience as a starting point for the discernment process. This experience includes our life in community as well as our experience as a District.

- What are the social, economic, political changes in our continent that have had the greatest impact on our life as Brothers?
- Keeping in mind the five continental voices, what life experiences as Brothers more clearly demonstrate our strengths and our weaknesses or problems?
- As we take a closer look into our community life, which of those strengths are also ours? Which strengths characterize our communities that are not mentioned in the continental voices?
- Which weaknesses or problems mentioned in the continental voices are also present in our communities?
- Name other weaknesses and problems of our community that are not mentioned in the continental voices.

Reflecting on our experience

We now, in this *second step*, take a closer look at our experience, critically analyzing the context in which it is lived, the events that have generated it, and the consequences for us.

- What are the historical events and changes in the world and in the Church that have led us to develop and to live out these strengths and these weaknesses, as described in the continental voices?
- At the community level, which factors have determined or conditioned us to live the way we live, with these strengths and weaknesses?
- In what way has our lifestyle been influenced by the society in which we live?

Shedding some light on our experience

At this stage of the discernment process (the *third step*) we remember our *dangerous memories* so that the Gospel and the Lasallian experience interfaces with our own, affirming and giving direction to our next steps.

- What Lasallian icons are being highlighted in voices from five continents?
- What are the biblical and Lasallian icons of our communities?
- As we compare our icons with their icons, what do we find most shocking? What seems to shed a new light? In what ways do they affect our life as communities?
- Which are the promises and challenges underscored by today's Gospel and Lasallian icons?
- In naming these promises and challenges, what is most important and what is secondary to our life as Brothers?
- In which moment, either community or District events, do we believe that we have witnessed the presence of the Spirit leading us toward new horizons?

Considering future alternatives

After critically reinterpreting our reality in light of Scripture and our common *dangerous* Lasallian *memory*, we open ourselves up, in this *fourth step*, toward a new horizon.

- In light of these challenges and promises, what are some of the alternative ways to live out our identity as Brothers today, especially in response to the urgent educational needs of the poor?
- If we had to write our future history as Brothers, how would we write the next chapter of our narrative?
- What type of consecrated life, community, and association for the educational service of the poor do we wish to develop and aim for in the future?
- What type of association with our lay partners for the educational service of the poor do we want to aim for in the future?
- Which is the *sign* that we want to become in our life as Brothers?

Choosing a horizon

Having considered alternative futures that have emerged in our experiences in light of Scripture, we now, in this *fifth step*, compare those alternatives with our current way of living; and we choose the life we want to live as Brothers today.

- What are the new challenges and promises that best re-energize our hope as Brothers?
- What narrative is closest to the heart of Saint John Baptist de La Salle?
- What is the narrative or story that would best enable us to live the Gospel and to proclaim it more authentically to the poor?
- What type of communities will best enable us to live more fraternally and more apostolically?
- What type of association for the educational service of the poor will allow us to be more bold, courageous, and radical?
- What type of consecrated life and spiritual practices will allow us to become a more authentic witness?

Deciding our action plans

Having reflected on our experience in the light of our common *dangerous memories* and having imagined our future horizon, we now, in this *sixth and final step*, seek practical ways to move toward that horizon.

- What means and strategies do we need in order to “enflesh” the alternatives that we have chosen?
- What risks are we willing to take personally and as a community?
- With whom do we want to create this history? With whom are we willing to walk toward this horizon?
- How do we create and provide opportunities for real conversion on a community and District level to happen?

- What personal and communal changes do we have to make in order to succeed in our community and District projects, especially for the poor?

Final Notes

These reflections are the result of the shared experience of the CIL Session in Rome, which was held from May 7 to May 20, 2006.

May they serve to encourage your own reflection and prayer, and may they enrich your community sharing.

Contributions Based on the First Part of the Document “Being Brothers Today”: Our Context

Where are the principal changes that you have experienced in the last twenty years in the realm of socio-economics and the political situation of society, the life of the Church, and the life of the Institute?

The socio-economic and political realm

- Influence of the means of communication and information, a consumer society; the presence of new technology is the source of new types of poverty.
- Financial inequality produces even greater distance between rich and poor; economic progress generates this inequality.
- Awareness of belonging to the world and an assessment of the immediate as priority.
- We have gone from the culture of saving to that of wellbeing.
- We live in a consumer, materialistic, and competitive society.
- A “provisional” civilization (in which nothing is long lasting).
- Globalization gives birth to a society of desire.
- Thinking about education as a consumer product.
- There is an attempt to politicize society.
- Power is sought without regard for the common good.
- There is corruption and a lack of ethics in the world of large corporations.
- Great changes as regards globalization and international affairs.
- Greater intercultural and inter-religious awareness.
- The clash of civilizations makes us discover the phenomenon of immigration, which should touch the consciousness of each developed country.
- Evolution of the family structure generated by family crises; family life has deteriorated; parents work to maintain a determined status and lifestyle; parents do not always have control over their children because of their work situation; kids are “given everything.”
- Emphasis on difficulties makes it difficult for persons to become adults.
- Crisis of meaning with a resulting loss of reference, values, and authority.
- The growing need to be able to adapt to a changing competitive system.
- An aging European population.
- The process of the European Union provides security to Europeans.
- In Africa, there are still dynamics of maintaining power and neo-colonialism.

