



Lasallian Reflections

No. 17a

Brothers of the Christian Schools

December 2004

Vocations Are Born from the Needs of the Young: Our Lasallian Tradition

*Brother Claude Reinhardt, FSC, General Councilor
Vocation Conference, Guadalajara, Mexico, July 2004*

Dear Friends,

As soon as I received the invitation to come and spend these days of reflection on vocations with you I said, "Yes!" Everything about the proposition pleased me: the theme - we know its vital importance; the host country: Mexico - we know of its hospitality and its enthusiastic youth, and the experience of living with all of you coming from three Lasallian Regions of America. I thank you for your welcome and the fine atmosphere that reigns among us.

I am very much aware of the diversity of our origins, of our personal histories and of our cultures: countries, languages, national histories, and ways of living the Church. This makes it difficult to say something general which will interest everybody. All the more so since the theme I have been asked to deal with includes several "sub-themes" which taken on their own would deserve whole hours. Judge for yourselves: the questions that I have been asked are the following: "the needs of the youth of today/ are Brothers needed today in the association with Lay persons? / what is the identity of the Brother in the association? / what is the role of the Brother in the service of the poor? / what might be the characteristics of the Brother of tomorrow? / the promotion of vocations and the educational community."

We are in America and I am European, of French nationality. My travels, my reading and the visits I have made to different regions of the world over these last four years have helped me discover diverse situations and fascinating persons, but it remains true that it is mainly Europe that I know. Thanks for listening to a European voice.



1. The Needs of the Youth of Today

1.1. "God among us"

The organizing committee has asked me to speak on the following theme: "Vocations are born of the needs of the young." In other words: "The vocation springs up when one becomes aware of the needs of the young." This is a claim that I believe to be both true and false, or rather true

but incomplete. What adults call “the needs of the young” can in fact call us into question and arouse commitment, but it is not because needs are numerous that one enters religious life... one could just as easily become involved in a humanitarian organization or in politics....

Then, where does a vocation come from? How is a vocation born?

When speaking of the 'birth' of a vocation or the successive 'births' of a vocation, of our vocation, whatever it may be, it is useful to look at those moments in our lives when we have met other persons (with a certain depth, of course), those moments when our personal histories cross: the moments when we become aware that God is at work in our personal history and in these privileged meetings. As the Parisian theologian Guy Lafon puts it: “God is certainly in us, but God is above all among us!” There are in life moments that destabilize you, trouble you, disorientate you and re-orientate you....

The 43rd General Chapter of the Brothers in the year 2000 spoke of the needs of the young and thus of what the Brothers perceive as “educational priorities.” It is interesting. This could indicate some lines of action. But instead of repeating to you the interminable and well-known list of “the needs of the young” and the needs of the poor let me tell you the story of four people. I have invented them of course, but on the basis of several true stories.

1.2 Three young people with different needs

My first character is called Yussef... Yussef is a young Christian of sixteen years of age in a village of Upper Egypt. It is a big village with a Christian population, something rare in a country with a Muslim majority. But this helps to explain that the education authorities have neglected this region. Fifteen years ago there was no school. Today thanks to the Christian associations and aid in the form of per-



sonnel and finance coming from outside the country, it is possible to get a primary and lower secondary education. Yussef's parents are poor small farmers: some cultivation, a rather thin cow, a donkey and some hens. Like the majority of the houses in the village, Joseph's house is made from plain bricks and it has an earthen floor. Lots of people in the village, including Yussef's parents, are illiterate. The families, which are for the most part Christian Orthodox Copts, have a traditional practice based on the catechism which they have learnt by heart and liturgies which are long but involve the participation of the congregation: here, lots of psalms, prayers and hymns which follow the liturgical calendar, are known by heart. Yussef and his friends see beautiful cruise liners on the Nile. Europeans and Americans take cruises on the Nile, from South to North, heading towards the mouth of the river. They stop to visit the Pyramids and museums, dreaming of ancient civilizations.

As for Yussef, he sees above all the fact, that after a few years at school, there is no further possibility of formation in his region. No one dies of hunger, but the incomes are so low that there is little hope of any solid improvement in the conditions of life and the large cities, starting with Cairo, the capital, have millions of poor. Luckily for Yussef, he is able to read and has even learnt enough English to be able to read some articles in the newspapers. Recently he has learned the following expressions: “self-sufficiency” and “the

debts of poor countries.” He looked up a dictionary and asked one of his teachers if he had understood the expressions correctly. Yes, the rich countries were still asking his country and even poorer countries to be self-sufficient and to repay their debts. Yussef wonders how that can be done when he sees the miserable prices they are being paid for their agricultural products and the lack of formation of many young people in his country. But he is a believer: “*Insh 'Allab*”... “if God wills”.

