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The Educator's Life Journey

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"*The Educator's Life Journey*"* is the title we have chosen for this text of twelve themes prepared for the initial formation of Lasallian educators. Our hope is that they will be put to good use, especially in taking those first steps which will permit the young educator to discover the richness of the teacher's vocation and to set out to live that vocation in all its fullness.

We feel that the greater part of what is said here is applicable to the majority of educators, independently of the religious affiliation or the faith they profess. The explicit references to the Lasallian heritage or to the Gospel that we occasionally include in the text are all intrinsic to the source from which this "*Vade Mecum*" flowed and which continues to sustain it.

In a certain sense these themes are only meant to whet the appetite, to serve as an introduction to a much broader process of formation that comprises Lasallian pedagogy and spirituality, the life and times of John Baptist de La Salle and the social reality of childhood and youth of each culture today as well as biblical and theological formation for Christian educators; all this, taking into account that the focal point for Lasallian formation is the discovery of the mission, always inclusive of the educational service to the poor.

The twelve themes that we present here are grouped around three perspectives, all mutually complementary and present in each part: *the identity of the educator, the educational program and the Lasallian mission.*

* (Translator's note: The Spanish title "Itinerario del Educador", does not translate smoothly into English. "Itinerario" in Spanish suggests an entire life charted out according to one's calling, ideals and expectations. "Itinerary" in English is simply the list of stops along one's route. "Life Journey" is here meant to include all that "Itinerario" means in Spanish.)

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1st Part

Taking on the identity of the educator

Theme 1. The identity of the educator

1. The levels of the educator's identity

To be an educator is an identity. It manifests itself in the *task* and in the *social relationship*, but above all it is a manner of *being*. This identity may be lived on three levels. To confuse them (or to set them in opposition to each other) oftentimes becomes the source of confrontations within the educational community.

a) The first level on which the identity of the educator can be lived is situated on the plane of biology and occupation. It corresponds to the need to “be doing” or working in order to live so as to satisfy the basic needs of a person. The result is the “worker in the field of education”.

The motivation that justifies it is the very subsistence of the educator and that of those who depend upon him or her. This should be a life lived with a certain decorum with regard to the social milieu in which it is immersed and, for that reason, requires an adequate wage.

b) The second level is found on the psychological and social plane. It corresponds to the need for social recognition, of occupying an honorable position (“fulfilling a role”) not just in society as a whole but in the most immediate social group: students, educational community etc. The result is the “professional educator” who is characterized by his or her knowledge, competence and command of the material to be taught.

The motivation that energizes this level is the wish or the need for a sense of self worth, the esteem of others, and patent success in one's efforts. The educator wants to be respected and admired, to be liked and even to satisfy a certain taste for power. The spectrum is broad according to the various persons.

c) The third level delves deep down into the very core of the identity, touching his “being”.

It is the “being” of the person that needs be projected into the world, contributing to its building up. What comes to the fore now is the teacher “by vocation” a person who knows that he or she is meant

to be an educator who feels fulfilled as such and has the knowledge of being in the right place in the “symphony of creation”.

The motivation here comes from the attitude of the teacher, an attitude of service and creativity so as to give a proper response to the needs of those who will profit from his or her labor.

As we see, regarding the identity of the educator, aspects of work, profession and vocation all converge, with regard to the different needs that the person must fully satisfy in order to reach complete fulfillment based on this identity.

Between the three levels a series of relations is established:

– First of all, we are not speaking of opposing levels but rather complementary ones. The person – and the educational community – must take all three into account.

– Each level, taken in isolated form, indicates a degree of depth and fulfillment of the person. Each of these degrees can be achieved with a certain independence from the other two. That is, they are not mutually affected in an absolute way, even though they may indeed influence one another. For example, a well-paid teacher has the incentive to increase his professional competence and even happily devote extra time to the needs of his students; but this does not occur necessarily. In the same way, a teacher who is strongly motivated by his “vocation” may also enjoy the appreciation and positive feedback of his students, or his own intellectual growth, but this is not always the case. On the other hand, a teacher with an insufficient salary can nevertheless be a fine professional and/or feel fully satisfied vocationally.

To choose, either consciously or unconsciously, one of the three levels to the exclusion of the other two in real life terms, would be to seriously cripple one's own identity, apart from the prejudicial effect it could have on the children who should be the beneficiaries of our work.

However, it is not possible to perfectly balance the three levels. That is for a simple reason: given that the three levels are attributed to groups with different values – even though they are not opposed – it is normal that on more than one occasion these values can come into conflict one with the other. In such a case the person inevitably finds himself in a bind to choose one value, setting aside, in this case, the other or others.

This would be the situation that presents itself, for example, when I have to decide between one more week of summer vacation with my family or attendance at a workshop that would serve to increase my professional competence. Here's another case: I have to decide if I will use some after-class time to help some students who have special needs, or to use that time to work toward an academic degree which would benefit me professionally, or even dedicate that time to earn some extra money with tuition classes.

Basically, these are values that are at stake here, and when they come into conflict I have no other option than to choose one and reject, or at least, postpone the other. At times, the urgency of a particular need obliges me to set aside a value that I know to be the best on a scale of values. But it need not always be the immediate that determines my decision. What then, should be the basis of my choice?

If I wish to avoid a permanent conflict within my own identity – which would be the equivalent of a split identity – I must adopt a single perspective, one of the three levels we've seen, and look upon the other two from that perspective. In other words, I have to establish a hierarchy of values in such a way that, when a conflict does arise, I will know how to distinguish the values that are in play and make the consequent choice according to the hierarchy of values previously made.

But we must add something else. Every educator is challenged to determine his identity based on vocational values, making of these the whole focus of his "what is my task?", his "what must I know?" and his "who am I to be?". Only in the measure in which he accepts this challenge and sets out along the path that they indicate (the needs of his students), can we speak of an authentic educator, and not just a professional or a worker in the field of education. That does not mean having to renounce any of his rights at the other levels.

2. The community and school from the perspective of the educator's identity

The level or dimension that every teacher chooses as his perspective in establishing a hierarchy of values has its repercussions not just on his own identity but also, and strongly, on the educational community and on what takes place in the classroom.

a) When the *job perspective* is dominant in an educational community, the whole emphasis will be on *teaching staff*, all based on mutual support and the defense of working conditions. The staff meetings, the conversations and the activities are all geared toward that purpose. Any attempt to inject other values is met with disinterest, or worse, open opposition, by the majority of the community.

In this case, what passes for education is seen to be “the means by which the teacher earns a living by teaching”. The various structures of the school are all organized with that end in mind.

b) If the *professional perspective* predominates in the community, what carries most weight is the *teaching* and that which ensures professional relations among the educators. The basic concern is that the programs be punctually achieved and that the intellectual level be top notch. Much attention is given to academic titles and the upgrading of one's degrees.

The work of education then is seen to be the means by which the students acquire the knowledge described in the brochure of course offerings. Academic prestige is paramount to other considerations, which guarantees social recognition. The various activities are all geared toward this purpose. The structures are set up to ensure the security of the professors, who come to see themselves as tenured. If some personal problems of students are mentioned at all, the primary considerations will be the social consequences to the school or the prestige of the professors.

In general terms, what this type of school does best is to *reproduce* or mirror the model of society in which it is inserted.

c) Finally, if the community is comprised principally of teachers *by vocation* it will tend to be organized *around the interests of the students*. Its objective will be to *give the best possible response* to their needs. Staff meetings will be programmed mostly on these topics and ordinary conversations among the educators will very often dwell on the same.

The work of the classroom will likewise be considered to be the means to address the educational needs of the students, beyond what is strictly required by official programs and legal guidelines. The very neediest of the students are objects of even greater attention.

The will to respond adequately to the needs of the students sets the tone of the community in continuous search for creative solutions. The various scholastic structures do not become absolutes but rather undergo critical analysis to guarantee their validity for each age. They are improved upon and changed when necessary with fresh invention.

Having made this classification, which may appear to be somewhat artificial, we must now add our conviction: a community of educators has to take into account the complex reality – in terms of job, profession and vocation – of its members; but it must never lose sight of the ultimate reason that justifies its existence, the educational needs of youth.

3. Identity and the program of education

Together with the identity of the educator and very much related to it, we have also to address the *Educational Program* or overall plan. We are educators in a Lasallian school and are among the number of those who are carrying out a global program whose roots go back more than 300 years. If we carefully consider these roots we come to realize the urgency with which this educational program must include the identity of the educator in its fullest development.

Before John Baptist de La Salle conceived his plan of education for children he had come across many hired workers and teaching professionals in his day, but few who were educators by vocation. The “hired workers” of teaching had quite a bad reputation at that time. They were a bunch of “time servers” with little culture, incapable of maintaining a minimum of order in the school. There was no set timetable of classes, with pupils entering and leaving when they felt like it.

The teaching “professionals” such as the “writing masters”, jealously guarded their prerogatives and particular skills. They were more concerned with their privileges than with trying to overcome ignorance. De La Salle suffered the worst attacks on his schools from these “professionals”, the defenders of those traditions that kept them in power and security.

When De La Salle began to conceive and develop his educational program he realized that it could only be brought to fruition with educators by vocation. For this reason he would personally dedicate himself to cultivating the identity of the educator, but with the knowledge that this formed part of an even broader program from which it depended and upon which it acted decisively. De La Salle's grand scheme of education is built upon three irreplaceable pillars.

a) The person of the educator:

– *An interior man*: for only an interior man has the capacity to listen; only he can distinguish between the superficial and the authentic; only he will be open to the needs of others and permit himself to be touched by them. This interiority reaches its highest expression in the man who is “full of God”, the man who lives and walks in the presence of God, who finds God revealing Himself in daily life and, in a special way, in the children and young people that the teacher is called upon to serve.

– *The man of professional conscience*, that is, who feels responsible to acquire an excellent preparation to fully accomplish his educational tasks. And even more, he is aware that he is called to be a mediator, which in its finest expression is described as “*a minister of Jesus Christ and of the Church.*”

– *An elder brother among young people*, entirely devoted to the work of education. It is his mission and he makes it his life's dedication, not simply a way to spend his time or earn a living.

b) The community of educators

– The teachers become a *fraternal sign* by the way that they relate to one another and their students and in their willingness to share their lives and live the Gospel.

– *The community is the teacher of teachers*: it facilitates the formation of teachers, encouraging the exchange of pedagogical experiences and the search for the most effective methods. It assists in the acquisition of those values which will then be passed on to the students. It promotes reflection on the reality of youth and their corresponding educational demands.

– *It is fundamental to the work of education*: Educators are aware that, if they have been brought together in a community, it is in order to provide the best response to the educational needs of children and youth (“together and by association, for the service of gratuitous schools”). The community is the authentic protagonist of the educational plan, and it is the one factor that can guarantee the continuity of the work of education.

c) The work of education: The Lasallian plan of education is made practical in a structure that we define as “The Christian School at the service of the poor”, with these distinctive characteristics:

– *It is made to measure for the poor*, even while it is open to all.

– *“It works well”*, in the expression used repeatedly by De La Salle in his letters to the Brothers. It is a school where the boys love to be. But it is also a school of quality, one that prepares for life, that answers the real needs of the students that attend, that provides for the full development of each student and is not iron-bound by traditional programs.

– *It imparts a Christian education*, based on the criteria and values of the Gospel, including the explicit announcement of Jesus Christ. It takes as its ultimate objective *“to form Jesus Christ in the hearts of children and young people.”*

For reflection and sharing

1. What is your “self-portrait” of the educator? Which are the aspects of your identity you feel you are fulfilling and in which do you find yourself wanting?
2. What perspective (work, profession, vocation) predominates in the educational community to which you belong? What are its outstanding traits? How does it exert influence in the school, in its structures, in the way in which students are treated?
3. What are the aspects of the educator, of the educational community, and of the entire plan of education in your center that need to become more like the “Lasallian plan” as it has been described here?

1. Where the educator's journey begins.

The challenge put to the educator in the previous chapter should rouse him to set off on a "journey". The journey of the educator begins when he starts to see his profession in terms of the needs of those who are its beneficiaries.

We speak here of a conversion, that is, of a transformation of persons, and that is not something that happens overnight. It has to do with a *process* that they must undergo, both the ones who are discovering their vocation as educators, as well as the ones who already have many years in the vocation. The process does not end since the needs are always changing and require new answers.