- Explosion of a rural exodus in Africa and problems resulting from this.

The life of the Church

- Assessment of the reflection and commitment of the laity without an established hierarchical system.
- The creation of new places to form the Church community.
- The value of inculturation, ecumenism, and inter-religious dialogue.
- The impact of Pope John Paul II on young people.
- In Latin America, the Church as an institution is valued for its stand in favor of the poor and against injustice.
- The Africanization of the apostolic mission with its consequences based on the proclamation of the Word; participation of lay Christians in the life of the Church and the role of the deacon.
- Separation between the Church and society.
- The view of young people in their wanting to move away from Church hierarchy.
- There is minority influence and situations of privilege within the Church.
- Very little social credibility.
- The existence of a division between the official Church line and concrete pastoral ministry practice in some dioceses.
- There is an existing dualism between the official, hierarchical Church and the Church of the believers.
- The creation of new Church movements of a conservative nature.
- A pending task is the presence of the laity and women in the Church.
- Inflexibility and lack of honesty in certain cases.
- Scandals within the Church (finances, sexual-pedophilia) based on generalized ideas about institutions.

The life of the Institute

- A greater appreciation for and search for community life based on fraternity.
- Young people are yearning to live their spiritual lives in community.
- Young people are seeking opportunities for sharing on a deep level with someone in community and to deepen their spiritual lives.
- We live in a Spirit-filled time; we value life and community; we think that life is more important than structures in themselves.
- We think that the sociological phenomenon of committed laypersons is a grace from God and a sign of the times.
- The formation of Brothers and laypersons must be given importance.
- Effective responses to the needs in our own situation.
- A trend toward the needy classes, toward the world of the poor.
- Effort to take care of the poor and the needy.
- Assessment of the quality of vocations, rather than the number.
- In educational practice, there is not just one model for teaching; the school is one of the models, but there are other models of non-formal education that promote learning.

- We have a democratic view of the way we run things and in the way we plan, but there does exist an individualism in certain places.
- It is difficult to envision the future model that is coming.
- There exists a certain pessimistic view, instability, perplexity, and slowness to change.
- Individualism is influenced by globalization and the propagation of technological knowledge.
- Our conversations, dialogues, and communication of vital experiences and of faith tend to be decreasing; television, music, and computers have replaced ease of encounter.
- We are complacent; we dare not correct the Brothers.
- How to approach the future of the Brothers given the presence of the laity and committed associates.
- There are Brothers who are recognized as being nothing more than administrators and managers, and from this comes a certain “invisibility” from the Brothers and from the community.
- Questions about the role of the community and the role of the Brothers in places where they do not have “power” in the schools.
- The vocational diminishment affects the way the Brothers are organized and how they feel; the Brothers are decreasing while students and works are increasing.
- Ongoing vocation crisis.
- Aging of the Brothers.
- The need for geographical restructuring in certain Districts.

Contributions Based on the Second Part of the Document “Being Brothers Today”: Our Present

*What most impassions us, the feeling of the original fire,
significant experiences and fears in our life journey as Brothers?*

Things that impassion

- The search for God and the recognition of God’s love.
- Being with my Brothers in community.
- Embracing the identity of the Brother based on fraternity.
- The closeness and the understanding of the Brothers.
- The mission; being able to teach and to be a part of a teaching-learning situation.
- Contact with education, the classroom, and catechesis; turned on by the fire of God’s call.
- The presence of God in educational activities.
- Reference to the poor and needy.
- Being close to the needy.
- Making our lifestyle explicit in the parish.
- Embracing with the Brothers an apostolic and missionary project.
- A joint and shared hope for embracing the Lasallian charism on the part of Brothers and committed laity.
- The generosity of volunteers and other persons who embrace the Lasallian mission with us.

- In the educational relationship with children and young people, teachers and those who work in pastoral ministry
- Collaborating in awakening of vocations and the formation of young Brothers.
- A close relationship with other religious congregations; sharing different models of being Church.
- Opening a new school.
- Contact with the indigenous world in that it permits the discovery of another type of living.
- Youth meetings, missions.
- The attitude of service on the part of those who assume District administrative positions.
- The wisdom of the senior Brothers.
- The feeling of belonging to an international Institute; exchanges with Brothers from other Regions of the Institute.