What might the needs and hopes of Yussef be?

Pedro is 18 years old. He is from Central Spain. He was born in a rural area to an ordinary family without financial problems. He has the good fortune to belong to a very united family: his parents love their four children and are very solicitous about them. His grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins live nearby. They regularly meet for entire days on the occasion of birthdays and important Catholic feasts. The region is Catholic and people here are still regular Mass-goers. The sunshine of spring suits the beautiful celebrations which follow one after the other in this season: Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and Corpus Christi, in between which, depending on the village, are inserted First Communions, Confirmation, Baptisms....

Pedro has just finished secondary school and has begun his university studies in a large city. He is a young man of his time. He is not naïve. He is well aware of how other young people live who have not all had the good fortune to have a solid and united family, in a consistent and still quite protective environment. Now it is life in his university accommodation, evening invitations out from his friends, student parties where too much alcohol is consumed, some girl friends who make approaches to him.... Sunday Mass doesn't mean much to him any more: bleak Masses on Sunday morning surrounded mainly by elderly people that he doesn't know.... Pedro has no one with whom to share his feelings on these subjects and on the changes in his life. He is all alone. The Sundays when he can't go home to visit his family are the worst moments of the weekend.

What might the needs and hopes of Pedro be, at this moment of his life?

Günther is German. He is sixteen and lives in Dresden in the former East Germany. He was only one year old when the Berlin Wall fell and the two Germanys were re-united. His parents, born after the Second World War, did not experience the pre-war period when religions were freely practiced. There was a Jewish minority and two large groups: Protestants and Catholics. It was, however, a more reserved Catholicism than the baroque Catholicism of southern Germany.



In Dresden where Günther lives, as in all of East Germany, the economic and intellectual isolation, the Communist regime and Marxist propaganda over more than forty years, reduced to a ridiculously small percentage the number of courageous people who practiced their religion. A profound atheism was installed. Patriotic and sporting celebrations replaced Christian feasts and marked out the stages of life. Western theologians think and write that there ought to be there “in the depths of their souls” a search, a thirst for God.... But the people of this country and also the priests and pastors of today who know the situation, say that the years of Marxism have killed the religious feelings of many and that “the religious question” is not of interest there.

Günther's parents too are atheists and were brought up in complete ignorance of religion. However, since the opening up of the country and renewed contacts with the west, an old Jesuit college has re-opened in the city. The old building was given back to the Company of Jesus who have constructed a fine, new welcoming building. Günther's parents want him to receive another type of education, a new education, open to the whole European cultural, philosophical and spiritual heritage. Günther and his parents have been received together on the first day of the new school year. Even non-believing parents have been invited to participate in a “liturgy of the Word.” They have given their impressions: “respect, human warmth, words chosen for each one, and a Word said to be 'from God', which has come from elsewhere, never heard before.”

Günther feels his parents have made the right choice. Still confused, he expects and hopes....not quite sure for what.

What is Günther expecting?

After Yussef, Pedro and Günther, I want to introduce you to a fourth character to illustrate the needs of the young people of today. But this person has a different kind of need, because his history and his path through life have led him to expect a different type of answer.

2. The Young People Called Today to a Special Vocation: Their Needs and Expectations

2.1. A rich young man

My fourth and final character is Tanguy. He is French, a Breton, but he could be from any other rich, developed and liberal country in the west... His father is a doctor, his mother a teacher. They have good salaries, a beautiful house and a cultivated and middle-class background. Apart from family events, they never set foot in church. His parents are what are called in French the “soixante-huitards” (68ers). They were university students in 1968 and in the years that followed. They demonstrated for more liberty and social justice.... today they still retain some 'left-wing' ideas, but they belong to the privileged classes. They have also been liberated from the “power” and the influence of the “parish-priests.”