It all begins like this: When a pebble is tossed onto the surface of a tranquil lake, the waters flow out from the splash in concentric circles, each new wavelet pushing the earlier one. Thus, onto my awareness as a teacher, the features of the youngster whom I teach take shape and become ever clearer as I begin to concern myself for his person, his present and his future. From the moment in which these circles are formed, that they influence and impel one another, the journey of the teacher begins in an on-going *dynamism*.

a) First circle: The discovery of "the other person" as a call

The "other" is, in this case, my student, our students. Frequently he only appears before our eyes as the receptor of knowledge, "the subject of learning". But if I begin to notice him with greater attention, if I see him to be the person he is, and not just as a storehouse of facts, I will soon find in him a series of gaps: possibly affective and relational needs, or the lack of values that permit him to live a meaningful life, or some type of poverty that hinders his personal development, or possibly the absence or deficiency of faith.

These cannot be reduced to a simple analysis of more-or-less objective facts. They are clarion calls that resound in my conscience as a teacher; they are the "pebbles" that break the calm

surface of the waters, obliging me to react. I hear them then as cries that demand a response. It is thus that I begin to live my profession as a *vocation*, even before I have discovered its transcendent meaning.

The result of this first movement is the conversion of my attitudes, the reflection of my vocational perspective. Such attitudes are directed towards the welfare of others my students, rather than myself.

We immediately notice, even before advancing beyond the first circle, two characteristics of the dynamism that occurs and that we anticipated from the start:

– The teacher does not see his vocation as a “static” thing. It is not the object of classification. Rather, he finds himself in it as on a “pathway” that he must traverse, in which he learns to listen, on which he grows to the measure to which he advances. The path ends for him when he stops, when he no longer wants to advance. In the same way the efforts of the teacher are no longer a “vocation” when he no longer wishes to listen, when he shuts his ears to the cries, when he remains fixed in a “*modus vivendi*”, when he clings to the security of the old routines and the ways of doing things, “the way we have always done it”.

– The fact of “living the vocation of the teacher” cannot be boiled down to the hours when he is physically with the students or involved with them. It becomes a way of being that extends to every situation in which the person of the teacher finds himself. His habit of listening continues, not just with his students, but with his family, his community, and with all those who come in contact with him each day. Even more, the “manner of being” that gradually takes shape in the teacher “by vocation” surely has its repercussions in his dealings with other persons, but also in his relationship with God, with the premise that faith is present as a fundamental condition of his life. His habit of listening permits him to find a God who reveals himself, who dialogues and transmits his will to humanity, speaking through symbols. Emphatically, he discovers a personal God present in human history. It is from this moment that we can speak of vocation, in the religious sense, as the call of God.

b) Second circle: Gathered together to provide a response.

The feeling that unsettles us when we come into contact with the needs of those who are the object of our mission, leads us direct-

ly to a second circle that form on the surface of the lake. Here we discover the difficulty of giving effective answers to those needs when we try to do so on our own. We must “associate ourselves” with others who have set out on this same journey.

So it is that a new dimension presents itself in the process of the educator: the dimension of community.

The image of the road to be traversed by the teacher also is present.

— Community is not something that a person finds “ready made”, not even when we enter one that has been functioning for a time. Community is always something to be constructed, always adapting organically, as each new member is introduced. An attitude of dialogue often obliges me to set aside my own opinions so as to consider those of the others in the mutual search for the ends of the community, for the work as a team, with all the frictions that such effort carries with it, especially for one who is accustomed to make formal presentations from a speaker's podium to a group of boys who “can only listen”. Fears, insecurities and prejudices have to be overcome. We have to learn to forgive, forget and go forward. We have set off on a tough road, if we are to take it seriously.

— Besides this, we are speaking of a community of persons whose purpose is oriented toward other persons. The workforce of a factory or a laboratory, once its objectives and procedures are clarified, has it easy. It is only a question of knowing how to work as a team and how to handle the equipment. However a community of educators is faced with personal situations, ones which cannot be mechanically manipulated. The subjects of its efforts are young people, evolving right before our eyes, differing in age and the rhythm of development in each case. Besides this, they are immersed in a society characterized by rapid changes — the media in general, the street, and, of course, the family. It means that the only relative sure thing that a community of educators possesses in responding to the needs of young people is constant adaptation to the same.

This then is the principal instrument to be utilized by the community as it advances along the “journey”: a *critical reading of reality* (“see-judge-act”). The point of departure will always be the real situation being lived by the students. It is an interpretation

that must transform. Based on it the community will question the effectiveness of the structures, programs and methods that it uses and will decide what changes, what renewal and what creative answers must be applied.

So is born *the all-inclusive program of education*: a common plan for a work in common in which all contribute their special talents. It is the sum and substance of efforts and abilities, all channeled in the same direction.

c) Third circle: at the core of my identity.

The two previous circles run the risk of progressively running out to the periphery of the person if they are not included within this third circle, the whole orientation of the life of the educator.

The direction that one takes for his life is what brings unity to the entire life, beginning with a set of values, or better said, the hierarchy of values upon which his identity rests.

The educator that has raised his profession to the level of “vocation” no longer “acts” as a educator but rather “is” a educator. The direction he has taken for his life determines the use of his free time, his relationships, his dependence on God, his reading habits.

This program for a life, if it is well founded on the values that he aspires to, will be the framework within which important decisions are made, those that impart a fixed direction to one's life. Thanks to this, the educator will see his own journey as a coherent process that gradually transforms his person in accord with the values that he has chosen.

2. The life journey of John Baptist de La Salle

We now make reference to another journey, that of John Baptist de La Salle. If previously we have referred to him as the author of a all-inclusive program of education that calls for a particular identity for the educator, we will now consider him as a man on his own journey, who found himself along the path of the educator without having foreseen such a journey from the outset.

He himself stated that initial absence of intention in his *Memoire of the Beginnings* which he wrote in his latter years to describe to his Brothers how the Institute was born.

Of course, the journey of John Baptist de La Salle is that of a man of great faith. To the bottom of his heart he felt it was God who guided him, which meant not only that he had complete confidence in God but that he was constantly alert to the least sign that might indicate God's will in his regard. However, it is not the dimension of faith, so characteristic of his journey, that calls our attention now. Rather it is the change that took place in De La Salle in the measure to which he let himself be moved by the dynamic that we have described before in the three circles of the teacher's journey.

a) A man with his eyes open

There is an outstanding trait of De La Salle that calls our attention from the merest perusal of his biography: he is a man with "his eyes wide open", attentive to life, available for whatever "cause" he felt himself called to. He did not wait passively for those calls; we might say that he was always poised to recognize them and, once recognized, determined to address them in the best way that he knew.

His heart was as open as his eyes. And that willingness to leave himself vulnerable is what placed him at the crossroads of conversion, from canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, to educator (or, better said, "teacher of teachers")

Perhaps the pebble (the first one; others will follow) that broke the relative calm of his waters was the chance meeting with Nyel, that restless, zealous person, so dedicated to establish schools for the poor. At the time John Baptist was just 28 years old. Nyel had come to Rheims, John Baptist's hometown, with the idea of founding a school for poor children. John Baptist showed interest in the undertaking; he also knew the obstacles that Nyel would encounter and he offered to help him because he knew what had to be done to get past them.

The openness that Nyel had detected in De La Salle disposed the young priest to perceive and actually to feel "heartsick" at the needs of the teachers. He noticed that they were disorganized, of little culture and less education, and no idea of pedagogy. From the start he helped the teachers in their living situation, contributing to their material sustenance. He accompanied them somewhat but had no idea of making this his life's work. Nevertheless,

through the teachers he suffered the poverty of the children and of the schools, while at the same time noticing betterments there in accord with the improvements in the teachers.

The high ideal of the work that took shape in his mind impelled him to do everything within his power to improve the quality of the workers. So, while he was remedying these, he was himself being transformed. As he progressively drew closer to them, the next step was to house the teachers in his own mansion, in spite of his family's opposition. Each new step led to the next. Years later he would remind the Brothers, in his "Memoire of the Beginnings", of the utter importance of having accepted every one of those steps, one after the other, without considering what would follow:

"If I had known that the care that I devoted to the school masters out of pure charity was going to oblige me to live with them, I would have abandoned the work because, as I naturally held to be inferior to my own valet those men that I needed to work in the school, the very idea that I would have to live with them would have been unbearable. And, in truth, when I began to bring them to my house, I suffered enormously, a situation that went on for two years."

The person of John Baptist was being transformed throughout this first stage of his journey. He left his family, his social equals, his canonry, his fortunes, his normal concerns, etc., in order to put himself at the same level with the ones with whose needs he identified himself - the children and the teachers.

b) A journey undertaken in community

One decision proved decisive in the life of John Baptist for it signaled a qualitative change in his journey. He was 31 years old (1682) when he decided to leave his own home and go to live with the teachers. From that moment the journey of John Baptist is intrinsically combined with that of the first Lasallian community.

Very importantly, John Baptist is no longer alone, but walking a unique path of communion with the teachers who would soon be called "Brothers". In mutual interaction, John Baptist and the Brothers who assist one another in discovering God's will, in the knowledge that this would become clear through the needs of the children and young people lacking an education. Their response

would have to be in accord with these needs. This experience of “exodus” would finally come to fruition as the Lasallian association.

As “exodus”, the new community had the experience of a real *setting out*. They abandoned a world that was no longer their own; they abandoned a system of values; they abandoned a way of seeing life in terms of their own welfare, in order to put themselves at the service of the ones who needed them.

It is a departure “from” but more especially it is a departure “toward”. Another world awaited them into which they had to sink their roots. They had to open their eyes to discover the real situation of the boys entrusted to them – their meager economies, their family scarcities, their cultural shortfalls. As they became closer to the boys they could see how so many of the traditional practices of the school were insufficient to address these lacks. This examination of the real life situation brought about a new creation: a new school – a practical one, adapted to life, one in which the boys enjoyed attending, one where each individual was appreciated and accompanied as a person and not just part of the mass.

The observations that De La Salle and each Brother would make, were exchanged and improved upon in community sessions. The results of this “association for the mission of education” would find concrete expression in a carefully detailed “plan of education”, *the Conduct of the Christian Schools*.

The Lasallian community that John Baptist was mentoring continued to grow with a powerful internal cohesion. Its founder tried to instill stability into a profession that in itself was badly remunerated, of scant social prestige, and little attraction. He was thus able to guarantee the professional and spiritual formation of the teachers and provide that each would find in the others the support of enthusiasm and mutual assistance.

But beyond this practical purpose, the Lasallian community became a sign for the world of education, a sign of dedication to a work that “*calls for a whole and integral person*” as De La Salle would say in his *Memoir on the Habit*.

c) Committed to God's plan

There was a dynamic factor that was lacking in the early journey of John Baptist de La Salle and the first Lasallian community. It

was what comes from the internal commitment of the person. Without it the durability and stability of the all-inclusive program would be seriously compromised. This is what became abundantly clear a few short years after the formation of De La Salle's community when it was shaken to its very foundation. There was ever-increasing opposition from the outside, clashes with legal authorities and the desertion of many of its members.

John Baptist was then weighed down with perplexity and discouragement. It appeared that the work was doomed. However at the same time he perceived a few signs of hope: the certainty that something was changing in the world of children thanks to the work of the Christian Schools. Also, he was heartened by the willingness and the generosity of those who continued in the community. On the other hand, the community was increasingly aware of being an *instrument of God*, and of carrying out his work of salvation. All of this was reason enough to go on trusting in God. But this trust came about through the men with whom he had associated. His own fidelity to God found expression in his fidelity to his Brothers and to the children and young people to whom he considered himself sent.

At the moment of greatest doubt, when the fragility of the work was at its height, John Baptist took the decision to seal his commitment with a definitive consecration. He first made this with two other Brothers in 1691 and again in 1694 with twelve.

Externally, the consecration added nothing, neither to the work of education nor to the community. But internally God came into the equation. To the good will of the person, were added his liberty and creativity so becoming a *vital program*. For this reason its protagonists would find strength needed to carry forward the work of the Schools.

For reflection and sharing

1. What changes of attitudes will the vocational perspective of his work require of an educator?
2. What expectations and projects characterize your work as educator? How does the educator's vocation influence the other facets of your life?
3. Does an on-going effort to build a community of teachers (teamwork, exchange of ideas, relations built on friendship...) exist in your teaching staff (religious and lay)? Or, on the contrary, is there coldness, indifference, jealousies, individualism? How can the present situation be improved?
4. How do the needs of the students influence the programming done by the community? Is there sufficient analysis? Does the school strive to address those issues even when customs, timetables, programs and methods must be changed? Are there adequate structures to permit "discernment in community"?
5. What do we find, what is suggested to us, by the life journey of St. John Baptist de La Salle with regard to our own experience as educators?