Some fears and concerns

- The disenchantment of some senior Brothers who are no longer involved in the ministry of education.
- Living with Brothers who have lost the original passion of their vocations.
- Discovering Brothers who devote a lot of time to watching television and using the computer.
- The loneliness of certain Brothers.
- The tension of maintaining the institution based on the promotion of evangelization.
- Accepting administrative positions has prevented us from having contact with education; sometimes administration has occupied our minds but not our hearts.
- Not proposing innovative challenges.
- An unknown future.

As a community of Brothers, we are motivated and energized by . . .

- Believing that we are led by the Spirit of God and that we are gathered under the sign of community.
- Knowing that we are doing God's work.
- Sharing our vocational life journey.
- Feeling part of a project of liberation and transformation.
- The witness of Brothers, partners, and associates.
- Fraternal relationships.
- Shared dreams.
- Continuing to be a reference point for young people, adults, and catechists.
- Fidelity to the poor.
- The process of discernment.
- The Institute's own fragile nature that makes us discover the sense of belonging and the sense of universality.
- The need to rely on and believe in persons and their abilities.
- Being Brothers in a Church where there is distance on account of diverse ministries.
- The presence of young people who value our vocation.

- The renewal of the life of prayer.
- Association with lay persons; institutional processes lived in relation to shared mission and association.
- Working in collaboration with Church, social, and cultural organizations.
- Our openness to pluri-religions and different cultures.
- The creativity necessary to think about new types of presence in other contexts and new ways of living in community.
- Radical openness toward ongoing transformation.
- The vitality of our vocation; boldly taking on transmission of a renewed evangelizing educational project that can “touch hearts.”
- Reflection on the new ways of drawing closer to God, in prayer and in Lasallian zeal.

Challenges and opportunities for the future

- To rediscover and revitalize community life and the way we witness to the general public.
- To assess spirituality and prayer as the essence of our consecration.
- To believe in persons, trusting and appreciating their abilities.
- To relativize our numbers; to appreciate the depth of the sign as witnesses; raise the issue of the significance of quality; being signs of the hereafter based on the effectiveness of our witness.
- To opt for formation.
- To opt for association.
- To integrate and propagate our evangelizing educational project.
- To maintain unity with the Church.
- To embrace our mission with hope.
- To discover new educational frontiers.
- To respond to the inter-cultural and inter-religious situation.

Aspects of our vocation that would appropriately be considered by the next General Chapter

Based on the particular reality of your continent, and on your personal convictions and group dialogue, from your general assemblies, and on your reading of parts 1 and 2 of this document, what aspects of our vocation would need to have an in-depth look at the next General Chapter?

Explain why you think this is so.

a. United States and Canada

- Community Life: the importance of the life of prayer; the integral dimension of our consecration; the development of spirituality among youth; trust in the role of celibacy; community innovations; the difficulty of a lifestyle that merges with a lack of prophecy; and the problem of individualism.
- Vocation Ministry: to consider vocation ministry as being linked to the community and to the life of the Brothers and not the exclusive domain of those directly in charge of that

ministry; and the possibility of accepting temporary vocations based on an appraisal of belief among the different ways of belonging.

- Senior Brothers: the pastoral care of senior Brothers based on mission criteria.
- Apostolic Mission: to encourage the Brothers to engage in enriching experiences of apostolic mission.
- Service to the Poor: to deal with the reality of service to the poor, the awareness of it and the intentionality of it in our educational works.

b. *Pacific Asia (PARC)*

- Community Life: the quality of community life; examining our communion as Brothers based on our embracing the idea of “together and by association . . .”; communion as a sign of life, an expression of service, and a prophetic sign.
- Vocations: attention to vocational aspects of the Brother’s life that require serious consideration, especially: the vocation as lived in diverse situations; the options for the service of the poor, including in totalitarian regimes; the meaning of the vocation lived in diversity, considering it as an opportunity; and the tension between the existing commitments of the Brothers and emerging needs.
- Association: the imperative of association; the role of the Brothers in participating in this reality.
- Inter-Religious Dialogue: the reality of the world in which we live (cultural diversity, pluri-religions, post-modernism, etc.).

c. *Latin America and the Caribbean*

- Community Life: involvement of the Brothers in community life; and ideas about power, control, and domination in living religious life and in the community.
- Consecrated Life: imagining the life of prayer based on living out the Gospel and our spirituality in our context; giving importance to a more Church-centered experience, not overly centered in the Brothers themselves; reformulating the relationship of the Brothers with the world, with lay persons, and with the Church; redoing and designing the new way of saying what we always express; taking note of the discrepancy between language and what is actually lived; the language that is used to describe consecrated life is not always questioned sufficiently on the part of the Brothers.
- Association and Mission: establishing the Brother’s identity in association; collaboration with other institutions which creates for us a richer and deeper understanding of the mission of Jesus Christ and of the Kingdom of God; an awareness of the future linked with collaboration with other forces without thinking that we Brothers are the only owners of the mission; the new levels of belonging; and openness to new language.

