

I. The context in which we ask ourselves: what does it mean to “Be Brothers Today”

1.1 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 towards conversion, based on what the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* 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 change in 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 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.

1.2 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 Septem-

ber 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 ageing rapidly.

In fact, one only has to have a glance at MEL booklet 20, dedicated to the May 2004 Intercapitular meeting, 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 Middle East. 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 booklet 4 on “*Educational Innovations*,” 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, such as those cited in MEL booklet 16 on “*Lasallian Presence*” in the world.

BEING BROTHERS TODAY

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1.3 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 ,

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 dis-

See MEL booklet 2, *Lasallian Association: The Ongoing Story*, MEL booklet 8-9, *The Educator’s Life Journey*, and especially the November 2005 Bulletin of the Institute *Associated for the Lasallian Educational Mission*.



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cover 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.

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.

1.4 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, an 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 the Church of today.

1.5 “Being Brothers” Forty 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 Brother is a baptized Christian who responds to a special and mysterious call from God. He consecrates 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 (D 12 to 14):

- The Brother fully expresses his baptismal consecration as a member of an Institute that is exclusively lay, in virtue of his public vows... (D 16 to 18)
- As they join a community...each Brother, whatever his role, contributes communally to the unique mission which the Institute has received from the Church (D 19 to 27).
- Communally, the Brother takes on a specific educational role, with special preference for the poor (D 18 to 34).
- 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 (D 35 to 42).
- The school is the preferred tool for the exercise of the Brother’s employ, although not the exclusive one (D 43 to 51).”

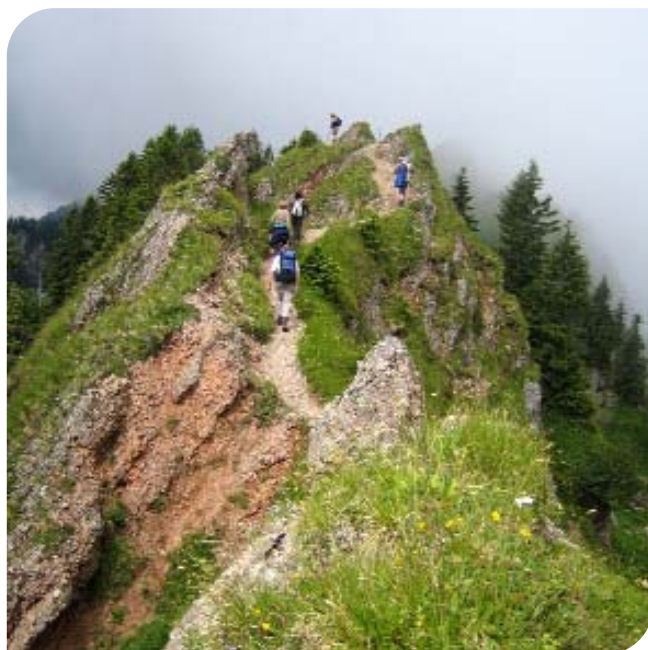
For the Brothers of that generation the identity of the Brother was not based on any one of these dynamics taken in isolation. The Brother was defined by his decision to assume all of them in a personal synthesis motivated by love (*Declaration* 14), along the lines request-

ed by the Council’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* (D 11).

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 John Baptist de La Salle (*Declaration* 5 and 6), 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 (*Declaration* 8 and 9), that is to say, to the Gospel in our current situation.

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.



1.6 Being Brothers Forty Years Later at the 43rd General Chapter

Why, then, bring up that question again some forty years later? We bring up that 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 last 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 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.

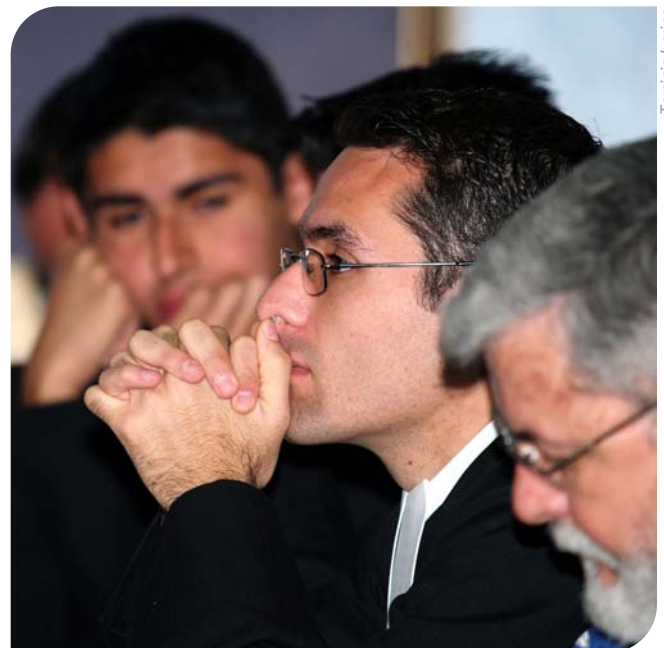
The clear reduction and the ageing of the Brothers in a network of educational works and projects, both traditional ones and new ones, in which lay persons are clearly taking on main roles, necessitates our having to look courageously and boldly at the significance and the role of Brothers’ communities,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

However, if we understand that consecrated apostolic life such as ours is in the very heart of the Church, as emphasized by the document *Vita Consecrata* (VC 3) in 1996, 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.

1.7 Being Brothers, Forty Years Later, in a Church in crisis, or in a Church closer to the gospel?

For some, the Church is living in a 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 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



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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.

1.8 Being Brothers, Forty 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, some of the possibilities and brokenness of this 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.

1.9 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, ageing, 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 laity and religious and persons in positions of authority in the



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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 II, are letting themselves be lead 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 cri-

tical 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 refoundation, recognizing also the obstacles that we carry inside us, both personal ones and community ones. Among these are, without a doubt, the ageing 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.



Complementary texts

Declaration "The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today", Rome 1967

1 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...

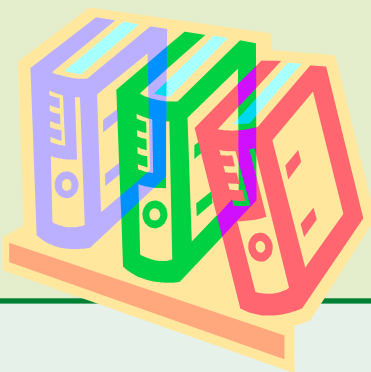
- Even the best adaptations to the needs of our times will fail to produce their effect unless they are motivated by a spiritual renewal (PC.2).
- To renew oneself spiritually means first of all that one must again be aware that it is only the Holy Spirit who brings about the renewal of persons and institutions.
- 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...

Declaration, 2 and 3

2 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 the 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.

Declaration 11,1-4



Personal and community notes