Theme 3. The educator's point of view

Here's a story that we can base our reflection on:

A certain prince had three wise friends. One of these was a sculptor, another, a biological scientist, and the third, a teacher. One day, out of curiosity to know and compare the way each of his friends looked at things, he put them to a little test in this way: he called them one by one into his garden where there was a small reflecting pool in the center. To each he asked the same question, pointing to the pool and saying, "Tell me, what do you see here?"

Before answering the sculptor walked around the pool, admiring the lovely marble parapet which was beautifully sculpted. He answered, "I like the pool because the parapet is marvelously carved."

The scientist looked at the parapet but his glance was immediately drawn to the pool itself. For a long while he closely examined the water, the lotus flowers opening on the surface, the little colored fishes that swam in the water and the insect life that moved both on the surface and beneath it. His answer was, "What is best about the pool is the life that teems in its waters."

When it was the teacher's turn, he began as the other two had done. He also observed the parapet and, even more so, the water. He then responded, "The parapet is beautiful and I'm sure that the life that is in the water is even better. But what impresses me the most is the light" "The light?" asked the prince in surprise. "Yes," said the teacher, "just look at the play of lights and shadows that bring out the carvings on the parapet. The light makes the pool look different in the morning than at noon or in the evening. Notice how the rays of the sun filter all the way down to the bottom of the pool. Everything comes clear at its touch. And what is most important, life grows and transforms within the pool thanks to the light. Tomorrow it will be different from today. We just cannot say what we will see in each new day because the light adds life to mystery."

1. The teacher faces the student

The two previous themes were almost exclusively in reference to the person of the educator — his identity and the journey that he must undertake in the process of growth in that identity. Of course, the students were also there but they were more or less in the background, on a secondary level.

In today's theme the student is very much present, right up front, and our observation is directed at him, the stance we are used to in the classroom. The way we see the student will be the object of our analysis. To say, "view", or "viewpoint" here is to speak of "the spirit" with which we contemplate our students. The story with which we began our reflection will help us to understand what we are looking at, and even what we expect of the student, which is clearly related to our "point of view".

We are going to discard, from the start, certain viewpoints that are not worth the trouble to dwell on, such as that of the person who only glances at the parapet, or even of the one that sits down on it and stirs the water with his hand, but distractedly. That would be a person who comes to the pool to carry away some of the fish, or cut the lotus flowers. Fortunately, we do not have so many "educators" (!) among us who see their profession as little more than a mediocre means of earning a wage. Such folk consider the students to be unavoidable obstacles to be kept at arm's length; or they even see them as so many "customers" whom we dryly negotiate with for the services we render.

These are viewpoints that we must qualify as negative.

There are other more frequent points of view that we may say are almost inevitable in many teachers. They stand before their students with a positive outlook, even one of service and self sacrifice but also aware of obtaining some payback, a certain benefit. And we are not just speaking of financial gain. They look for respect, at least, or better still, admiration and possibly even affection. And if they do not feel they are getting that, if the pool does not reward them with its freshness, they begin to be bored and frustrated.

These "viewpoints" are all too human of course. We have encountered them but we will not dwell on them at this time. We will consider others that are positive and constructive, in dealing

with the student. These are the ones we adopt with a clear awareness of being a *mediator* in the process of an education. Besides that, we will see them as part of the "journey" of the teacher and therefore susceptible to conversion. This then is the affirmation on which we base this theme: our "viewpoint" can also be changed.

a) The sculptor's point of view

They tell a story about Michelangelo, the famous artist of the Renaissance, but it could be applied to almost anyone. He himself chose the block of marble that he would sculpt into his "Moses". He stood looking at the block in ecstasy. "Moses is here", he said, and to the surprise of the people that accompanied him, he added, "He is inside and we have only to remove the outer layer for him to appear."

The "sculptor's point of view" is often found in teachers with regard to their students. It does have two very positive aspects. It is not, first of all, distracted by the actual limitations of the student, his present reality, but he goes beyond that, to what the student *can become*. It is, therefore, a constructive and optimistic attitude.

In second place it brings out the potentials of the student for their development. The teacher sets about discovering and *drawing out* such potentials. He awakens expectations of fulfillment (known in pedagogy as the "*Pygmalion*" effect).

Nevertheless, there is a considerable "but" in opposition to this viewpoint. The sculptor shapes the block of marble to his own vision; he molds it according to what he wants. This does not work when our material is not a block of marble but an evolving person.

The "teacher-sculptor" runs the risk of casting the student in his own image and likeness or, at least, in ways he would like him to be. He forgets to listen to him, to pay attention to what the student thinks about himself, his opinions, his feelings, the reasons he behaves as he does. He tends to forget that it is the student who is ultimately responsible for his own formation, based on freedom, well or ill employed. What especially escapes the notice of the "teacher-sculptor" are the many unknown factors, the internal motivations, those things that make him be a living being, a unique individual, different from anyone else in the world. He has his likes and his dreams, his hopes and his fears, what he loves and what he hates. And besides all this he is found in the shade

of the garden where we saw the pool, that is, surrounded by family and society which, together with the school, contribute to the development and maturation of the boy.

b) The scientist's point of view

An immediate difference is obvious when we compare the viewpoint of the sculptor with that of the biologist for the latter does not attempt to transform reality as he would wish; rather he respects it as a living organism and he tries to foment its growth and development. Surely both of these attitudes are quite positive.

But let us describe a bit more the "scientific viewpoint" of the biologist, of the "teacher-biologist". As the scientist that he is, he strives to objectively analyze the real situation of the student. He observes his successes and failures, his tendencies and his possibilities. He foresees his reactions and arranges the "proper conditions" that will achieve the desired results in the student's behavior. He attempts to systematically control all the variables that might affect the progress planned for in the process of learning. Up to this point there is nothing to object to.

Naturally, at this point, the teacher-scientist tends to categorize and classify his students according to their abilities, according to their answers, according to their progress in the process and according to their docility. The following step is the "selection". The "good-for-nothings" will be failed, or at least, ignored as a waste of time. Those that "give the right answer" are attended to with pleasure.

The problem with the teacher-scientist is that his viewpoint is necessarily controlling, positivist, strictly based on logic. Its great risk is that *it eliminates mystery* or it simply ignores it. Part of that mystery is a man's free will but it is also the mystery of God's grace which produces surprises in human development; it works the unexpected and values what in man's eyes passes unnoticed. The "scientific" point of view is incapable of perceiving the vocational path of the individual which often defies nature and depends in large part on the values that a person discovers and adopts.

c) The educator's point of view

"When I get home they ask me, "How was school?" "How did you do on the exam?" "What grade did you get?" "Did you do

your homework yet?" In school, if the teachers ask me anything it always has to do with the subject. I sometimes have the impression that, when they look at me, they think I am some sort of computer that does its job when it can store material and spout out what was fed into it, the more the better. But, about my personal problems, about what I want and what worries me, or what my dreams are, it seems they don't want to know anything."

This is a teen-ager's complaint. Couldn't it be of any one of our students?

But this complaint does not fit the viewpoint of an educator. It may correspond to that of a professional, or of one who just "gives his class".

But what does the educator, see? More than see, we prefer to say that he captures the complexity of the person through intuition. He does not undervalue what the "sculptor" and the "scientist" have added, even though those things may not be so obvious to him. His great contribution lies in the depth and the breadth of his viewpoint, and especially in the broad scope that he gives to Mystery, the active light in the interior of every person.

The educator's viewpoint does not "pigeon-hole" the student. He knows that he is a person-in-evolution, that his human development depends on *his interaction with his social milieu*, which is in itself very complex.

He knows that a person's future does not depend on the intellectual mastery of "scholastic programs" and test scores but on his ability to situate himself critically, creatively and in solidarity with society, in the acquisition of skills of every sort, in the assimilation of values, in the capacity to make free and responsible decisions.

In addition, the educator that manages to see the light in his own person, can marvel at the light that he finds in the person of the student. It is the view of faith, that discovers a new dimension, the transcendence of the person, even when that seems impossible, humanly speaking. It happens then that it is God's fond contemplation that "shines through" the eyes of the teacher, even though this latter might not be aware of it.

2. To see with the eyes of God

Here we enter another dimension, but not on some other galaxy. We continue seeing the parapet and the waters of the pool, but now we become conscious of the light that illumines them.

Let's speak of it with another symbol, one drawn from the Bible. It deals with a story that we find at the beginning of the Book of Exodus (chapters 3 and 4), that is loaded with images and symbolism. We find the person of Moses. He has fled from the Pharaoh and is watching over his flock but he has not been able to forget the Israelites whom he had seen oppressed in Egypt. With the flock he reaches Horeb, the mountain of God, and there next to the "burning bush", he hears the voice of God that calls to him and says, *"I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians... Come, now! I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."* (Exodus 3, 7-10).

Moses had already seen how enslaved the Israelites were but *he had not looked upon that* with the eyes of God. It is now, as he stands on "sacred ground", that he realizes that God is looking those his eyes (Moses' own) and has come down to free the Israelites, that is, sending Moses to free them.

This way of *"seeing with the eyes of God"* brings, as a consequence, the "being sent to address the necessities that are discovered as the way God wants to be served". That situation of need becomes a *situation of ministry* ("minister" means "one who serves"). That is, we have found our vocation as God's call to serve him in a given situation (which for us is the education of youth), that we have seen with the eyes of God and heard with his ears.

Let us look into this new perspective that the history of Salvation opens up to us. From this viewpoint we can see God present in our usual daily work and present in the youngsters whom he himself has sent us to. Apparently, everything is just as before but in reality the light that we have found causes us to see everything with another attitude.

This experience of encounter with God in human history – in the world of children and youth, of the "infiltration" of God's eyes

through his own, was what De La Salle had and what he tried to pass on to the Brothers. As he says in his meditations, speaking of the children confided to us: "*He (God) looks upon them with compassion and watches over them as protector, support and Father; but he does so by commissioning you with this task. The good God places them in your hands...*" (Meditation 37, 3).

In the Lasallian experience "*to see with the eyes of God*" is to permit the presence of God to act in us. In this way we come to identify the vision and the spirit, which is the true origin of the vision: "*The spirit of faith is a certain participation in the spirit of God who dwells in us*" (Letter 105). Thanks to the faith that enlightens him, the Christian educator is able to see that other mysterious dimension of son of God in every youngster as loved and called by Him to become part of Jesus Christ.

But we cannot think about the spirit of faith — or the view of faith — as something that "you either have it or you don't" but as a process that one begins and continues to advance in (we recall the journey of the teacher). Certainly this all implies discipline, vigilance over ourselves, analysis and discernment of our real intentions, etc. and so the view of faith goes on converting us. De La Salle offers some means to make that a reality: daily nourishment with the *Word of God, prayer and living in the presence of God*, reminding ourselves of that presence in all that we do.

As it is based on a personal relationship, it is an on-going challenge to draw progressively closer, to strive to make the work of each day "*guided by God, moved by his spirit and with the intention of pleasing him*" (Common Rule 2,6).

This is a demanding task, without doubt. But it is one that can be proposed as a life journey to any believing educator.

For reflection and sharing:

1. What are the factors that cause us to see our students in any of the different ways indicated in this theme?
2. What are the implications of the manner with which we deal with students when one or other of these different ways of “seeing” them is dominant?
3. What means, policies, actions, etc. can we employ so that a purely academic view of our students does not prevail? How can we help them in the other facets of their personality?

Theme 4. At the service of the student

1. The attitude of the educator

Since we have come to the nature of relationships in education, we now have to speak about our attitude as educators.

When we reflected on our identity (theme 1) we reached the conclusion that we require a hierarchy of values, based on the perspective of vocation.

On considering the journey of the educator (theme 2), we found that the direction we take is the result of vocational values, underscoring the selflessness and generosity of the teacher that should characterize his relations with his students.

The "spirit" that breathes life into that educational relation, the "way of seeing" the youngsters (theme 3), means living out those values that we have assumed and which, in their turn, give rise to certain attitudes.