d. *Europe and the Near East*

- Association of Brothers: to consider the topic of association among the Brothers from a new definition of consecration and of community in relation to mission.
- Association of Lay Persons: reflection and discussion on association with lay persons based on educational service to the poor and based on evangelization within a secularized context.

e. *Africa*

- Problems to Be Considered: the African diversity and the reality of common elements; poverty; the lack of freedom of expression; illiteracy; the presence of Islam; the world of sects; unschooled children; unemployment; child workers; alcoholism; prostitution; young people recruited by sects; vandalism; pillaging; the critical impact of poverty; the little significance of Brothers on the Church level; and activism and routine in the life of the Brothers.
- Wide-Ranging Topics to Be Considered: the identity of the Brother; aspects of consecration (prayer and spiritual life); formation (the value of memory in reference to Lasallian tradition, knowledge of the Institute, and specific Lasallian formation).

Contributions Based on the Third Part of the Document “Being Brothers Today”: Our Origins

What are the aspects of the life and mission of De La Salle and his first associates that are important for the life and mission of the Brothers today?

a. *Africa*

- Criteria & Actions:
 - The life of faith: prayer in the life of the Brothers; embracing the spirit of faith following the example of De La Salle; a balance between prayer and activity (prayer should commit us to action); the role of the Brother in community; enabling the community.
 - The vow of association: primacy of the vow of association; association with the Brothers; practical consequences (living fraternity, sharing, mutual trust, mutual respect).
 - Accompaniment: accompaniment in vocation ministry, initial formation, ongoing formation; accompaniment which promotes the perseverance of the Brothers and the efficiency of the apostolate; special accompaniment for young Brothers after the scholasticate; creating structures that will allow for the accompaniment of young Brothers and for training them to accompany others.
 - Creating structures that will allow for the accompaniment of young Brothers and for training them to accompany others.

b. *Europe and the Near East*

- Criteria:
 - To be impassioned for God and for the poor.
 - The evangelical life journey, such as De La Salle’s going from Exodus to the call to salvation.
 - To be sensitive of the lack of humanity in facing situations of persons who live in poverty; having an attitude of fairness that orients us toward God.

- Point of view: The community (the Brothers), association (with lay persons who are committed with us), and in collaboration with those who are attentive to the poor where they are.
- Actions:
 - Community: to discover our community as a place where the experience of God is shared; to learn to create links of fraternity starting from our differences; to understand community as a place of fraternal relationships; to appreciate the job of the community director; to learn to read and to pray together, starting from the Word of God in order to re-read our life as consecrated men.
 - Associates and partners: to receive them and to journey together with them from commitment to commitment; to appreciate the community as a point of reference and place of mission.
 - Organization on the Lasallian level in Europe: to learn to leave behind structures that are too burdensome to allow for creativity; to organize on the European Lasallian level; to do this, it is important to review the *Rule* as regards association, the community, and the passion for the poor.

c. *Latin America and the Caribbean*

- Criteria:
 - De La Salle was aware of reality and open to events; he knew how to accept and to confront new challenges with appropriate methods; he sought discernment, and he approached decision-making from his seeking the divine plan.
 - De La Salle developed a participatory process with those around him; with them, he created a fraternal community; together they prayed, looked for solutions, made decisions, analyzed and looked at reality with a critical eye; he was concerned about the integral formation of the Brothers.
 - De La Salle knew how to be in dialogue with the Church, with society, and with the Brothers; this enabled him to govern the Institute; and in doing this, the Institute grew based on its mission to teach and to evangelize.
- Actions:
 - To raise the question of the future based on proactive attitudes; what does it mean to be a Brother today and tomorrow?; what is it that we want to be, and how do we want to achieve this?; do current government structures help us respond to the above questions?
 - To establish coherence between faith, life, and science; will we have to prepare ourselves for religious life with greater attention to science and to professionalism in order to better deal with intercultural and inter-religious dialogue?; we have to be lively in responding to the demands of reality, offering a visible witness.
 - To simplify and make more flexible current structures that no longer respond to change, to new challenges from society, the Church, and the Institute; to offer on

the part of the Institute a study of new alternatives for the government and leadership of religious life; to build community, governing and saying something about minorities, so that all are involved in activities and in decisions; to review the criteria for representative authority: quantitative, qualitative, places for the poor or for others; to opt for a Chapter that is either for decision-making or for leadership, or for a Chapter that combines both aspects.