Tanguy has therefore been brought up without any real links with the Church and without any particular knowledge of the Catholic religion. This doesn't seem to have done him any harm. He did very well in his baccalaureate, is a musician and sportsman. He is intelligent and has begun his university studies. He is at present in a large city 150 kilometers away from home. He is successful at everything: studies, sport, and girls. The son of liberal parents, he is himself

very liberal and rejects the old middle-class morality, which in any case he never knew. Nevertheless he has undergone some disillusionments and disappointments in friendship and in love. He is disillusioned but not yet cynical. One day he goes to an exhibition of the associations in the town. He is looking for a sports association and comes across an association of Lasallian Youth. What exactly is it? He makes inquiries and lets himself be invited to one of their evenings. While claiming not to be interested in religion, he agrees to take part in a “mission camp” in Africa the following summer. He doesn't go for religious reasons and although he knows he will be giving service, he doesn't go for humanitarian reasons either. He has not been educated towards generosity. He really goes to find out if he will be able to live in conditions less comfortable than those he has always been used to. This will be one more feather in his cap.

On his return he was transformed. He had got out of his own world and he had met poor people. He had met other young people and he had

met believers. Some among them had been living for a long time in Africa, as bachelors, in communities. On his return he noticed that there were also some of them in his own country, in his own town. They were members of the same network, of the same “Institute” as they called it... Tanguy discovered the faith. His childhood baptism had remained without any apparent effect. His pals from the Lasallian group, some Brothers of the Christian Schools and a priest accompanied him up to Confirmation. His parents could no longer understand what was going on. He went to the World Youth Days in Paris in 1997. He heard John- Paul II comment on the gospel story of the rich young man who turned away from Jesus and went away sadly because he had many possessions. Tanguy's heart was touched. He understood that God was calling him to commit his whole life to





Him in the service of others. In the enthusiasm of his youth and of his rediscovered faith, he wanted to find a community which had all the qualities:

- prayer and contemplation, *and also* social and professional commitment.
- identity and visibility of the community *and also* closeness to the people.
- mobility and availability for service *and also* a community where one truly shared like brothers.
- a true service of society *and also* a true mission of the Church.

Who and what does Tanguy need in order to discern? What does he need to discover to begin his commitment?

Starting with the example of Tanguy and the witness given by young people in his situation in 2004 in Western Europe let us ask ourselves the following question and attempt some answers:

2.2. What elements could nowadays attract young people into a community, into an Institute?

Being able to perceive a light in the market place of ideologies, ideas, religions, ways of living...

Often “adults,” as we say, have difficulty in understanding that the young - those between 15 years of age and 30 today - were born after the years of social, political and religious controversy. They were born after Vatican II also. They belong to the civilization of the Internet, of immediate information, of the circulation of all the ideas placed on the market in education and in the media.... In all this, how does one make out what one ought to adhere to and what deserves a life commitment?

I believe one can make out at least three areas:

Understanding love in a different way!

In order to understand something of the Christian vocation in general, and of special vocations among the people of God, it must first of all be asserted that we are talking about love, and in the first place about the love of God, discovered in countless ways, and of love for God, in the manner of Jesus-Christ.... And it is in thinking of the love of God and love for God, in taking it seriously and committing oneself to a response, that we understand love “differently.” Love is not a “loan with interest.” And when we understand love in this new way, we see that love is a gift... that we are invited to give all and to give always! This absolute is obviously very difficult and can cause a kind of vertigo but isn't that, after all, a road of liberation from the little prisons of our selfishness?

Encountering and living a true brotherhood

The young people of this world and this time, who are trying to determine their vocation, also want to encounter a true brotherhood. On this subject, the men and women religious of today are taking a very serious look at their community life. There is, of course, the sharing of the experience of God, as, for example, our Rule puts it so well. There is also the sharing of the mission but first of all we need to meet, quite simply, human communities, communities which wish to live the Gospel, communities where persons live in peace and are themselves educated to listen, to truly share the joys and sufferings of each, to ask forgiveness and to say thanks!

Living a devoted commitment

Caught up in the love of Christ and by the needs of their society, the young ought to be able to commit themselves with enthusiasm and devotion to a form of service. For us Lasallians it consists of an educational service.

But the young people of today know that you can be very generous without falling into the danger of becoming 'workaholics'. More than their eld-

ers, the young wish to be vigilant and keep the time necessary for their Brothers and for God.