Summing up, in accord with the identity of the teacher that should be ours, in accord with the journey that we might have set forth on, and animated with the spirit that enlivens our educational relations, we will have one or the other attitude. And it is the attitude that determines our immediate conduct with the students.

a) The fundamental attitude of the "educator by vocation"

What we call "attitude" is the tendency or predisposition to act in a determined way; it is generated by the values and/or needs that are found in the subject.

The "general attitude" or foundation of the educator by vocation (later we will speak about specific attitudes) we found when we reflected on the journey of the educator. We opened ourselves to the needs of others (especially of our students); we found that they *cried out* to us; we felt responsible for them and we committed our lives to them in the search for the solution to those needs.

This is the dynamic that places the educator on the path of vocation.

We discovered a two-fold perspective for him: on the one hand the self-effacement of the teacher with regard to his students. It is

the process of "conversion to". What the student needs is the focus of my attention. I place myself at his service.

On the other hand, this dynamic or attitude is seen as a *commitment*; it is the firm determination to resolve the educational needs of the youngsters.

The teacher's *self-effacement and commitment* are like the two sides of the same coin, his fundamental attitude toward his relations in education.

b) The instrumental or specific attitudes

The all-embracing attitude of "self-effacement and commitment" only becomes operative through "specific attitudes" which are the "instruments" by means of which the global attitude steers one's actions toward the desired goal.

We will attempt to group several attitudes that can figure in this dynamic into four pairs, while expressing that two-fold meaning at the same time: commitment to the student and self-effacement of the teacher.

1. The first pair of attitudes is geared to the *personalization* of relations in education. They underscore the integral character of that relation which is not limited to aspects of cognition and academics but which sees the person of the student as a whole in the process of maturation.

– The *openness* of the teacher toward the student is the first attitude that makes this process possible. It is our attention to the mystery of the person, accepting him without condition. It is our effort to understand each person in all his particular traits, his history, his temperament, his family circumstances and surroundings, and the resulting adaptation to the individuality of the subject, something very different from uniformity and being bunched together.

– In parallel to this openness the teacher's *availability* grows and develops. He is generous with his time, his talents and his willingness to welcome any request.

2. The second pair of attitudes extends that personalization, explained above to its limits for the sake of the neediest among them. These are the children and young people who, for whatever reason, have the most difficulty in their personal growth and social integration.

– Here we find the *sensitivity* of the teacher toward the poorest, the marginalized, the ones most lacking in attraction. It is really just the refinement of the first attitude, openness. This sensitivity helps the teacher *prefer*, in the wider framework of equality, the neediest students when it comes to dedicating time, attention, concern and patience.

– In the same way his *selflessness or generosity* perfects his availability and prevents it from faltering, in spite of misunderstandings, the lack of rapid and visible results, ingratitude and failures. A teacher inspired with this attitude seeks first and above all the welfare of his students. He feels responsible for their growth in maturity and strives with all his might to bring it about. His lack of self interest steers him in a special way toward those who most need his efforts, even though these are often the ones who may least show appreciation or gratitude.

3. The third pair of attitudes refers to the formation of values, that is, building up a framework that gives consistency to the identity of the student, and permits him to take his place in society freely, responsibly and creatively.

– This demands on the part of the educator, a *commitment to the truth*, that is to say, acceptance of the responsibility to lead the young person along the path of truth, as it is in the real world and not just in theory, for his complete fulfilment. The teacher pledges himself to make the student a seeker for the truth, to develop his critical capacity and open himself to the Mystery present in life. He helps him to know and experience the values that ennoble a person.

– This attitude would have scant success if it were not accompanied by the *example of the teacher's own life*. "Your actions speak so loudly that I cannot hear your voice" is the accusation that on more than one occasion students direct at their teachers. The coherence of words with actions, the sincerity of one's witness, ought to be a constant concern, or better said, attitude of the teacher.

4. Finally, the function of the teacher as *mediator* finds its dynamism in another pair of attitudes:

– One is an attitude of *motivation* to awaken the student to an interest in his own formation. It establishes the right conditions

that will permit the student to develop the abilities that lead to his maturity. As guide and companion along the way, the teacher's pedagogical relation to the student could not be farther from that of a disciplinarian and an authoritarian style. On the contrary, he strives to predispose the will of the youngster to fuller responsibility for his own formation.

– When a teacher becomes aware of the responsibility implicit in his role as mediator, he will find a new attitude forming within. It is an interest in his *continuing formation*. Fidelity to the truth and to the student demand this constant attitude of staying up-to-date, mastering as much as he can of those areas of knowledge that he teaches, honing those educational techniques that improve communication, getting to know his students better to adapt to their situation and promote their progress, being aware of the social environment, the “signs of the times”, in order to examine them critically in the school.

To conclude this first point, we can state that it is not so much what is done that defines the good teacher in his relations as educator, (his work might be motivated by some psychological need, or some motive of winning his students' affection), but rather the internal attitude that inspires his activity as educator. With this attitude the person of the student occupies the center of the teacher's attention.

2. De La Salle and service to the student: “an ardent zeal”

In Lasallian terms, self-effacement and commitment are moulded into one characteristic expression, *zeal*.

a) A spiritual interior attitude

In De La Salle's mind ZEAL, for the Christian educator, is *his spiritual interior attitude* which infuses his whole conduct as teacher and breathes life into all that he does.

We cannot equate “a whole lot of zeal” with “a whole lot of activity”, nor with “grand projects”. “Zeal”, for De La Salle, is not the same as action. He wrote, “*When, in your apostolic ministries, you do not join zeal to your action, you will produce little fruit for all the good you wish to do your neighbor.*” (Meditation 114.2).

Zeal is the fruit that draws the sap up from the root... And what is the root in this case? It is the "spirit of faith" (or "the view of faith" as we saw in the previous theme). It is not possible to understand or interpret the sense of "zeal" in Lasallian terms if we do not see it like this, the root that goes before the fruit, the spirit of faith.

The spirit of faith is what inspires the Christian teacher to *consciously* want to take part in the History of Salvation, where God comes down to the human person, chooses him and leads him. Through faith the Christian teacher sees that he is God's "minister", sent by Him for the education of children and youth. That faith transformed into zeal impels him to carry out his duties as "the work of God" with all the ardor of which he is capable.

Seen in this light of faith, zeal is the awareness of a responsibility to God for the welfare of children. It is the certainty of *collaborating* in the work of God with entire confidence in the students' potential for growth, based on their vocation as human beings and their dignity as children of God.

This existential attitude gives unity and meaning to the life of the Lasallian teacher. What is often monotonous and fatiguing work with his students becomes transparent and "sacramental" when he raises it up to God and joins it to the History of Salvation. At the same time it becomes a source of clarity and energy for his work: he can address the needs of his students more efficiently and creatively.

b) The attitudes that "give substance" to zeal

In his writing De La Salle described this interior attitude, zeal, in several ways but it is worth the effort to emphasize here certain special attitudes to which he gives the most importance.

1st. *Responsibility*: We have already referred to this as the attitude that unifies the way the Christian teacher sees himself. In De La Salle's expression, "He makes no distinction between his calling as teacher and what pertains to his own salvation and perfection". The first consequence of that attitude is a sense of responsibility.

Aware that he is to act as God's instrument, his primary concern is to ensure that he is fully prepared. "Give an account of the diligence you have had in instructing yourself on those subjects which you must teach to those confided to your care" (Meditation 206,1)

And De La Salle, as always, finds the ultimate motivation in the faith. "You have pledged yourself to answer to God for those children that you teach and, on taking responsibility for the care of their souls, you offer them to God, in a certain way, soul by soul" (Meditation 137,3).

The work of teaching must therefore be carried out with entire dedication. "In the classroom your only concern should be the manner in which you fulfill the ministry that God has confided to you with your students" (Meditation 6,2).

2nd. *Tenderness*: It is rather surprising to find this term repeated so many times in that otherwise austere style that typifies De La Salle's writings. Nevertheless he would time and again invite his teachers to supply that element of affection which their parents ought to have, as he considered them to be their substitutes. "If you use the firm hand of a father to correct them and impose order, you ought also to feel for them the tenderness of a mother, to welcome them and bring them all the good that is within your power to give" (Meditation 101, 3).

This is how the teacher is "to win them over and touch their hearts" (Meditation 43,3) so that the students gladly accept the education that is offered to them.

3rd. *Gratuity*: This is the most radical sign of lack of self-interest and De La Salle carries it to the extreme even though in doing so he brought down on himself the most serious problems and the greatest struggles in order to maintain gratuity in the schools. As he saw it, it was the only way that he could guarantee that the very poorest would attend his schools without hindrance.

But there is a second aspect of this gratuity that deepens its significance – it is the sign of the gratuitous love of God for the teacher and, through his ministry, for his pupils.

This unselfishness or lack of self-interest is, in De La Salle's thinking, an essential attitude in education. The teacher lives for those that are entrusted to him. He strives to promote their growth and so is always alert to initiatives in pedagogy that will renew the school and make it ever more effective.

4th. *Good example*: The witness of the teacher is the first lesson that he must give to his students if he really wants them to benefit from what he teaches. It was also almost an obsession for De

La Salle and with good reason: *“...because example makes a much greater impression than words do on their minds and hearts. We find this especially in children who, for lacking still in a spirit of reflection, usually will imitate in their own lives the example of their teachers, and are more inclined to imitate what they see them do, rather than what they hear them say, especially when their words contradict their actions”* (Meditation 202, 3).

5th. *Prayer*: Finally, the Christian teacher should have prayer as an expression of his zeal for his students for he does know that it is God, the Author of his salvation, who commissions him to teach and makes him his representative to the students.

Through prayer, he raises to God all that he does but also asks in prayer for the zeal that his work demands. *“It is your obligation to raise your thoughts each day to God in prayer in order to learn from Him what you must teach your pupils, and then return to them, adapting yourself to their capacity to share with them what God has communicated to you about them”* (Meditation 198,1). *“You must frequently beseech God to obtain from Him what your profession requires you to communicate to others... Be persevering in asking God for this spirit of prayer”* (Meditation 95,1)

3. The bases to “create a new school”

The commitment of the teacher, which we have called Lasallian zeal, finds its expression through initiatives in education that are directed toward the *creation of a new school*, just as De La Salle did in his own day. This school aspires to be an authentic answer in education for the needs of the youth of today.

The effectiveness of this “new school” can only be guaranteed if it has the attitude of the teacher as its foundation. Further on we will consider the initiatives in pedagogy that this will require. But before we close this theme, let us open the spectrum of possibilities to which the teacher must direct his commitment. Concrete initiatives will flow from this. He should work in several directions:

a) *Toward the teacher himself*. He will strive to improve:

- his professional competence, his continuing formation in the various subjects that he teaches;
- the genuineness of his witness, the coherence of his life with his words, his commitment to justice, charity, respect for persons...;

- his accessibility, his lack of self-interest, his presence in activities of the pastoral ministry;
- the style of his dealings with others, his relations to them.

b) Toward the students:

- an extensive knowledge of them as individuals, openness, dialogue, an interest in their problems;
- a personalized “accompaniment”, which is a process in education that calls for constancy and dedication, personal guidance;
- adaptation of the programs and techniques of learning to the actual possibilities and needs of the students, investigation into the formative elements that are most appropriate and the techniques that are most effective.

c) Toward the educational community:

- in order to promote a spirit of solidarity and collaboration;
- a willingness to share responsibilities
- dialogue and cooperation with the other teachers, the parents, the administration.

For reflection and sharing:

1. Based on your teaching experience, to what degree is the “lack of self-interest and commitment” that we have proposed here workable? Or does it belong to a Utopia?
2. Which one (or ones) of the concrete attitudes that should characterize the teacher is the one that you feel is the most necessary for our mission? And which are most needed by the students?
3. In your community of educators what are the attitudes that should prevail amongst you that will really launch a worthwhile program of education?

Theme 5: A spirituality for the journey

Spirituality expresses our life's deepest meaning, the *spirit* that enlivens our every action and our way of relating with the world, with our neighbors and with God. It is like the common thread that runs through and guides all our steps, giving unity and sense to our journey.

"Spirituality" does not always have religious connotations even though we often use this term when referring to our way of relating to the sacred. A non-believer can live a deep spirituality. The believing person finds in God the most profound roots of his life; for that reason his spirituality is nourished by God Himself and has its expression in God.

Lasallian spirituality is a support for the life's journey of the teacher. Its most elementary symbol is a star that is often combined with the motto "*signum fidei*" (sign of faith) in reference to the *sine qua non* of Lasallian spirituality which is the *spirit of faith*. But the symbol of the star, in its simplicity, says a great deal; it permits us to approach the great wealth and potential that are contained in what we are calling "Lasallian spirituality".