d. *Pacific Asia (PARC)*

- Criteria:
 - A convergence of the work to be shared.
 - Following the action plan of activities based on long-term strategy.
- Actions:
 - Revitalize community life of the Brother, required in order to embrace our vision of being Brother and to carry out the understanding of shared mission and association; to do this, it is necessary: to put in place structures of accompaniment and leadership; to develop trust in community life; to explore concepts of community based on the Trinity (we are called) and communion (united with . . .); to make possible some conclusions on our personal prayer life; to promote evangelization and catechesis; to be able to continue embracing our identity as Brother.
 - To revise personal identity and to abandon to Providence in order to revise the most important elements of the life itself.
 - To understand better the shared mission and to accept inclusivity in order to appreciate the views of collaborators; to abandon the need to exercise control; to accept their witness.
 - To review the degree to which leadership structures and the *Rule* guarantee appropriate coherence, vitality, and response to the needs of society and of the poor (structures of accompaniment, formation programs, initial formation of young Brothers, trust in Brother directors . . .).

e. *United States and Canada*

- Criteria:
 - An ongoing Exodus experience, based on De La Salle and his dedication to the Brothers and, from them, the educational service of the poor.
 - To focus on the life of faith, zeal, and the vow of association.
 - To fix attention to the most significant icon: the expression of the image of Christ.
 - To appreciate the witness of De La Salle: to abandon the barriers to the priesthood and to commit himself to the Brothers; the creativity of his commitment to the community and to the mission; he acted from the creativity of the Spirit, and he was not tied to the teaching of the law; he experienced the Exodus of leaving behind his

family, money, his canonry, and privilege to commit himself to the Brothers and walk with them toward the poor; in Parmenie, he grew in self-knowledge, in his personal prayer life, and in his commitment to the Brothers.

- Actions:
 - To consider as transversal axes the life of consecration, the life in community, and the mission.
 - To discover and appreciate, from the perspective of consecration and shared mission, the role of the associates in the dialogue of *being Brothers today*.

Appendix A: The Fragile Promise Contained in Our Foundational Icons Which Point toward the Horizon of the Brothers' Community

When you consider the most significant biblical icons that were enlightening the vocational, community, and missionary journey of the first association, we can get a better idea from the inside of the most obvious symbolic and operative forces that led De La Salle and the first Brothers to those unprecedented places where the Spirit took them.

Rather than giving a lot of attention to the personal and biblical icons of De La Salle, we will focus on the *corporate icons* of the community. Especially those that appeared in the very important crossroads of the time of foundation, the Assembly of 1694. Adding still other icons that appeared toward the end of the community journey, such as those that are spelled out in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*,⁵¹ a collection of meditations which was written after 1705 and before the Founder's death in 1719. That is to say, we focus here exclusively on the *corporate icons* identified during his mature years, from his forties to his sixties and after having gone through a long Gospel journey.

The icons of 1694

For that reason we examine in the first place, the icons of that common journey of the community in 1694, gathered together for a retreat and for the Assembly. We focus our attention on the Scripture readings for those days: from the Rogation days after the Fifth Sunday of Easter up until Trinity Sunday, the day on which the Brothers and De La Salle consecrated themselves formally to the Most Holy Trinity "to procure his glory, as far as they were able, and as God will require of them."

We need to explore, therefore, the following meditations: *Meditation #37* for Rogation Monday; *Meditation #38* for Tuesday; *Meditation #39* for the Eve of the Ascension; *Meditation #40* for the Feast of the Ascension; *Meditation #41* for the Sunday within the Octave of the Ascension; *Meditation #42* for the Eve of Pentecost; *Meditation #43* for Pentecost Sunday; *Meditation #44* and *Meditation #45* for Monday and Tuesday after Pentecost; and finally *Meditation #46* for Trinity Sunday.⁵²

The first thing that caught our attention is the interplay between the biblical icons and the experience of the Community gathered together in Assembly, which finally converged on Trinity Sunday. It was about this “sacred mystery, the object of the Church’s most profound veneration in heaven as well as on earth,” the beginning and source of all other *mysteries*. And, we could add, the center toward which all of them are headed.

Trinitarian life, then, as the source from where every journey of faith starts – “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed”⁵³ – and the center toward which all journeys converge. On this day “you should pay special honor, and dedicate yourself entirely, to the Most Holy Trinity, to contribute as far as you will be able to extend its glory over all the earth.” This sentence explicitly recalls the rite of association of the Brothers, their consecration to keep together gratuitous schools. At the same time, it points toward an obligation: to reveal this mystery to those to whom they have been sent. “They, too, were consecrated to the Most Holy Trinity in baptism, just as you were.”

The consecrated life of the Brothers, who are associated to share the mission, is nothing other than participation in Trinitarian life. A life that is focused totally on the contemplation of that unfathomable mystery, in order to reveal it to others.

That convergence appears gradually in the meditations for the previous days. The Most Holy Trinity is the most significant founding icon of the association of Brothers, but throughout the Assembly during which they were making decisions for their community life and for their professional life, the Brothers followed no other iconographic trail than that proposed by the liturgy of the Church. It is that icon where the icons of Sacred Scripture are opened. In that icon, the mysteries are made present to us.

