

# THE HUMAN AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATION OF THE POOR

*The Brothers are entrusted with their mission by the Institute,  
a mission especially to the poor. (R 14)*

## PRELUDE

**2.40** *The connecting thread which has linked the history of the Lasallian movement in education has been the response to the need to provide for the human and Christian education of the poor. It has been and remains the essential dimension of the Lasallian school. The Rule of 1987 reminds us that “John Baptist de La Salle gave a new meaning to the school by making it accessible to the poor and offering it to all as a sign of the Kingdom and as a means of salvation” (R 3) and that, with his first Brothers, “they associated together to respond to the needs of young people who were poor and far from salvation.” (R 47)*

### **2.41 A “return to the poor”**

Following the orientation of the Second Vatican Council, the Institute, through its Renewal Chapter of 1966-67 as we have already noted in 1.43, addressed itself to the authenticity of its *Service of the Poor through Education*. The *Declaration* expresses this clearly by saying “*that the apostolate with the poor is an integral part of the finality of the Institute.*” (D 28.2) and concludes with the clear direction that “*every level of authority, then, every dialogue and decision in the Institute, must be in harmony with this orientation, so that all our plans and work will show in deed and in truth our “return to the poor.”*” (D 34.4) The *Rule* of 1987 invites the Brothers to consider “*the direct or indirect service of the poor as the preferred aspect of their ministry of education.*” (R 40)

### **2.42 The process is continuing**

The fact that this return to the poor is being addressed from the center of the Institute can be seen from the following steps which have been taken. In 1980, the General Council issued an important Circular of some 150 pages entitled *The Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice* (No. 412), the last chapter of which concentrated on describing some important initiatives from each continent. The basis for this circular was a *Working Paper* of 1979 which simply gathered together experiences from all around the world of what was being done throughout the Institute for the service of the poor. The discussion which centered around the final form of the *Rule* after the 20 years *ad experimentum* led to some important strengthening of the historical sense of the special vow of *Association for the service of the poor through education* in articles 39-41. The request from UNESCO in 1990, the Year of Literacy, to provide a dossier of things being done by the Institute in various parts of the world to promote literacy revealed such a wide range of major activities that the **Noma Prize** was awarded to the Institute.

The General Chapter of 1993 made its own affirmation of its continuing option for the poor in the following words:

*“As members of the Institute of St. John Baptist de La Salle, we strongly re-affirm our option for the human and Christian education of young people and adults, and in particular, for the poor.”* (C 435, p.20)

In specifying ways in which this option is being exercised, the Chapter instanced the willingness of Brothers *“to become trained and to adapt to all kinds of social situations,”* and noted that Brothers *“especially in the third-world continents . . . have made a strong commitment to help the most deprived young people and adults.”* (C 435, 1.4, p. 20) As the section finishes, the text stresses the importance of being *“active witnesses to the dignity of all people”* and then enumerates a variety of ways, many of which have direct reference to the poor such as the following:

*“( . . . being) active witnesses to the urgent need for national and international programs which include specific cultural measures regarding the poor;*

*(. . . being) active witnesses to God’s solicitude for people who are marginalised by great poverty and other modern forms of misery.”* (C 435, p. 21)

## **2.43 Some of the new initiatives**

An important initiative in recent years has been the widespread concern, in the best tradition of the Institute, to ensure that educational works are as far as circumstances allow, gratuitous even if they cannot be completely so and open to all who wish to come. The progress realized to recent years has led to a growth in sensitivity, a greater awareness and concern for what can be achieved in spite of financial restrictions. Where the schools receive no or little state subvention, this has led to extensive fund-raising and development projects, often staffed by volunteers, and to the creation of new works or to the development of previously unforeseen initiatives to try to give some kind of answer to new situations of poverty such as the following:

- activities on behalf of refugees and immigrants;
- orphanages or centers for young persons in difficulty;
- centers for young people who have learning difficulties;
- various ways of accompanying young people who have dropped out of school;
- different ways of helping and supporting young people who are handicapped;
- educational activities which cater for street children and gypsies;
- the setting up of evening courses either as literacy courses for adults or to provide courses for young persons in need.

An interesting contribution from a pedagogical viewpoint has been the introduction of special programs and the creation of various structures so as to reach more efficiently those students who are having difficulty in our educational establishments. There has been a marked contribution from Brothers and other Lasallian educators in this regard. There are also places where older students help younger students who are having difficulty.

## 2.44 For which “poor” does the Lasallian School have a preference?

In its *Declaration on Christian Education (Gravissimum educationis)*, the Second Vatican Council spoke of three kinds of “poor”:

*“The Council exhorts all associated with Catholic schools to carry out their task even more perfectly, and especially in caring for the needs of those who are poor in temporal goods, or deprived of the help and affection of a family, or are .strangers to the gift of faith.”* (No 9)

The *Rule* suggests to the Brothers that they “*work directly for the poor by providing an education for the economically deprived, victims of social injustice, delinquents, and those neglected by the rest of society.*” (40. 2) There are, above all, those who have neither an active nor a passive role in society or who simply lack the possibility of developing their talents and aptitudes. This point was addressed by Brother John Johnston in the Second Lasallian European Congress at Strasbourg in 1994:

*“Many economically poor youngsters are extremely talented intellectually. They have a right to develop their God-given talents and abilities. We must be careful to avoid forcing the economically poor into a special category, as if economic poverty were equivalent to a lack of ability to learn. We need to open the doors of opportunities to those who have become marginalized by circumstance.”* (Lasallians ... without Frontiers No. 5)

## 2.45 A preferred option for the poor which arises from considering unjust structures which lead to poverty

In a powerful passage which could have come from today’s newspaper, the Declaration of 1967 considers the world where the Lasallian educator is called to serve.