In this chapter we will make a brief and simple introduction to Lasallian spirituality.

1. A light in the heart

The star is light, even before it is seen or recognized as a star. Lasallian spirituality is, before all else, *an experience of light*. De La Salle described this experience in his *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. He began by presenting in a brief synthesis the dynamic development of that experience, placing it in relation to its three principal actors: God, the teachers and the children.

"God, Who spreads the fragrance of His doctrine in all the world through the ministry of human persons and Who ordained, 'Let there be light in the depths of darkness', is He who has enlightened the hearts of those whom He has chosen to announce His word to the children, so that they can be enlightened in their turn and discover the glory of God" (MR 193,1).

a) The enlightened heart

How can we translate that expression, *to have an enlightened heart*, for today's world?

Before we apply more religious formulas for that task so that these do not become empty of meaning, we will start with the most basically human. An enlightened heart is one that has discovered the most profound meaning to life. It is a heart that lives every moment with the hope of rising above the problems that each day may bring. And even more, the enlightened heart is one that has discovered the joy and the strength that comes from loving. It has emphatically chosen the values that build up a person and permit his humanity to constantly grow.

Whoever in his life has gone through a time of darkness, disillusion and lack of meaning, and has suddenly seen the light can likely describe that experience as being born again, as if creation had been repeated in his person. That person would understand then why De La Salle spoke of a creation in reference to Genesis, "*on the first day, God made the light...*", when he attempted to describe this basic experience for the Christian educator.

When that light is ignited in the heart, it cannot be kept hidden. It needs to be communicated. This is truly when the teacher is born. The real educator is one who communicates meaning, dreams, love, values, far beyond all the bits of knowledge and techniques.

And the Christian educator is, quite simply, one who has found the root, the source, of that light that enlightens the heart and calls it by its name, which is *God*. Or rather, *Jesus*, Who is God Incarnate. A teacher, after having communicated meaning, dreams, love and values, points out the origin of all those things and pronounces their Christian name, *Jesus and Gospel*. He shows Him to be the final end of all his instruction because He is the final end of the teacher's entire life as well.

Let us focus our attention on the "*levels of experience*" present in the Lasallian formulation at the beginning of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*:

1. The educator discovers the light in his heart (the meaning of life)
... and he transmits it to the children.

2. The educator finds the origin of that light
...and he shows the children how it is origin and end.

And now, situated in this dynamic of faith, comes the third level:

3. The educator finds that he himself is a mediator of the light.

The consciousness of being mediator

- Makes him see God as protagonist and creator in human history, but One who acts *through the ministry of human persons*.
- And he knows himself to be chosen by God *to announce His word to the children*.

It is at this level, of the awareness of mediation, that Lasallian spirituality develops with the greatest force. This does not seek its motivation in the desire to be the most perfect – in a perfection that remains centered on a glorified self image – but in the need to be a good *mediator of the light*, the very best possible.

b) The glory of God

With the perspective of the third level we can now understand that mysterious expression that De La Salle sets as the final objective: *to discover the glory of God*.

What does the *glory of God* mean? De La Salle uses the expression very often. In another part of these same meditations he employs it, linking it to the symbol of light, and again he shows that it is the final objective of the ministry commended to us:

“God has called you to your ministry so that you may know His glory and instill in the children the spirit of knowledge and of light, so that they may know Him and that the eyes of their hearts may be illumined” (MR 206,1).

Are these two things: *“To procure the glory of God”* and *“to instill in the children the spirit of knowledge and of light”* one and the same or are they distinct?

A sentence from St. Irenaeus of Lyon gives us the answer: *“The glory of God is the human person fully alive”*. What could possibly be a greater glory for a God Who became incarnate in order to share the human condition?

- In our case to procure the glory of God is equivalent to helping our children and young people *reach their full potential* as per-

sons, as human beings and Christians. (In today's more secular language, we would say that "you have to give God something to like, to make Him happy", and that is the way to do it).

— "*To discover the glory of God*" is to discover the human vocation and reach one's full potential according to God's plan, in solidarity with all men and women. Isn't this the best objective for the education of our youngsters? We can make it more practical and concrete in several ways.

2. The journey and the star

Lasallian spirituality is presented to us then as a journey that we set out on to seek the meaning of our life and our mission. It leads to the discovery of "*the glory of God*".

It is a process of enlightenment, a pathway of openness to the light. We see this so clearly in another mediation of De La Salle, told as a sort of parable, in which he joins the two symbols, the journey and the star.

This is the meditation that he gives us for the feast of the Epiphany (MF 96). The Magi, guided by the star, set out to find Jesus and adore him. De La Salle changes the story into a parable about what must be our journey of faith as teachers.

In the background of the parable we catch echoes of what had been De La Salle's own experience of vocation: his journey began without his being aware of it (cf. *The Memoire of the Beginnings*), as he saw the needs of the poor teachers who, in their turn, opened his eyes to the needs of children and youth. Now, having to walk the same path, he had to make choices from among a series of values: to leave one world in order to become part of another, but without renouncing the dialogue (faith and culture) with a society which he wanted to prepare the children for. Recall his two works, *The Duties of the Christian* and *Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, published together for the first time in 1703. And this road attained the peak of his experience of faith when he felt himself to be one with those teachers, "ministers" and mediators of Christ to children. In the encounter with them he experienced his own encounter with Christ.

Let us look more closely at this parable of the star. It was written in an explicit religious language that we will have to transpose

into our secular culture of the third millennium. If we are able to make that leap we will discover its very telling message.

The three points of the meditation are related to the three areas in which the journey of the teacher plays itself out:

- that of his interior life
- that of his social and cultural relationships
- that of his mission in education

Let us not forget a detail that is not explicit but is in the background. It reveals a fundamental trait of Lasallian spirituality. The Magi were different yet they traveled together. Together they arrived at the goal of the quest. We are speaking then of *a journey in community*.

It also mentions three sources of light: *the star* that guides them, the light of their own *faith* and the *Sun* that gives its light to the other sources, that is, Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the Magi began the journey without knowing that third source which De La Salle calls "*the true light*".

At the end of their quest the three lights seem to fuse into one. But they did feel the attraction even while setting out, eventually arriving at the unity of life.

1st point: The interior life

The journey of Lasallian spirituality begins when "*They discover a new and extraordinary star*" that, for the teacher, is the world of children and youth which permits these to hope for a new society, thanks to a human and Christian education.

However, just as the Magi had to study the firmament to find the star, the teacher must set aside his everyday concerns and self concerns to open his eyes to the needs of the children and young people that are in his charge. His interior life begins to resound with their voices, at times scarcely audible. And, on wishing to give an answer to them, his journey begins, an exodus in which he must resist the temptation to fall back to his self interests, even very legitimate ones.

"And having once seen it, they set out from a remote place in search of the One Who they themselves did not know, nor was even known in his own country". The start of the journey often-times does not have a religious character; nevertheless, faith, a gift

of God, is there present as a seed in the heart of the teacher, for it is God Who *"has enlightened the hearts of those He has chosen to announce His word to the children..."* (MR 193,1). He it is that unsettles their hearts so that they rise and set out on the journey.

"Enlightened by the star, and later on by the light of faith, they set out on the journey to announce a new Sun of justice in the place where He is born, causing astonishment to the inhabitants of that place with such startling news". To commence a journey is to initiate a process of conversion of one's attitudes so that they come to focus more on others than on themselves. With his enthusiastic dedication to youth, the teacher affirms his conviction that it is possible to build a new humanity founded precisely on these youngsters.

Notice where De La Salle places his emphasis: *"even more by the light of faith"*. This is what permitted them to recognize and follow the light of the star until they found the *Sun of justice*. It is not yet an explicit faith in Jesus, whom they do not know, but the ordinary faith of every believing person, of whatever religious creed: *a sincere attitude of attention and faithfulness to interior inspirations*. This is the first condition for the change to begin to happen for the grace of God to become efficacious in the life of the teacher. Thus, *"The star does not shine on them in vain...for having shown themselves so faithful to the divine inspirations"*.

Here De La Salle makes the transition from the parable to our lives:

"Do we pay attention to the inspirations that we receive from God? Are we as diligent in following them as were the Magi in letting themselves be guided by the light of the star that went before them?"

The *"inspirations"* that teachers get are the wants and needs of children and youth. From the moment we try to attend to those needs we are already *"enlightened by the light"*. Our *"employ"* rises above the levels of work and profession and takes on the dimensions of vocation. The result is a new style of being a teacher, one who proclaims a new society with his own example, with a new type of relations among persons.

This is the way a *"new manner of being"* originates, one that extends to all the situations in which the person of the teacher finds himself. His habit of listening reaches not only to his students but also his family, his community and all those with whom he has daily contact.

Besides the repercussions that this style has with other persons, it affects as well his relations with God in the measure in which faith – *the spirit of faith* – impacts as a fundamental dimension of his life. The attitude of listening enables him to discover a God Who reveals Himself, dialogues, makes known His will to men and speaks by means of symbols. He finds a personal God present in human history.

2nd point: Present in society and culture

The second point of the meditation shows us the Magi having arrived in Jerusalem, right into the palace of Herod. It is the field of social relations at various levels as well as the area of politics. And it is an obligatory area for the teacher whose mission consists in *initiating* new members into society and who cannot remain on the margin of it. How does Lasallian spirituality serve him in this area?

The situation of the Magi in Jerusalem is exactly what often occurs to the Christian teacher. He normally carries on his work in a social and cultural atmosphere that does not look kindly either on the explicit mention and witness of the faith or on the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Frequently the moral and religious background of his students is lamentable. But that should not cause him to stand back nor be discouraged. On the contrary, he is invited to seek out and find the young in their culture. "*The seeds of the Word*" that Vatican Council II referred to (AG 11,2) are present there without a doubt. Christian teachers are in a wonderful place to apply this invitation of the Council:

"...They should get to know the people with whom they live and converse with them to make known in sincere and patient dialogue the riches that a generous God has strewn among men; at the same time they must strive to examine these riches in the light of the Gospel, freeing them and subjecting them to the dominion of the Saving God." (AG 11,2)

In their exchanges with the people of Jerusalem the Magi learned the signs of the birth of Jesus. They were careful in their discernment not to be fooled by power, prestige and appearances. They saw, for example, Herod's son, "*who was lying in a silver cradle and was admired by all of Judea*". All the new values of a consumer and secular society were embodied in that child, who was presented with so much attention and veneration.

De La Salle tells us that "*The faith that burned within them and the grandeur of the One they sought moved them forward and caused them to spurn every kind of human considerations*".

In the same way the alert teacher, who knows how to see "*with the eyes of faith*", will find in society and in young people the signs that announce the birth of Christ and his Kingdom among the young.

3rd point: Present in the ministry of education

In the third point of the meditation De La Salle calls us to see the presence of Christ incarnate in those children and youth that we accompany. If we have approached this encounter with sincerity we will find that Lasallian spirituality leads us to find God, not on the periphery of our daily work, but at its very core

"They were guided by the star that went before them up to the place where the Child lay and there it remained overhead. Entering then into the stable the Magi saw a little child wrapped in swaddling clothes, together with Mary, his Mother" (MF 96,3).

De La Salle embellishes this meeting with some rhetorical flourishes of admiration and surprise so as to bring out the natural difficulty of recognizing Jesus in the midst of so much poverty. He ends by reminding us once again of the key that we found at the beginning, on the subject of interiority: "*See what the faith moved them to do, with whose spirit they were so deeply penetrated*".

He immediately proceeds to apply this situation to the teacher, knowing that the problems that a teacher encounters are not fewer than those of the Magi. What De La Salle really tells us is what he had said of the encounter of the Magi with Jesus:

"It is not easy to live our faith in this work of education; it is not easy to recognize Jesus in many of these young persons that we serve; and it is not easy to carry out this work with the same zeal as one who adores and serves Jesus Christ. And in spite of that, it is what we must do."

Here is the summit of the process of interior enlightenment through faith and it is what Lasallian spirituality consists of:

"Recognize Jesus Christ under the poor rags of the children that you instruct; adore Him in them. Love poverty and honor the poor in the example of the Magi."

What are the kinds of “poor rags” that our children and young people have today? They are not simply material poverty but also moral, affective, intellectual and physical poverty. That poverty, De La Salle tells us, should make us loving persons “*entrusted with the education of the poor*”. It is a difficult challenge. And for this he adds, giving us once more the key to the entire process:

“Be moved by faith to do so with love and zeal, since they are members of Jesus Christ” (MF 96,3).