Two other questions arise for us now:

- *Loving in a different way, living in brotherhood, being enthusiastic about service ... can this still be of interest?*
- *In the market place of different spiritualities, ways of living, formations ... have Christian Religions anything to propose?*

2.3. What might religious life propose?

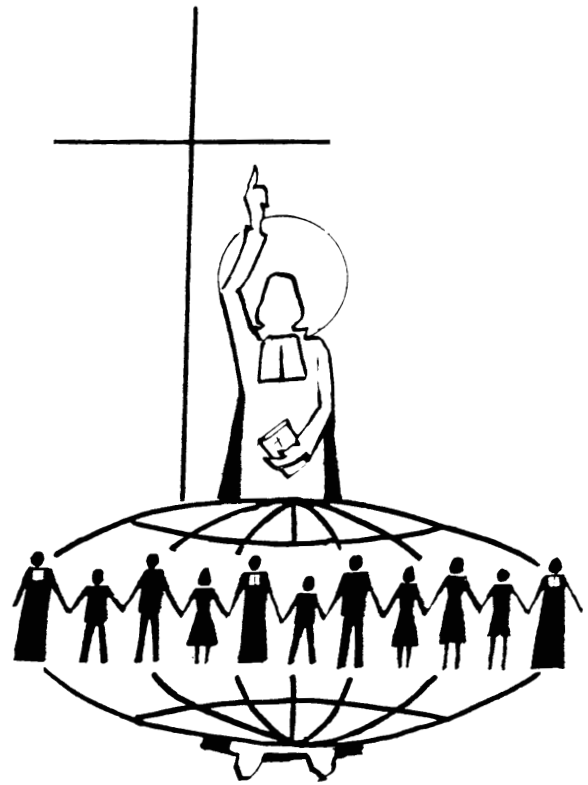
A French psychiatrist, invited by some bishops and religious superiors, declared that the religious life had much to offer to the world of today. It can offer a way of life in counterpoint or in contradiction to certain “values” which are in fashion or what others call “counter-values” or bad habits in the world of today.

This “way of life”, these values of the religious life are the following:

- where individualism and social irresponsibility are developing, the religious propose a brotherhood where one lives with attention to others including older people.
- in a world of war and social exclusion, members of religious orders invite us to look towards the source of peace: God.
- where some societies propose living our affective life in an individualism of two or more which is exclusive and absorbing, but without any promise for the future, the religious propose life in community with other persons that you have not chosen....

And the psychiatrist continued by saying that religious life has lots of spiritual assets, good fortune and “riches,” which it could help wider groups to profit from:

- religious have a Rule: a text which marks out the road, when so many of our contemporaries have lost their bearings.
- the accompaniment which is provided in religious life is a benefit available to few people nowadays.



- the Word of God: a Word which comes from outside you, which speaks to you and which you meditate on all your life.
- the social bodies religious belong to: the community, the Institute, the Church etc...in a society of solitary people...

I find these remarks well thought-out. Of course they pre-suppose that religious are living their lives authentically, because there is a great risk of conforming to the society that surrounds us.

3. To Respond to the Needs of the Young: The Lasallian Family

We are gathered here among Lasallian friends: young people from several countries, educators, Lay Associates of the Brothers, a priest-friend of the Brothers, Lasallian Volunteers... and Brothers.

Can we bring something to this world and respond to these needs of which we have seen some examples?

I will give just some elements of a possible response, inviting you to develop them more fully.

3.1. The Lasallian educational mission: the field of our meetings and of our commitment and the service we offer.

An educational mission

It is true that the young need to be able to distinguish clearly what the mission is. Ours is well defined: it is education, especially of the poor. John Baptist de La Salle responded to the needs of his era in a certain manner. He did not respond by creating a new society of priests or a nursing order. He created schools, but already during his lifetime these schools had several forms, several 'faces': there were mainly small Christian schools which were gratuitous but there was also the refusal to create social ghetto schools for the poor - these schools also welcomed other children. There was also the embryo of what we would call today specialized education for delinquents, with St.Yon. Finally there was the formation of teachers.

You are aware of the diversity of our educational presence today and the vitality of the Lasallian Educational Mission. It is good to remind ourselves that our mission is education, our way of serving the poor is education: a total education of the person which includes elements of formation, of socialization and of opening up to the spiritual.

A shared mission

It is obvious that our educational mission is today a mission shared between a majority of laypersons and a minority of Brothers.