The texts that shed light on this experience of the Brothers as they gathered in Assembly are the following:

- The icon of the *incessant request of a friend* who receives another friend in the middle of the night⁵⁴; an icon for Brothers who feel driven to pray to the good and loving Father of orphans and the poor, to the Father who has called them as his children to care for other abandoned children.
- The icon of *Jesus praying for his disciples*, consecrating himself to the Father for those whom the Father has entrusted to him⁵⁵; an icon for the community of Brothers, in which each Brother prays from the profound center of Jesus present in the community, for his own disciples. Entreating the God of hearts, that your own heart and that of your Brothers, will be one in the heart of Jesus.
- The icon of the *apostolic community gathered together and praying* as they wait for the Holy Spirit; an icon of a fragile, fearful, weak community, but united with one another in prayer, they believe in the promise by which Jesus assures them “that our heavenly Father will send his Spirit, filled with love and goodness for us, to all those who ask him”⁵⁶; the promise of the Advocate⁵⁷; the strength of the Spirit that opens eyes of faith, now enlightened, they are now able to understand the Scriptures and to explain them clearly; a founding icon for the community of associates whose obligation it is to touch hearts, an aim they cannot achieve without the strength of the Spirit.

- Finally, the icon of an *apostolic community* that is now able, not only to see all things with the eyes of faith, but is now given the fervor, the passion to move and to act by grace⁵⁸; a living icon for the spirit that characterizes them, the gift of faith and impassioned love.

In short, when you explore the biblical icons, even superficially, that enlighten the *place* from where the first community of Brothers consecrated itself for the first time to the Holy Trinity, all of them seem to converge in that Trinitarian life as lived in this association for mission. We are Brothers because we are children of the compassionate Father who calls us to care for those who are abandoned. We are Brothers because we are brothers of Jesus, participating in his own mission, that of giving life. We are Brothers because we have been enlightened in the midst of darkness, in order to be able to understand, in order to be able to proclaim the Gospel of life to the poor. We are Brothers, mystical and active. We are contemplative Brothers who represent the mysterious plan of salvation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the daily life of educational service.

Gradually, day after day, through prayer and Eucharist, year after year, during their annual retreat, the Brothers continue unawares to go more deeply into that unfathomable mystery of Trinitarian life which consecrates them as Brothers.

Appendix B: The Icons of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*

With this a backdrop, we can now discover the richness and the profundity of the perspectives and the horizon of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*.⁵⁹

Meditations #193 & #194: Lay Brothers as well as other men and women teachers, Brothers for our brothers, “fathers and mothers,” who have neither training nor the time for their own children, whom they have abandoned. We are God’s *cooperators*, the Father’s workers, his *ministers* sent to the city, to the vineyard.

- We are called by God the Father, as his cooperators, his workers, his ministers, from the place of darkness and destruction where many men and women experience the absence of God. From those places of darkness, with enlightened eyes to see and with impassioned hearts to touch other hearts, we are gratified with the gift of faith and the loving passion of God for the poor. We cooperate in making a new creation.
- We are not priests. We are laity who exercise a lay ministry, gratuitously, for education. We are called as others are called, men and women teachers, also lay, also inflamed by the passion of God and also sent to the vineyard. But we are not like them. Neither priests nor laity, but Brothers. We consecrate ourselves and we form one body, a Society called to live the exclusivity of this call of the Father, giving gratuitously what we have received. For this purpose, we consecrate ourselves, as far as we are able and as God requires of us.

Meditations #195 & #196: Brothers and disciples of Jesus, his *ambassadors and ministers* to represent his power for those who are far from salvation.

- We are invited to walk in pursuit of Jesus, to follow him on his journey. Our following him does not have as its object personal perfection, but perfection in compassion. That is to say,

our “following Christ” requires, not only an exterior imitation of Christ, but that we are united with him in such a way that he is the center of the community of the Brothers. Identified with our only teacher, the power of the passion and the resurrection is made present in each of us for those who have no hope of redemption.

- Disciples and ambassadors of Jesus, we are not his priests. Our participation in the mystery of reconciliation is not from the altar, but in our relationships with our disciples. It is there that the powerful force of grace is made present.
- The other men and women teachers are also invited to discipleship to proclaim the Good News to the poor. We do it as consecrated men in our community of disciples where we commit ourselves to read Scripture every day, to learn how to act as Jesus did, so that we can do the same with our disciples. From the community, we become the visible sacrament and sign of Jesus. In the community, each branch is connected to the one vine. All our actions aim toward Jesus; and from him comes forth all the power of our new actions in the ministry that makes him present.

Meditations #197 & #198: *Contemplative and active* Brothers, messengers that know the mysterious plan of God, and who are sent to the heart of the world which is in darkness, like visible angels that know the mystery and that accompany and reveal the Good News of salvation.