For reflection and sharing:

1. In your personal experience as educators, what resonance do these expressions produce in you: "to have light in the heart", "to be mediators of the light", "to draw out from the darkness"?
2. Can we recall some aspects of Lasallian spirituality that have helped to give greater significance to our work as teachers?
3. What experience have we had of "procuring the glory of God"? Describe "the glory of God" in our work with children and youth.
4. What aspects of our own journey of faith do we find reflected in that of the Magi as it has been presented in the commentary on Meditation 96 of De La Salle?

2nd Part

Participating in a Program of Education

Theme 6:

The dynamics of an educational program*

The desire to give the best possible response to the educational needs of the students is always present as a constant concern in the teacher's "journey".

The second part of our program has the educator's identity as its background, such as we have described. With that in mind we now ask ourselves what the "program of education" should be in which that identity can take shape if it is to be effective.

We will begin by analyzing the dynamics that launch a program and facilitate its permanent re-generation.

1. Dynamics of a program

A program is energized by four interrelated elements. The absence of any one of these would cause the program to be ineffective.

a) The actors: The first element is always the person who gives it *impetus*, that is, the persons or *actors* in the program. For a program to even exist and also that it may be self-generating, we have to start with persons who feel themselves *responsible* for it, who are capable and decide to become its *protagonists*. If these remain on the periphery of what are the program's objectives, if they do not wish to be fully involved, they cannot be the real "pushers" of the program. If such were the case, in what refers to them, there could be no dynamism.

b) The children and their needs: *The needs of the children and the youngsters* here come into play. The actors of the program discover certain situations of needs and feel stirred by them to want to apply remedies. In all likelihood these needs existed before, but they only enter into the dynamics of the program when they come

* translator's note: The Spanish expression, "proyecto educativo" cannot be directly translated into English. "Project", in English, suggests a narrower concept while the author uses "proyecto" as an all-inclusive program of education – in philosophy, planning and execution. "Program" may be the closest term we can offer for that.

to the attention of the actors who, in their turn, feel *responsible* to do something about them.

c) The objectives: Once the needs are known, we then must set our objectives or ends of the program. How far do we wish to go? What new situation do we wish to create as a result of the program? This will be the *utopia* that will serve as our “magnetic north”. But that utopia runs the risk of being too far out of reach if it does not translate into partial and specific goals — particular needs or stages which must be passed through en route to the resolution of the overall situation.

d) The structures and policies: Lastly, we must determine the *structures* that will help us to achieve the partial goals, and eventually, the ultimate objectives of the program. The structures put the program on firm ground and situate it in real circumstances with the possibilities that they offer. They strive for efficacy - the best results with the least possible effort.

Not all the structures and policies are of the same order. Normally, the personal policies, the ones that establish relations among the participants, have greater importance. The smooth application of the rest follow from these.

The structures should always be checked against the needs that brought them about in the first place. If this is the practice, they can be replaced or modified when it is found that they are not producing the desired results.

2. When the dynamics falter

Dynamism can fail when any one of the four elements is missing. In other words, dynamism disappears when one or more of those four elements loses its relation to the others because the program will tend to put all its emphasis on that particular element.

Let us look at the principal “short circuits” and ask ourselves if they might not be affecting the program of the institution where we work.

a) Short circuit through activism

The focus of the actors of the program is completely absorbed by the *needs*. There are so many deficiencies, so many urgencies,

that a person is tempted to run off in every direction to try to resolve them. Time is not taken for a proper analysis, for a good formation, for the right statement of objectives nor for programming the means and the effective structures, least of all the ones that require interpersonal relations.

This *anxiety arising from needs* easily affects the people who are more sensitive and committed. But activism ends with the *burnout* of the protagonists, rendering them superficial and robbing the program of meaning. Ultimately the deepest needs are left without resolution.

b) Short circuit through paralysis

Attention is centered on the *finalities* of the program, on its objectives. The theoretical principals are carefully examined and the criteria that must support them are clearly stated. Vocabulary is labored over. But then the philosophy is in no way applied to the structures; the objectives that were so well thought out are not brought down to earth. Or the protagonists stay put in their ivory towers, shut up in their labs and offices, with little contact with the children and youth.

It is the risk of the theoreticians, who let themselves be dazzled by the utopia and cannot translate it into reality.

c) Short circuit through routine or inertia

The attention (or what, in this case, are simple reflexes) is monopolized by the *structures*.

We go on doing what has always been done without questioning its validity or the possibility of improving on it. If by chance a glimmer of a doubt occurs, it is summarily dismissed with, "If it worked before, it will work now." Instruments like self-analysis or on-going quality control are absent.

Perhaps there are fewer areas of society in which there is such a propensity to fall into this detour than the field of education. The academic syllabi, the educational methods, the salary scale, the repetition of content year after year, the successive rhythm of the calendar year, all seem to combine in causing teachers to lose sight of the horizons of objectives and the needs of the children that the objectives must zero in on. All these factors, as a program

develops, tend to hypnotize its actors in such a way that the program ends up as a *group of people working to maintain the old structures*.

d) Short circuit for motives of survival

Here the attention of the actors is centered on *themselves*. The program is the least important. The children and their needs fade from view; the objectives matter not at all, much less the structures. The only preoccupation is self-interest, how to survive. Spirit has been lost, as have responsibility and the ability to imagine a utopia or any creative thinking. All that had its *raison d'être* in the actors participating in the program, where they found their satisfaction in working to resolve the needs of the children, is now gone. The children have only become "customers" whose business permits us to survive.

3. How the Lasallian program came to be

The dynamics that we have been describing are the very same that gave birth to the Lasallian educational program 300 years ago. The spark that ignited that dynamism we can identify with the chance encounter between De La Salle, at the time a canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, with Adrien Nyel, an enthusiastic person whose insatiable dream was the creation of schools for poor boys. From that point on, we see the development of an interrelation of persons, needs, aims and structures in the following way:

a) The actors:

De La Salle's original community had little to do with a compact body that functioned and moved as one, and even less with a well disciplined group that would faithfully follow the dictates of a charismatic leader. On the contrary, as soon as we look closely at this community, we immediately come up against a haphazard mix of persons, the result of individual "journeys" converging and clashing over issues:

– *Nyel*: the apostolic man, moved by the pressing needs of abandoned youth. What he lacks is an appropriate structure that would guarantee the success of the undertaking. He lacked a community.

– *John Baptist de La Salle*: a man open to God, conscious of that

final end which is the salvation that God calls all men to. He was searching and wondering what might be his role as an instrument of God in the work of salvation. He did not as yet feel himself "touched" and moved by the needs of youth that was abandoned and without culture.

– *The teachers and the first Brothers*: practical, everyday people. They needed structures that would give them a sense of security; they themselves were living in need.

The Lasallian "program" commenced when these individual "journeys" came together.

b) The needs:

De La Salle's program of Christian education did not arise from theoretical reasoning, nor was it the consequence of a philosophy. Its development had nothing to do with the gradual application of a series of ideas or a plan that was previously thought out. And of course, in its beginnings we can in no way detect a vision of a global organization that aspired to solve the overarching problem of Christian education.

What we do find with the protagonists of this program is openness and sensitivity to detect palpable needs that called for concrete solutions. It is true that many of those solutions that were adopted proved valid for other needs as well and so were permanently set. Nevertheless, the community continued to be attentive to detect new needs that would call for new solutions or the modification of ones that they had.

But there was a certain order in the discovery and judgment of those needs. This would also determine the hierarchy of objectives that the community would propose for itself:

– The first needs that they found were those that had to do with the children, "*children without instruction and far from salvation*", as they were described in the language of the period. The solution to their needs called for gratuitous schools that would attract the children, that would function well and guarantee continuity.

– Once the schools were established, the needs of the *teachers* clamored for attention. They were in dire need of preparation, discipline, devotion to their work and an appreciation of their own ministry.

—While tending to the teachers, De La Salle realized the need for a *community* that would be formative for the teachers, that would facilitate the organization of the school and guarantee its community. It could not be at the mercy of an authority disconnected from the school ministry.

The importance and attention that each of these needs represented would vary throughout the journey but what would remain constant would be the meaning and order of them all. *Sensitivity to the needs of the children of the mission will be what inspires and justifies the validity of the other needs.*

c) The objectives:

The response to a determined need can be declared in very different degrees of determination and it is here that the *originality* of the Lasallian program was forged, in the *radicality of its response* to the objectives it proposed.

— To facilitate the salvation — the total liberation — of poor and abandoned youth. It was not enough to simply teach the catechism for its objective *was to impart an integral Christian education.*

— It was not enough that the teachers be well prepared; they had to be *entirely and exclusively dedicated* to the mission.

— It was not enough to administer schools that "*functioned well*"; they had to be a "*sign*" that would serve as a model.

— It was not enough for the teachers to educate; they had to do so fraternally ("*Brothers*"), being with the students "from morning to night".

— It was not enough to offer children and youth the chance for an education. They had to be *attracted* to the school by breaking down all economic barriers, making the act of learning as agreeable as possible.

— It was not enough to form "*communities of educators*"; these had to be authentically fraternal "*Christian communities*".

— It was not sufficient to dignify the profession of teachers; it had to become a true *ecclesial ministry*, one in which the teacher could feel chosen by God and sent by the Church.

— A half-hearted dedication would not be enough — *“as long as it doesn't cost too much”*: a *life-long commitment* was demanded, that the Brothers would express with their consecration, even though it might be necessary *“to live on bread alone”*.

We find ourselves looking at a program that could respond to reality and be based on the highest ideals. It is a program that has as *its ultimate objective “to give a Christian education to the children”, “the children of artisans and the poor”*. It became workable, and at the same time, conditioned, by the *“objectives of mediation”*: a school as *“sign”*, a *“fraternal”* community, a teacher who was *“minister of Christ and of the Church”*.

d) The structures and policies:

A program cannot be effective unless it takes on material form by means of concrete structures. In a certain way structures represent fidelity to the present moment. They are not identical to the purposes of the program but they are both *the pathway* to reach them and their *concrete shape* at the present time.

The Lasallian community, inspired by its Founder, from the first moment sought to implement the structures and policies that would permit it to confront the needs that it was discovering

Contrary to what one might think, it did not act *“because it had a program”* but rather it arrived at a program because it had set out to act first. It had *the will to give an answer* to the needs that it discovered along the way. In a certain way, the creation of structures preceded the articulations of objectives, with one condition: *that those be energized in the prophetic spirit of the objectives*.

This is how the members of the primitive Lasallian community found solutions to the problems that they encountered in the day-to-day contacts with boys. They shared their ideas, discerned what was going on, and managed to create a style, a way of acting, a kind of school, which eventually they gave printed form to in the *“Conduct of the Christian Schools”*. That will be a topic that we will explore later.

4. Re-Inventing dynamism for today

If we look back on history it is in order to learn from it. If we look for insights it is to focus them on the our day, on what we want to

re-vitalize. This is the time to shed light on our educational reality so that we may re-create its dynamism.

a) Who are the agents of the program for today?

It is evident that for many years there has been a great variety of persons that have participated in the Lasallian educational program, side by side with the Brothers. In practice, however, this has not always been so obvious, unless we confuse "being an actor" with "being a functionary". Here we have the first element that we must deal with: the *leadership* of those who have a role in the program. To be a leader, to be an actor, means to have a specific contribution to make to the dynamism that constitutes the program. It means, in practical terms, to be ready to discover the new necessities that require our attention as educators, to feel responsible to address them, to be capable of re-stating and approximating the grand objectives of education for their "transformation", to find the needed creativity to renew and invent effective structures, etc.

No one can be forced to do this. Perhaps some will prefer going on as simple classroom instructors. But whoever wants to step forward responsibly as an actor must provide himself with the proper means so that each may act in accord with his own identity.

b) What needs do we have to address?

The answer to that question has to flow out in concentric circles. Our attention is extended from the circles that are closest to us to the very farthest. We begin by getting to know in depth the needs of the ones we are in daily contact with, the boys and girls who are in our classes. Among those we pay special attention to are the ones who are the most underprivileged, backward, marginalized, and who must find in the school what today they do not find at home in their family. First of those needs would be affection as well as understanding and personal attention. But that knowledge must be accompanied by a *critical analysis* that tries to get to the causes of those situations so as to find the best solutions.