After Vatican II, which had insisted on the missionary role of every baptized person, successive General Chapters made more and more explicit the role and the mission of laypersons with the Brothers, in the framework of the shared mission and in the movement of association for the educational service of the poor... In the countries that I know, laypersons have become involved in the Lasallian mission either through conviction, or through

getting to know of the Lasallian project, or by chance, depending on the circumstances of the recruitment of the teachers. But the call to a deeper form of association is addressed to all.

Association is both a joy and an opportunity

The field of the educational mission offers us a unique opportunity in the Church. Very few places can be compared to this particular one where we are able to share so intensely a common mission, which is lived in complementary vocations of baptized people. It is there that we meet each other and that we share shoulder to shoulder, the different tasks and responsibilities in our educational centers. Brothers and Lay people alike, we share 'secular' tasks, professional tasks which come within the framework of timetables, and that is difficult. But through this service in an educating community by proposing an education of the poor and by forming the young we are trying to reveal God. The blessing we have, is that in associating more closely in the education service, we send each other signals that this profession is also ministry, that this profession is a vocation.

Our way of educating is eminently and essentially *communitarian*. This is still a characteristic of the Lasallian world. John Baptist de la Salle trains us in humility which consists in not presenting ourselves to the young "on our own." Among the functions in the Church, in order to announce Jesus Christ in and through education, or at least in order to open up the question of God among the young who never ask this question, we are not educator-missionaries sent to work alone. We are community; we exercise a kind of "*communitarian deaconate of education*." It is our very own way of carrying on education in the Church.

3.2. Such an education community in the Church of today has a double responsibility. It ought to promote all Christian vocations and promote complementary Lasallian vocations.



When I say all *Christian vocations*, I'm thinking, for example, of the vocation of Christian husbands and wives, of Christian parents, and I'm thinking of different forms of commitment or of consecrated life in the Church. I'm also thinking of the vocation of priest that is an absolute need for the people of God.

It is normal that an education community should also call upon people in professions *involved in education*. Like every human group, our education communities do not have all possible qualities. But we can propose the Lasallian education community to lay persons:

- we propose to the young people who wish to be educators with us, a “large family” of educators, a family with a rich history and assured experience.... a family which invites them to join a movement of close association for the mission.
- we suggest a family of educators which has expended considerable efforts in the formation of its members; a family which, in spite of its institutionalized bureaucracy, knows how to bring to light its education projects to provide organized and relevant answers to the many needs the young have with regard to the total education of the person...
- to young people who wish to become Christian educators, as Lay persons or as Brothers, we suggest that they enter a process of association where complementary vocations are not confused, do not copy each other, do not blot out other aspects of human solidarity, but on the contrary, allow each other to grow in the understanding that we have arrived at this profession through a vocation, and that in recognizing this in faith, we can become ambassadors of Jesus Christ for the young people of today. In this large family, depending on the projects of the Districts, they can become teachers, educators, catechists, specialized teachers, university professors, researchers in pedagogy, animators of socio-educational centers, animators in pastoral ministry, and also Lasallian Volunteers who give a year or more of their lives in an educational service

in areas with social problems, and who share the life of a community of Brothers...



4. In This New Framework, Do We Still Need to Invite People to the Vocation of Being a Brother?

An identity that is sometimes questioned

In some countries more than others, and at some moments in life more than others, the Brothers themselves call into question their own identity, the life they lead, and their role in society and in the Church. In the Church itself, the roles and functions are allocated differently than in the past...

A threatened identity?

Some Brothers have seen the massive presence of Lay people in educational works and in posts of responsibility as a threat... the Association with Lay people has not been well understood everywhere.

Is it a simple equation: more Lay people = fewer Brothers = the disappearance of the Brothers in the long term? Obviously NOT! This equation is a trap, a false trail for reflection.

Other obstacles to the call to the life of the Brothers

These are our own weaknesses and our lack of consistency and authenticity, our slowness in being converted, repeated discouragements in the face of the difficulties of work in education. We



have our own doubts and some bad habits and collective defects of which we are not even aware. As Psalm 19, verse 12 puts it: “But who can detect his own failings? Wash out my hidden faults.

Should we appeal for vocations to the life of the Brothers?

I say, “yes,” without any hesitation! To young men who feel themselves called to the consecrated life in the educational mission, we, that is to say the Lasallian Family and we, the Brothers, propose an association of a unique and especially profound nature, founded in the history of St John Baptist de La Salle, lived in community, in the freedom and availability for the mission which the vows give us.