*“It is a world in which the life, liberty and dignity of men are more and more threatened; a world of loneliness and despair for many who are trodden down by selfishness, greed, indifference, or desire for power; a world of social injustice with an increasing disproportion between rich nations and the poor; a world of illiteracy and ignorance in which the young are neglected.”* (D 11.3)

Pope John Paul II, in encouraging all to greater solidarity with the poor, reminds us that “*the freedom with which Christ has set us free encourages us to become the servants of all. Thus the process of development and liberation takes concrete shape in the exercise of solidarity, that is to say, in the love and service of neighbor, especially of the poorest.*” (Sollicitudo Re Socialis, 46) In his *Pastoral Letter on Solidarity* in 1989, Brother John Johnston suggests that “*we have to see more vividly and to feel more intensely the poverty that exists throughout the world, in our cities, and perhaps in our own backyard.*” (page 29) The General Chapter of 1993 highlights some aspects of the present world which are so many challenges to the Lasallian educational mission:

*“ . . . migratory movements, racism, urban violence, terrorism, drug addiction, loss of basic human values, crises of faith, refusal of religious education, the attraction of sects, unemployment, AIDS, hunger, illiteracy, street children, homelessness, contempt of life, broken families, school dropouts.”* (C 435 p. 22, 2)

Four particular challenges are presented to Lasallian educators:

- respect for children’s rights;
- the fight against illiteracy;
- education in values;
- specific ways of accompanying young people who are the victims of exclusion.

## **2.46 Preferential option for the poor enlightened by discovering the causes of poverty**

When the Brothers’ *Rule* invites them *“to become increasingly aware of the reasons for the poverty that surrounds them,”* (R. 14) it is not simply so that they be better informed of a phenomenon of our society. What is intended is that such an understanding, enriched by a variety of means such as the study and presentation of the social teachings of the Church, by attendance at local and international conferences which address the problem and, in general, by making this topic a focus of interest, should make students, parents and society in general more people aware of the problem and so be inspired to do something about it.

Such was the intent of the 42nd General Chapter in a series of *Recommendations* to the Institute on this point. Districts were encouraged to support *“projects of insertion in the world of the poor,”* Brothers in any kind of renewal project were invited *“to include . . . some involvement with the less fortunate.”* District Chapters were to look critically at their educational centers and programs to evaluate their degree of involvement with various groups in need, Lasallian universities and tertiary institutes were asked to consider *“scientific research into the causes of poverty and social injustice and into the elimination of the causes,”* while the same institutions were to look to *“the preparation of technicians and professional experts in the conversion of our ecosystems, in collaboration with national and international organizations.”* (C. 435, 3.1-3.4, pp. 25-26)

## **2.47 Making this option for the poor a reality**

Since the great Encyclical letter *Progressio Populorum* of Pope Paul VI in 1967, the Church has constantly addressed itself to the growing gap between the rich and the poor. The present cycle of debt of so many developing nations to the World Bank is so crippling that any further growth becomes impossible. But if this is the case at the macro-level of world economics, what can be done at the micro-level of education? In his address at Strasbourg already cited, Brother John Johnston, Superior General, made the following practical suggestions:

*“I have long advocated that each of our schools be an ‘impact center,’ that is to say, a center which ‘reaches out’ to the poor around it and responds creatively and effec-*

tively. The possibilities for service are almost unlimited: literacy programs-in the school or in other centers; teams of volunteer teachers and young people to work with street children; night classes for school drop-outs; Lasallian youth groups to respond to the needs of the sick, the aged and neglected, etc. Many of our schools 'reach out' to the poor of other countries by providing financial assistance. Some even send young people, teachers, former students, parents, and friends for service in needy countries during vacation periods." (No. 5, p. 11)

This solidarity with the poor challenges all Lasallian educators as well to give serious attention to their own situation if they are not directly involved with the poor. The *Rule* of 1987 reminds the Brothers that "concern of the Brothers for the poor serves also to motivate their activities when they deal with people in a more favorable social environment, urging these to become more sensitive to unjust situations of which the poor are so often the victims." (R 14)

In his comment on this point at Strasbourg, Brother John Johnston makes the following four practical suggestions about what Lasallian schools need to offer as programs:

- 1) enable the students to know and understand the injustices that exist at every level of society;
- 2) learn the social teachings of the Church;
- 3) have the opportunity to serve the poor, the sick, the aged;
- 4) participate in follow-up discussions and evaluations. (5, 11)

## **2.48 What are some practical steps to be followed?**

The General Chapter of 1993 suggested some strategies at different levels so that the preferential option for the poor would be an effective reality in the Lasallian Family at local, district and at Institute level. At local level, the Brothers were challenged "to respond concretely to situations of poverty;" at district level in "the District Plan for Shared Mission, worked out and evaluated by all concerned," by giving priority to "the promotion of the educational service of the poor and justice"; at Institute level, there was the first and major resolution of the Chapter expressed as follows:

*"The General Chapter asks Brother Superior General and his Council, between 1993 and 1997 . . . to make an appeal to the Regions and the Districts to make available 100 Brothers and a certain number of Lasallian Partners who will receive special training and will be sent on mission in view of responding to the following needs:*

- to create new apostolates for the poor in places where the Institute is already present or in new places;
- to renew or strengthen existing educational apostolates for the poor;
- to train (initial or continuing formation programs) Brothers and Lasallian Partners, especially in the small and developing sectors of the Institute." (C 435, pp. 26-27)