Our understanding and analysis will then move into broader circles, the educational community, the school district, etc. Children that are not in our schools should also be considered. It may be that they need us as well.

In the process and according to our sensitivity to the issues, we will be finding problems of a theoretical type, such as “school failure” but we will also see problems stemming from the influence of the mass media, such as superficiality, or consumerism, or the absence of basic human values of solidarity, justice and the respect for the neighbor. From the Christian point of view, we will detect another type of need that is shown in the loss of the transcendent sense of the world and of life, an indifference to things of faith, an ignorance about Christ and the Gospel.

c) What objectives do we want to achieve?

The clear statement of objectives obliges us to rise above the mere fulfillment of academic programs. We become aware of the “why” of our mission; we have to give “reasons to live and reasons to hope” (GS 31). In order to do that we look to the future rather than the past for a program that “*educates in values*”, one that forms persons and not just storehouses of knowledge: a program that *educates in hope*, in an active and creative hope so that those persons be capable of transforming and renewing society and not just passively moving into its ranks; a program that *educates in the search*, that will form persons who are lovers of the truth.

The ultimate objective, which for us is defined as “*procuring a human and Christian education*” has to be spelled out in detail, “brought down to the earth” of our day, our culture, our circumstances in history and society. This is where we have to refine our response to the question found at the beginning of this section about dynamism. This is because it is in the practical and partial objectives that dynamism runs the risk of disappearing through paralysis on being absorbed by routine, comfort, the pressure of projects, social programs and the difficulty of finding adequate structures.

For that reason a program *is not judged so much for its ultimate objective as for its intermediate ends*, the ones that give it the flesh and bones of daily life.

So, as examples, what might be some of the objectives we might especially aim for in our “here and now”? Would they be:

- promoting education for justice and the commitment to peace?
- providing appropriate intellectual instruments for the youngsters with special difficulties?

– affecting the young people of the higher grades in their evangelization for “Christian Initiation”?

– establishing fraternal relationships among the teachers, and among teachers and former students?

d) What structures do we have to invent, change, renew, promote...?

If previously we affirmed that a program is judged by its short term objectives, we now add that an educational community “should be judged not by the objectives that it aims for, but *by the means* it plans to use to reach those objectives” (D. Knight). It is in the means that the priorities and the personal and common options come into play. And every option brings with it something we must renounce, something that costs.

Fidelity to the past and creativity for the future ought to be joined in renewal: *fidelity* so that the ultimate objectives are not lost sight of and *creativity* to find the most effective structures that will resolve the needs we are finding.

We already have the challenge spelled out for us: “Our first obligation continues to be the *creation of a new school* for a growing number of abandoned youth” (41st General Chapter of the Brothers):

– a new school within the schools that we now have, one in which attention is showered on those who most need it.

– but also a new school that goes beyond traditional structures, that reaches the ever increasing number of youth who find themselves marginalized by the “normal” society.

Launching these options should be done “step by step” or “*from one commitment to the next*”, which was the way in De La Salle’s journey. We cannot expect to know the entire program in advance, rather, each step will permit us to have greater insights for the following steps.

For reflection and sharing:

1. Is our dynamism in education affected by some of the four “short circuits” that were described in section 2? What are the causes?
2. What are the dynamic elements that gave shape and form to the original Lasallian program and that most challenge our present day situation?
3. What concrete and short-term objectives are present in our Lasallian apostolate? Are they implemented by effective structures?
4. What priorities stand out when we sit down to seriously “create a new school” within the one that we presently have?
5. How do the leadership and responsible activity of all the actors of the program advance the goals of our school? What can we suggest to involve all the educators even though it be gradually and partially?

Theme 7.

The preferred choice in our dedication: the poor

1. A coherent choice

The Lasallian program begins to make sense when we look at its preferential target group. It is not sufficient, nor is it historically accurate, to say that we have our justification in the education of children and youth. The primary, the fundamental, justification of our Lasallian program of education is with the poor, and with these as our starting point, with all children and young people. This is the option where we have sunk our roots.

In our reflections on the previous themes, we saw that both the *vocational journey* of the teacher as well as the *Lasallian program of education* are grounded in *the real needs* of the youth that we serve. On delving into them, for as much attention we give them, for as much as we feel challenged by them, so much more will we feel moved by those real needs, that have given rise to "*situations of poverty*", that is, the human shortcomings that put limits to their development as persons, or that relegate them to the margins of society: the economic, intellectual, physical and psychological poverties.

It is here where we have to make a qualitative leap between one set of teachers, one group of schools and educational institutions on the one hand and their counterparts on the other. This is in the response that is given to this question: Are we content to react to needs as they come along, or do we choose to respond to "*situations of poverty*" *especially and as first priority*?

Stated in a more personalized way, do we deal with all students *in the same way* or do we show *a preference* for the poor? The first alternative really implies that the poor are left to one side, "*marginalized*", because they cannot keep up with or reach the standard that we have set "for all". The second alternative supposes a real concern, precisely, for those who otherwise would fall behind. We attend to these, preferentially, and this constitutes our "*option for the poor*".

Let us illustrate this with a concrete case:

Let's suppose that among the group of students there is a boy or a girl who is blind. We are faced with a situation of poverty in the sense that this impairment will make it very difficult for that student to fit into roles in society with as much ease as his or her companions. In this case "the option for the poor" means that the school pledges itself to make every effort to integrate the blind student into the life of the school, and, eventually, into society.

Registering a blind student on the school rolls is no more than a *starting point*, even though it does give an indication of the school's commitment. What is more necessary is to sensitize both teaching staff and student body because the blind person's integration will depend mostly on them. From this perspective the teachers' explanations will often have to be adapted to a different rhythm and the visual aids will have to be supplemented by other types for the benefit of the blind person. And how will the transfers from one class to another be handled, or the intramural sports, or the cultural, sports and religious events? Without imposing an absolute rule, the changes and adaptations that might come up at any moment should always take the "weakest member" into account.

Something that will definitely be lost will be the sharper edge that competition can create. On the other hand the entire group will gain in *humanity*. But what is more important is that this whole process will awaken in its protagonists – teachers and students alike— a sentiment, not of benevolence or compassion, but of *justice*. Those who enjoy certain God-given gifts, in this case, sight, have no right to use them to the exclusion of those who are deprived of the same.

The case we have cited is probably infrequent. Nevertheless, other situations of need will abound, such as students being dragged down by academic failure, kids that are victims of abandonment by their families and society, children of immigrants, orphans, etc. All these seek solutions more within the reach of our normal possibilities as educators.

If the mission statement of our school proclaims that it is founded on the Gospel, it must offer the signs of the Kingdom: men and women liberated from the situations of poverty " *the blind see, the*

lame walk, the lepers are cleansed..." and the principal beneficiaries should be the poor, "...and to the poor is preached the message of salvation" (Matt. 11,5). There, where only failure can be foreseen, our school must generate *meaning*, where the dignity or the liberty of the person is compromised, our school must *empower* and help to lift up; where youngsters find the doors closed and the horizons limited, our school must throw open the doors and offer *hope*.

2. A choice integrated into the program of education

The option for the poor is manifest in many ways and in many places. For the person, it is an *attitude*, for the school, a *dimension* that impacts the dynamics of the whole program of education. In reality, we can properly speak of the "option for the poor" only when it is found integrated into the dynamism of the educational program, or better, when the program is energized by that same option.

Each one of the four elements that make up the dynamics of a program of education (as we saw in the previous theme) are impacted in this manner:

a) The agents

No school or institution can maintain the option for the poor if it does not manage to have its personnel and student body identify with that choice. However, no one should identify through imposition, but rather *through motivation*.

A teacher is motivated by an option for the poor *when he is capable of seeing reality from the place of the poor man, and from that same place he presents it to his students*.

It is a vital perspective, that is, an all-embracing way of facing life. If the teacher cannot feel what that means, he will need a conversion if he is to take on that perspective.

This process of conversion requires various steps or levels:

— a *knowledge of the reality of the poor person*, but not a knowledge acquired from the outside, descriptive and statistical. It is a knowledge that comes from *the approach to reality*, from direct

contact with the poor man and his world. What does he think? What does he feel? How does he live in such squalor? The teacher must get to know his necessities, his limitations, and interest himself in the causes of his poverty, discovering their consequences and finding to what extent they favor or hinder the construction of his person.

– *to be in solidarity with the reality of the poor*: this affective identification occurs to the degree in which we gain in the internal knowledge of that reality and come to appreciate it *in the gut*, feeling ourselves involved in it.

– *consciousness of our capability to combat poverty*. In this third step, we take a look at ourselves with regard to the poor. We recognize, on the one hand, the need for us to do something and on the other, the possibilities that we have in our hands to contribute to the solution. At the same time we become aware of our fears, complexes, disgusts...that might excuse us from entanglement with the problem. This is the moment when we have to make our good intentions practical in realistic and workable propositions, ones that will spur our capabilities to action and commitment.

– *acceptance of the risks that the option for the poor carries with it*: these could imply the loss of prestige, the paucity of successes, failure, possible conflict with the families who see their interests threatened, or economic hard times.

b) The needs

The option for the poor demands a selection of the kinds of needs that the program of education attempts to address. From what stance will this selection be made?

From an active and critical stance: without waiting for the needs to come to us. We must sharpen our vigilance and go out to look for them, again with that movement of concentric circles, in the children closest to us out to the farthest. The “option for the poor” implies the “search for the poor”.

Open to the different forms of poverty, with a posture that *does not exclude but rather integrates*. With an attitude of discernment we try to find the different form of defenselessness, marginalization, disgrace and injustice. We are especially interested in those kinds

of poverty or limitations that are the immediate causes of others, like the links of a chain that progressively pull a person down.

With the explicit priority given to material poverty, in accord with the previous criterion. In so many cases material poverty is the cause of the other forms of poverty. It is among the economically poor that the worst deficiencies are found – the scarcities in family and in health, the social maladjustments, the loss of human dignity, the difficulty of access to culture.

“Poverty that is expressed in frustration is born of injustice, physical and social evils, or personal insufficiency and failure. This form of poverty makes it impossible for certain cultures, social groups, or individuals to attain a living standard that would allow them real freedom. They live in a kind of slavery from which they cannot free themselves because of the deprivation in which their material and cultural poverty holds them. Often experienced as a lack of love in one’s life, such a situation, by reason of the subservience and the struggle to survive that it engenders, prevents persons from developing in a way that fits their dignity as human beings.” (Declaration on the Brother in the Modern World 29,5).

c) The objectives

The ultimate purpose of our school includes this option for the poor: *“to procure the human and Christian education of youth, especially of poor youth”*. Nevertheless, we realize that this final end can only become a reality through the implementation of intermediate ends, and it is in them that we must explain our option.

– The first objective that must be made clear and assumed by the teaching staff is that the school exists to answer to *the educational needs of persons*. Its pedagogy should be focused on them and not primarily on the fulfillment of academic disciplines, nor in obtaining scholastic success. A system of humanistic and social education is planned that will promote solidarity among the young, will make up for social differences and foment collaboration and interdependence.

– The next step is a series of objectives that steer the school toward *direct, emphatic attention* to the various kinds of poverty that are within its scope, especially of the material sort.

– Finally, the school must broaden its horizons and *work for social change*, the establishment of a more just social order. For this end, and independently of the kind of students that attend the school, but even more so if they belong to a wealthier class, our school engages in education for justice. It works to prepare its students for their integration into society with a critical mind and a will to work transformations.

d) The structures

It is in the area of structures where, in the last instance, the option for the poor becomes a reality. This will be the acid test to show if an educational institution has truly adopted this option. *Only a sincere and on-going evaluation* will reveal an inconsistency between what is professed in the objectives and what is produced by the structures.

From the previously stated criteria, we analyze the following structures:

– *The system used for the admission of students*: How avoid that this might be used to filter out the needier students? Is there a preference for the “slow student” or is there a rejection for youngsters with a lower intellectual quotient, those who have scant economic resources and those who come from dysfunctional families.

– *The extra-curricular activities* of the school, such as cultural visits, excursions, sports... Do these promote solidarity with the most needy, or do they demonstrate a preference for the elite and the rich?

– *The relations between teachers and students*: What is done to cultivate cooperation and the lessening of distances between teachers of the different levels or sections? Is there mentoring between older and younger students? Does peer tutoring for the slower students exist in the school? Is there personalized programming for the students with special problems?