Already nowadays, and more so in the future, the role of the Brother will not be understood as it was in the past. I would not like to contrast the present with the past, nor dream of a romantic future, without saying that it is we who are building it at present. So we can say that the Brother of tomorrow will be like the Brother of yesterday, but he will also be quite different. He will be like the Brother of yesterday because from the time of the first group of disciples of John Baptist de La Salle who pronounced with him the “Heroic Vow,” it is a question of consecrating one's life to God and giving one's energy, together and by association, in the educational service of the poor. As I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, the consecrated life is a story of love. And we are the heirs of more than three hundred years of commitment, fidelity and development in the service of education.

But the circumstances and the conditions of life of the Brothers are quite different. The vocation of the Brother can no longer define itself in isolation from other Christian vocations. It can only be thought of in relation to other complementary and clearly identified vocations. There is no group isolated and set apart and somewhat 'superior'. The Brothers, first disciples in the mission, are happy to share it widely today with numerous laypersons. They thank God that they are heirs of a charism that is widespread, for the good of the young and the young who are poor. The role of the Brother today and tomorrow is to be seen in terms of linking-up, collaboration, sharing, presence and interaction.

Thus it is not the sum of accomplished tasks that will define the vocation of the Brother, but the quality of his presence, the capacity for encouraging and giving rise to other vocations. This implies a sharing of the responsibilities of directing and animating according to complementary talents. It implies sharing and dialogue in planning and in projects. Br. John Johnston used to speak of “a community that generates other communities.”

What then are the essential characteristics that define the Brother of today and of tomorrow?

- The Brother shows by his life that God has first place in every Christian life. The Brother, by his life of prayer is witness to the contemplative dimension of every Christian life. It is up to the Brothers of each generation to adapt the forms it will take!
- The Brother chooses a form of life that makes him completely available for the mission. This means that his time is available, it means that he can be moved about and is available for new or risky projects ... in September we are opening a new community in the Sudan!
- This also means there is an availability of the heart that makes him attentive to the poor and the small ... that makes him inclined to defend the rights of the young. It means that his consecrated celibacy makes him available for welcoming, listening, accompanying.

- The Brother is and will remain a witness to gratuity. Of course he will need to have the qualifications necessary for the specializations in education, but in this world where everything is paid for and where everything is made professional to an excessive degree, the Brother reminds us that there is no education that is not gratuitous, that is to say without the gift of one's person. He reminds us that God loves each one of us gratuitously.

All this needs to be developed and other things said, but we have here, I think, the absolutely essential components of the religious and apostolic life of the Brother.

Within the large Lasallian education community, in harmony with the other educators and sharing the most everyday tasks as well as high-level responsibilities with our Lay Associates, the Brother is irreplaceable and we will continue to call young people to share our life.

5. "The Need for This Institute Is Very Great" (*Rule, 1.4*)

Yussef and the young people of his age in Egypt have an urgent need for educational, agricultural and technical formation to ensure a worthy future for their villages. Perhaps God will send them, as some years ago, Christian volunteers from Cairo, some Brothers for the school and some Sisters to look after the sick. Entire countries are in the same situation.

Pedro is waiting for educators available and ready to listen while he is at a turning-point in

his student life and while he is experiencing the loneliness of the city and doubts and discouragements in his isolated Christian life...he still needs to affirm his choice of career orientation.... Will he find Christians to animate student hostels, a chaplaincy, in order to teach at this level and guide intelligences beyond mere scientific data?

Günther is waiting for honest upright teachers who, in a renewed education system, will transmit to him the best of humanity's intellectual heritage, while teaching him to look for the truth. In a country that has forgotten God, he is waiting for educators who take seriously the Gospel he has heard talked about...

Tanguy is looking for a spiritual councilor and a community that will open its doors to him so that he can advance towards the commitment to which he has felt called since he found his faith again.

The poverties, the needs, the expectations are as numerous as the children and the young around us. Dear friends, are we going to put an end to the Lasallian adventure that began more than three hundred years ago? "No!"

The Lord continues to call each and every one to a special and unique vocation. May these days that we are spending together be the occasion of being more attentive to His call!

May the Lord help us to say, "yes" every morning and to live with joy and passion one of the most beautiful adventures and missions that there is.

Brother Claude