- We are sent to the world. We do not flee from the world. We are not monks. We live a rhythm that is similar to that of monastic life, of prayer, and of work; but we live it in a different way. As in monastic life, we are impassioned by the love of God and we seek to know Him, to contemplate Him in prayer every day. But our prayer is apostolic. We go up to God and we come down from him with the needs of our disciples and to know the mystery and God’s plan for our disciples. We come down with that knowledge to reveal it to those who are far away. The going up and the coming down, like one movement, are centered in God and his saving plan for the poor. Our life does not consist, then, in “fleeing from the world.” On the contrary, the sending obliges us to incarnate ourselves in the world of abandoned children and young people, to accompany them from that place, as angels proclaiming the Good News. Each place is, then, a place of incarnation and openness to a transcendent God. Our teaching roles are that privileged place of the experience of the saving action of God.

Meditations #199 & #200: *The community of Brothers in the Church.* As a community of equals, it is a *sign of communion and of mission* that puts the evangelizing roles of those who have been destined by God and by Christ to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom within reach of those who are far from salvation. We are not presbyters but apostles of the Gospel, builders of the Church in service of the Word. We are ministers of the Church.

- Like the apostles and bishops who preceded them in the history of the Church, by means of our roles and professional work, we participate in a Church ministry, the ministry of the Word. Our entire educational project is, therefore, one of evangelization. Initiation into the mysteries of faith, the practice of the Gospel maxims, of prayer and of the sacraments, are framed within education, so that those who have lived without hope, can now participate in life to the full.

- We are not concerned about honorary titles not privileged rank within the Church, and we do not aspire to ecclesiastical status that will assure for us recognition and brilliance. We are simply Brothers to our brothers and sisters. Nor do we act independently from ecclesial authority. Together and by association, we are in the Church signs of what it means to be truly a Church that is stripped and poor, consecrated from mission, fraternal communion, where charisms are shared to fulfill the one mission.
- In certain ways, our fraternity provides for many lay persons and for many young people, who otherwise would feel marginalized within the Church, the place for living covenants and for building the Kingdom.

Meditations #201, #202, #203, & #204: Brothers who live the *same demands as did the prophets*: an impassioned love for God and the procurement of God's glory, and an unconditional and ardent love for those who have been entrusted to us.

- Like Samuel, we are sentries and prophets captivated and seduced by the love of God, with our eyes set on the powerful Word of God that directs history. Our eyes are also set on the events of history. We are always ready to intervene prophetically with the force of that powerful Word. We are not teachers of the law that oppresses with obligation. We are prophets of love. To make others discover the mysterious plan of the Father who pardons, reconciles, sanctifies.
- We are not fanatical and inflexible defenders of the law. We exercise our role as prophet in the daily exercise of our employ, inventing the best teaching methods, mentoring, encouraging, critiquing, leading. Always loving with the passion of God for those who suffer.

Meditations #205, #206, #207, & #208: We are *God's stewards and deputies*, visible signs of God's saving love. We are the bursars, the servants, sent by the Father to work in the Kingdom.

- As stewards, we do not act like landlords. We are workers in the Kingdom, building day by day through our work that new world and new creation, which will reach its fullness in Christ at the end of time. We do not dominate others. Our leadership is that of faith and love.
- We do not run away from the eschatology of end-time, nor are we prophets who threaten with destruction and punishment. Builders of the Kingdom, we believe that the saving force of the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, is here already and now active. We rejoice daily in the gifts and talents that we put into action to proclaim and to build the Kingdom that is growing in history without our being aware of it, until reaching its fullness.
- At the end, all icons are turned around. We are not the ones who are the saviors; rather it is those whom we serve, who become our defenders and saviors. We see ourselves associated with them, gathered in one communion, in one contemplation of the unfathomable mystery of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and we will shine like the stars, with the light that burst through the darkness at the beginning of our journey.

In summary, we can say that the biblical icons of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* resound and converge with those proposed by De La Salle during those days of the Assembly in 1694. Each Brother, associated from deep within himself, from deep within each Brother, from deep within

the community, is invited to follow a continuing movement which, pulled away from his daily life, with its joys and doubts, its promises and hopes, leads him toward the center which is Jesus. From that center he goes out, driven to fulfill his ministry, to represent what he has seen and lived.

Endnotes

1. *Being Brothers Today: Toward the 44th General Chapter Document #3* was first published, with limited circulation, in 2006 in preparation of the General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools that was held in Rome, Italy, in the spring of 2007.

2. The document was primarily written by Brother Miguel Campos, with the assistance and collaboration of a committee composed of Brother Patricio Bolton of Argentina, Brother Timothy Coldwell of the USA, Brother André Pierre Gauthier of France, Brother Angel Ricardo Laguda of the Philippines, & Brother Edouard Luzolo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Brother Miguel Campos, who was a General Councilor of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools at the time the document was written, earned his doctorate in theology at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, Italy.

