



**OPENING ADDRESS FOR THE 44TH GENERAL CHAPTER
Br. Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, Superior General**

Rome, April 29, 2007

Dear Brothers,

Welcome to our 44th General Chapter. It is wonderful for all of us to be able to meet today, April 29, on the eve of the 356th anniversary of the birth of our Founder – Chapter delegates, consultants and guests as well as another large group of Brothers who will help us in our work during these weeks. I am especially grateful for the presence of Father Dennis Thiessen, SDS, and that of all the lay partners who will help us in so many ways.

At this time I would like to invite all of you, along with myself, to thank the Lord for Brother John Johnston's presence during this first week. The Institute owes Brother John a debt of gratitude that is difficult to repay. Many of the paths that we travel today and many of the themes that will be part of our discernment were initiated or strongly promoted by him, with his openness to the future and his vision of our vocation and mission.

I thank the Brothers on the Preparatory Commission who, with dedication and effectiveness, have spent many hours and a lot of energy in order to facilitate our assembly as we will see in the coming days.

Finally, as the body of the society, we need to feel the spiritual presence of Brothers and so many other members of the Lasallian Family who, all over the world, will take part in the Chapter along with us. Their prayer and their interest in following our day-by-day activities – I am convinced – will be a wonderful support for us which will help us not to forget that we are here as capitulants who represent many Lasallians and we make visible the international character and the diversity of our Institute. We can really feel, as Saint Paul tells us in the Letter to the Hebrews, *that we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, therefore let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith* (cf. Hebrews 12: 1-2).

The Journey That We Have Traveled

As you know, our Assembly has had a great deal of preparation and we have made an impassioned,

interactive, and participatory journey. As I recalled in the Report which you have already received, we have many guidelines already, the result of the reflection and the work of many Brothers and Lasallian Associates. Allow me to recall them:

- The contribution of the Ad Hoc Committee that studied the *Rule*. Not satisfied with a mere cosmetic review, they invite us to consider greater changes due to changes in the world, the Church, the Institute, in the very heart of the Church as People of God and Communion.
- The Intercapitular Meeting that assessed our efforts to respond to the new forms of poverty and to promote islands of creativity and pedagogical innovation.
- The process set in motion by *Being Brothers Today* which gave rise to a discussion on our identity, and which helped us to discover what it is that disillusions us today and what it is that impassions us.
- The International Assembly on Association for the Lasallian Educational Mission, which was preceded by District and Regional Assemblies, and which afforded us the opportunity to embrace a wonderful experience "together and by association" as Brothers, lay persons, and other Lasallians and which inspired in us new responses to the needs of the young today.
- The Report of Brother Superior and his Council that you may have had the opportunity to read during these last few weeks.
- Finally, I would not want to forget the individual, community, or District notes and reflections that provided us with many convergences and not a few questions.

Why And For What Purpose Are We Here?

In recent years, we have said, and not without good reason, that for us Brothers our first association is the community. I think that a General Chapter, defined as it is in the *Rule* as *the ultimate expression of the communion that exists among all the Brothers (Rule, 103)*, constitutes the high point of our association. We know the importance that, since the time of the Founder and throughout our history, our assemblies and chapters have had as the most important expression of the body of the society. Therefore, the General Chapter is the privileged place for the manifestation of the Spirit.

A living community in dialogue is the locus par excellence for the presence and the action of the Holy Spirit. The General Chapter, above all, is the occasion when the Institute as a body, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can become aware of itself and declare to itself what it really is (Declaration, 7), and we should add, what we ought to be.

Important events always generate structures, policies and texts on the one hand, and a spirit on the other hand. Both of these have an influence on the story of these events. But without spirit the event loses its energy and is diluted. More important than the texts from Vatican II, certainly containing a profundity that still has not been exhausted, is its spirit of respect, of dialogue, freedom, hope, solidarity, compassion, returning to Jesus, of the People of God. Today, perhaps, we do not recall many of its texts, but it would be regrettable to have lost its spirit.

Applying this to the history of our Congregation, we can recall that this truth is a part of our most authentic tradition. The two texts that the *Rule* of 1987 wanted to preserve from the original *Rule* of 1718 both had to do with "**spirit.**"

That which is of the utmost importance, and to which the greatest attention should be given in an Institute is that all who compose it possess the spirit peculiar to it (Chapter II).

It is necessary that the Brothers take for the foundation and support of their observance of the Rule what Saint Augustine says at the beginning of his Rule: that those who live in community should, before all else, love God and next their neighbor (Chapter XVI).

We are in the realm of what is essential. The urgencies of the world, the Church, the situation of the Institute, the change of paradigms we embrace today, the needs of the young, association for the Lasallian educational mission which are all opening up. Given the fact of ageing in certain sectors, with the decrease in the number of Brother vocations or the perseverance of young Brothers in others, we cannot allow ourselves to spend time with the nonessential, nor can we waste time in dealing with what is of secondary importance.