3. Cf. *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1967).

4. Cf. *Report of the International Assembly 2006: Toward the 44th General Chapter Document #4* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2006).

5. Cf. *Concerning the Work of the "Ad Hoc" Committee on the Rule: Toward the 44th General Chapter Document #2* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2005).

6. Cf. *MEL Bulletin #20: The Educational Service of the Poor* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2005).

7. Cf. *Report of the Brother Superior General: Toward the 44th General Chapter Document #5* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2007).

8. As mentioned in a previous note, Brother Miguel Campos worked with a committee composed of Brothers from Argentina, Democratic Republic of the Congo, France, Philippines, and USA.

9. Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis: Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life* (Vatican, 1965).

10. Cf. *MEL Bulletin #20: The Educational Service of the Poor*.

11. Cf. *MEL Bulletin #4: Lasallian Educational Innovation* by Nicolas Capelle FSC (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, n.d.).

12. Cf. *MEL Bulletin #16: Lasallian Presence* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2005).

13. *MEL Bulletin #2: Lasallian Association: The Ongoing Story* by Antonio Botana FSC (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2003).

14. *MEL Bulletin #8/9: The Educator's Life Journey* by Antonio Botana FSC (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2004).

15. *Bulletin #250: Associated for the Lasallian Educational Mission* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2005).

16. Cf. *Declaration*, #12 to #14.

17. Cf. *Declaration*, #16 to #18.

18. Cf. *Declaration*, #19 to #27.

19. Cf. *Declaration*, #18 to #34.

20. Cf. *Declaration*, #35 to #42.

21. Cf. *Declaration*, #43 to #51.

22. Cf. *Declaration*, #14.

23. Cf. *Declaration*, #11: *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Vatican, 1965); *Gravissimum Educationis: Declaration on Christian Education* (Vatican, 1965); and *Populorum Progressio: Encyclical on the Development of Peoples* (Vatican, 1967).

24. Cf. *Declaration*, #5 and #6.

25. Cf. *Declaration*, #8 and #9.

26. Cf. *Vita Consecrata: Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World* (Vatican, 1996), #3.

27. The Congress on Consecrated Life, which was held in Rome, Italy, in 2004, had as its theme *Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity*. It was a collaborative project of the Union of Superiors General of men (USG) and the International Union of Superiors General of women (USIG).

28. Cf. *Declaration*, #2 and #3.

29. Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, #2.

30. Cf. *Declaration*, #11.1-4.

31. What is intended here is actually more along the lines of saying: "For others this conversion has to do with no longer holding onto positions of school or ministry leadership due to a lack of belief in the capabilities or commitment of lay persons"

32. Brother Michel Sauvage FSC (1923-2001).

33. Rev. Bernard Lee SM (1913-2020).

34. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1987), #50.

35. *Declaration*, #34.2.

36. Cf. *Genesis* 2:1-9.

37. Cf. *Exodus* 3:7-12.

38. Cf. *Jeremiah* 1:4-10.

39. 39Cf. *Jonah* 1:1-16.

40. Cf. *John* 18:15-27.

41. See the series of more than 50 publications of *MEL Bulletins* [Mission Éducative Lasallienne in French or Lasallian Education Mission in English] on the Institute website under the heading of “publications” (www.lasalle.org).

42. Cf. *Luke* 1:38.

43. *Rule*, #35c.

44. *Declaration*, #5.

45. Cf. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by F. de la Fontainerie and Richard Arandez FSC and edited by William Mann FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996).

46. Cf. “Rule of 1705” and “Rule of 1718” in *Rule and Foundational Documents by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated and edited by Augustine Loes FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002).

47. Cf. *Luke* 9:57-62.

48. Cf. *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arandez FSC and edited by Donald Mouton FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1995), #193 to #208.

49. Cf. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arandez FSC & edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994).

50. In May 2006, the Brothers Visitor, Brothers Auxiliary Visitor, and Brothers President of all of the governmental units of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (Districts, Sub-Districts, & Delegations) gathered at the International Lasallian Center (CIL) in Rome, Italy,

for two weeks to study the document *Being Brothers Today*. Brother Álvaro Rodríguez (Superior General), Brother William Mann (Vicar General), and Brother Miguel Campos (General Councilor) made presentations to and interacted with the participants during this study session that was led by Brother Miguel Campos with the assistance of the CIL Staff.

51. Cf. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, #193 to #208.

52. Cf. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, #37 to #46.

53. *John* 20:29.

54. *Luke* 11:5-6.

55. *John* 17:15.

56. *Luke* 11:13.

57. *John* 14:15-16.

58. *Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 2, *passim*.

59. Cf. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, #193 to #208.