The experience of recent General Chapters shows that texts and renewed structures, for all their richness, are not sufficient in themselves to promote a personal and collective conversion. Already in 1966, Brother Charles Henry made this distinction: *Chapter documents and the General Chapter itself should not be confused with Institute renewal. Renewal remains to be done; it depends on the common effort of all the Brothers.* Ten years later, the following was stated: *The Declaration, the Rule and Constitutions seem to be fully valid but insufficiently assimilated and translated into action (Circular 403).* Once again, the 42nd General Chapter recognized that we have no need of great and new documents but rather, to reduce the imbalance between what is described in the *Rule* and the reality that we live. Our last Chapter in 2000, for its part, invited the Brothers *to question themselves continually on how, in practice, they are associated among themselves, so that this association may stimulate their growth as persons, their solidarity with others, and their listening to what God says about the community mission, the educational service of the poor, the reason for their association (Circular 447, pages 3 - 4).*

As we begin the General Chapter today, it is important that we allow ourselves to be moved by the Spirit, in order to interiorize and embrace the Chapter more as a personal and a communal experience, as a vital, transforming impetus that as a simple exercise in reading texts or in making structural changes. We need to let ourselves be lead by the Spirit to better discover God's plan for our Institute, his Will for us, and the responses that we must give to continue being an instrument of salvation and *witness of hope* for young people, starting from those who are *poor, abandoned, or disoriented.*

It is about renewing our criteria, reviewing our personal and collective syntheses, in order to respond again with creative fidelity and with dynamism to the imperatives of being Brothers today, associated for the Lasallian educational mission, starting from the needs that the globalized world presents to us, respectful of diverse cultures, which today are more present than ever before in our Institute. I imagine that all of us think that fidelity does not deny change nor is it an excuse for not being what we ought to be. Fidelity, in fact, demands a firm commitment to the values that define us and direct us; at the same time, it gives us the ability to move ourselves freely, in order to go where we want to be if we wish to be faithful to the charism of our origin.

Our fidelity is the response to the ever-faithful God, who with wisdom and love, as our Founder said, conducts our story of commitment to commitment without knowing what the last word will be nor the last step taken. It deals with fidelity in an ongoing and creative search. It is about, deep down, making a vital synthesis between our *founding experience and historical reality*.

We cannot close ourselves in with the past and live with our backs turned to the realities of today. Certainly, we need to discover and to be faithful to our *roots*. At the same time, we need to make a similar effort to build up our "*antennas*" and to respond with creativity to the new problems we face today. Neither can we close in on ourselves and our problems, but we need to look ahead, to respond to the needs of young people today. This is the invitation which comes to us, on the one hand, from last year's Association for the Lasallian Educational Mission Assembly and, I am certain, from the presence of significant representation of our young Brothers.

Where Are We Willing To Journey?

Some think that consecrated life and, therefore, our life as Brothers, is going through what may be termed the Titanic syndrome. Our life is compared to a splendid ship that is sinking and the task is to refloat it. Our Chapter, then, will be a privileged time for this. In an interview with Father Maccise, then President of the Union of Superiors General and Superior General of the Discalced Carmelites, he said that rather than refloating the ship, we have to leave in the lifeboats, taking with us only the essentials: *One saves the essentials when one cannot save everything; then we have to choose what is essential and take it to a safe beach and from there build something again that, in the light of experience, will not become another Titanic that accumulates traditions and institutions because the time will come when it is submerged again.*

For the Founder, as we have seen, what is essential is to keep the spirit which is proper to us alive; the essential is to love God and neighbor. The essential, we can add, is to embrace the Gospel and its values, giving our lives in the educational and evangelizing service of the young who are poor and all those who are entrusted to our care. It is really about a true Exodus movement that unsettles us, certainly, but which opens us to new horizons and shows us a promising future.

Rather than a ship that is to be refloated, the Chapter asks us to be open and to let ourselves be led by the Spirit, which is like a wind that comes but we do not know from where nor where it goes. *The wind blows where it pleases, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit* (John 3: 8).

The Gospel also tells us that *it is the Spirit that gives life* (John 6: 63). The Chapter should be for us a fountain of living water. It is about choosing life and not death, it is about leaving here strengthened by and with Jesus, to see that all have life and that they have it to the full. It is about an impassioned adventure of love as our Founder and the first Brothers lived it; and as our saintly Brothers and so many Brothers who have preceded us lived it or continue to live it today.

Conclusion

A General Chapter does not automatically have the guarantee of the action of the Spirit. We need to let it act and to ask that it break the obstacles that impede our welcoming it, that it enlighten us in

order to be able to discover the signs of God in history, and that it permit us to ask questions in light of its truth, like Mary *who kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart* (Luke 2: 19). May she accompany us like a mother throughout these weeks. Let us make our own the prayer the Founder invited us to make on the Feast of her Presentation in the temple: *Pray to her to obtain for you from God the grace that your soul may be so well-adorned and so well-disposed to receive the word of God and to communicate it to others, that you may become through her intercession tabernacles of the divine Word* (Meditation 191.3).

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Superior General