For reflection and sharing:

1. Is there a concern in the educational community to know and to cater for the students who have special needs or deficiencies? How do we seek out the marginalized, the backward, the quiet ones, the impaired? In what way do we try to give them more attention? What academic structures should be replaced or improved if we are to achieve a better attention for the students who have the most need? What resources do we have at present to facilitate that aim?

2. Does our school promote the acceptance of poor kids? Are there economic and intellectual "ceilings" to filter out the needier students? What justification is argued for a school that does have these?

3. Is our school engaged in education for justice?

Is it in contact with situations of marginalization and poverty in its immediate neighborhood?

Are teachers and students exposed to that environment? Do they analyze it? Are they moved to do something about it?

Do the structures of the school support the analysis of education "for" justice?

Has our program of education incorporated adequate means to teach for justice? What aspects can be improved upon?

Theme 8.

Open to the youth and the world of today

The unhealthiest temptation for a teacher is to believe that he is fulfilling his responsibility as educator by the mere act of compliance with the academic programs. Whoever chooses to be a teacher by vocation and not just by profession knows that the immediate source of his mission, of his own journey as educator, is not found in academic programs but in youth, his students. His *whole perspective* and his attitude of commitment compel him to critically observe the reality of youth, of "his" students so as to respond efficaciously.

The *critical reading of reality* ought to be a frequently used tool in the hands of a teacher and of the educational community. And this *transforming* reading will contribute to the shape of the educational program.

1. Attentive to youth and to today's world

a) The immediate scenario

Where does this *attentive reading* of reality begin?

It begins with what is closest to us. We pay attention to the real, specific needs that our students have. "To pay attention" is not the same as "verifying", but "*seeing things with concern and a sense of responsibility*".

For this we are not content with jotting down data, situations, circumstances; each one of those facts comes with a question, "What can I do, as a teacher?"

We will have to distinguish between what is apparent and what is real, between the leaves and the roots of the tree, between the manifestations and the authentic causes.

And so, when I think of any one of my students, I must ask questions like these: Why is he failing? Why is he so not interested? Why is he acting up? Why does he seem to need so much affection? What does he need to be happy, in order to live his live creatively and as a contributing member of society?

While I am finding answers to these questions, others will suggest themselves as facets of the liberating education that I aspire to give. How can I motivate the learning process for him? How can I wake him up to human and Gospel values? How can I help him to feel good about himself, so that he can feel loved and appreciated? What subject matter will be the most useful for him? How can I instill a sense of responsibility, a critical sense, an independent spirit, when he comes up against so much manipulation?

b) The work of mediation open to other scenarios

The most recent pedagogical trends stress that the subject (the student) is formed in his interrelation with his surroundings. The subject is the result of the relation.

The *interaction* of the person with his surroundings unfolds in a two-fold direction: the person carries out a continuous process of "*internalization*". He incorporates the cultures, internalizes the values, re-structures his psychological activities. But a process of "*externalization*" is going on at the same time. He projects his own experience and identity, experiments with those "learned" values, acts on his surroundings and constructs new life conditions.

It is in that interaction with the persons that make up his world that the subject acquires his personal and social identity. He becomes part of the community and takes on the destiny that he is sharing with the other members of his group.

But the influence of surroundings in the *make up* of the personality is not limited to the most immediate. There are other, broader, nurturing agents, both proximate and far-ranging. They are the so-called *scenarios of human development* that give rise to multiple systems of personal interaction within which the personality unfolds and maturation takes place.

The school cannot ignore that, besides school and home, the traditional maturing places, there are other sites that today have much importance according to location and culture. The street and neighborhood are places of interchange and communication for many children and young people. In addition, the mass media and the various meeting places for social gatherings, amusement and sports that cities offer have a strong impact.

In each of these scenarios the maturing process is affected positively or restrained according to the influence of the components

that enter into play. There might be a positive setting which supports the activities of the subject, or, contrariwise, passive and even hostile influences.

However there is also a fluid nexus that can be established between the different scenarios that promote the development of the subject. It is here that the school has an important role as "*catalyst*" to analyze and filter the stimuli of the other scenarios in order to facilitate the positive reactions that serve to mature the individual.

The clash of scenarios or a simple ignorance of the influence that they exert makes for a more difficult maturing process, leaving the youngster at the mercy of the most powerful of them.

Together with the importance of the *scenarios of human development*, the new currents in pedagogy emphasize the role of the *mediator*. A culture is appropriated by a growing youngster by means of a *mediated learning*, through his interaction with other human persons who interpret the environment for him. These are the parents, teachers, friends, leaders, social communicators, etc., who become the *mediators* of the culture.

The mediator observes the influences of the surroundings and the collective experience of the culture. He filters out, selects and organizes them according to categories. He evaluates, interprets and transmits the facts, situations and messages to the growing youngster who, in his turn, processes all according to his own capacity.

All this reminds us of the responsibility that teacher and school have as *mediator* and *scenario* respectively for the growth of the person in order to connect the remaining *social influences* in a positive way. Both must work for the inclusion of the person in the other scenarios as leading actor, and not just a passive subject, so as to establish a process of *constructive learning* in which the subject is urged forward to higher goals but always ones that are within his reach.

c) In a cultural context

These titles of *mediator* proper to the teacher and *one scenario among others* proper to the school prompt us to open our eyes much wider to the realities that we must judge critically since they form part of the social and cultural context in which our young

people are developing. That is not because that context will fatally determine the characteristics of the youth in our classes but because in them we find the forces, tensions and poles of attraction in the midst of which our young people are growing and developing. Education must prepare them to face these tendencies critically and responsibly.

It will be necessary to make this interpretation of culture in each locale and cultural context. Here we can only indicate some traits that seem to be the most widespread:

—The first phenomenon that marks a great part of the contemporary world is change. This factor imposes a characteristic dynamism upon society in such a way that social structure itself, intended to maintain stability, is affected by change and becomes dynamic. Its effects are felt in every institution in the form of “crisis”. There have been changes in family, marriage, parent/child relationships, teaching, subject matter, methodology, vocations, vows, perseverance, etc.

Faced with the factor of “change” it is not right for us as educators to try to deny it, or to *hark back* to the old “tried and true” for answers that may have worked in the past. We should be wary of the *simplistic* solutions, applicable to each and every case.

It is important to *educate for change*, to set our sights on the future. An education for change will be concerned with the formation of identities grounded in solid and universal values while at the same time encouraging critical attitudes and openness to dialogue. It will be less preoccupied with pat formulas and securities than with instilling an attitude of search. There will be more of an awareness that the important thing is “to learn to learn” than “to learn concrete subject matter”.

There will be certain tendencies developing that have a strong impact on youth, especially with the impact of the media of mass communication. We can group them in four categories. It is with these four “bundles” of forces that the school will encounter its main challenges:

1st. “*Massification*”, lumping everyone together, revealed by the loss of the critical sense, by stereotypical relations with one’s counterparts, the adulation of idols and myths, the lack of a personal program, the chasing after the latest fashions and fads.

—Our response lies in *personalization*: To make the person responsible for his own actions, to assume the “lead role” of his education and evolution; to cultivate the critical sense, to guide his relationships toward the deeper levels of his personality; to foster an attitude of search; to build the personal identity based on a life’s program.

2nd. *Individualism*, as manifested in a disinterest in the plight of others, in self-preference in every instance and always regarding others as competitors; an ingrained distrust of the neighbor’s motives, subjectivism, the pretext of “self fulfillment” to justify whatever selfish choice.

— Our remedy here is *to educate for community*, with the common good as essential to the program. Here each student learns to “find fulfillment” in solidarity with the rest. It is an experience in community discernment, in the basic attitudes of community which are service, reconciliation, acceptance and learning to share what one has and one is.

3rd. *Materialism*, this is expressed in the accumulation of goods, the pursuit of pleasures, superficiality and the distaste for contemplation, a frivolous spirit and a hunger for continuous thrills to the point that any religious spirit is suppressed or reduced to magical forces that belong to the same worldly environment.

— Our antidote here is an *education for spirituality*. In it a person plumbs the depths of his yearning to be open to God. It is an education in the experience of “being”, of the free gift of self, of the gift of God. It means to educate in the capacity to contemplate, to know how to interpret events in their deepest significance, to discover their “transparency” or sacramentality. It is the preparation for prayer and the virtues from which it arises: interior silence, solitude, poverty, simplicity, humility and generosity.

4th. *Indifference*, a lack of interest in everything that does not affect me directly, shying away from those matters “that concern everybody”, avoiding difficulties, wasting time, passive resignation “when bad things happen”, fatalism and the renunciation of one’s dreams of childhood.

— Our remedy in this case is *an education to meet one’s obligations and commitments*. We try to instill a process of “consciousness-raising”, of the role that every person has in the struggle to make a

more just world; to build on the capacity to make decisions that promote life and inspire one to work for the underprivileged.

2. Learning from our roots

It is necessary to note that the exposure of the school to the outside environment is a preoccupation of recent pedagogy. In addition to that, *the critical reading of reality* as a method of scientific approach to the deeper meaning of things and events with a view to transform reality is a phenomenon that would be impossible to find if we went back a hundred years.

Nonetheless, even before these were conceived, there was an existing attitude that was manifested in various ways in common practice. It was *an open, critical and active attitude, that was able to change things the way they were and so affect history*. Indeed, we find that attitude in a paradigmatic form in John Baptist de La Salle and the Lasallian community of three hundred years ago. We can still speak of it as the way the Lasallian teacher and the school ought to be.

Even more, we must affirm that it is precisely that attitude which launched and gave the stamp of originality to the Lasallian program of education whose first published expression carries the title of *The Management of the Christian Schools*.

Blain, one of the first biographers of John Baptist de La Salle, describes the Founder in this way:

"His zeal often brought him to the classrooms to observe them and give witness with his own eyes to what was happening there. Both the children and the teachers were the objects of his attention. He noted in the teachers the manner in which they disposed the children to learn... After the teachers he turned his eyes to the pupils, studying their character and examining their progress."

Let us look at an example of the attitude that we are describing in a practice of discernment carried on by the Lasallian community and its Founder.

In their gatherings and in their conversations during the "recreation" after meals, a topic often dealt with was that of one of the worst drawbacks to education at that time, namely, *the students' frequent absences from class*. They knew it was a serious obstacle

to efficient learning and Christian formation. At the time there was no law that required attendance at school for children and adolescents.

– Their discernment began *by verifying the fact* and affirming the importance of attendance in the overall necessity of Christian education. This “global” necessity had been described in this way:

“All disorders, especially among artisans and the poor, usually arise from their having been, in childhood, left to themselves and badly bought up... As the principal fruit to be expected from the institution of the Christian Schools is to forestall these disorders and prevent their evil consequences, it is easy to conceive the importance of such schools, and their necessity” (Common Rule 1,6).

In their discernment the Brothers would focus on the specific need and the response that had to be put into place in *the general plan of the program*. They would then begin the analysis of the problem in question:

Causes: What has not been working in dealing with this situation? What *structures and policies* should be reinforced or created? In this analysis the children, the teachers and the parents were all involved. Let us see how this is developed in Chap. 6 of the 2nd part of the *The Management of the Christian Schools*.

“When students are frequently absent from school, it is either through their own fault, through that of their parents, or through the fault of the teachers.

– *The first cause of absences of students proceeds from the students themselves. It is because they are frivolous or undisciplined, because they have little affection for or a dislike of their teacher.*

Those who stay away through frivolity are those who follow the first idea that comes into their minds, who go to play with the first child they meet, and who ordinarily act without paying attention to what they do. It is very difficult for students of this sort not to absent themselves from time to time. All that can be done is to deal with them in such a way that their absences are rare and of short duration. Such students should be corrected only a little for their absences. This is because they will again absent themselves on the next day or on the first occasion afterward. They will reflect neither upon what has been said to them nor upon the correction that they have received. They will be induced to come to school

more by gentleness and by winning them than by correction and harshness.

The teachers will take care, from time to time, to stimulate children with this type of mind and to encourage them by some reward or by some outside employment if they are capable of undertaking it. Above all, they will never threaten them with correction."

– "The second reason why students absent themselves is lack of discipline. This is either because they cannot be subjected to remaining a whole day in the same place, attentive and with their minds busy, or because they love to run about and play. Such children are ordinarily inclined to evil, and viciousness follows lack of discipline. For this reason, it is necessary to seek, with very great care, a remedy for their absence. Everything should be done to anticipate and to prevent it. It will be very useful to assign them to some office in the class. This will give them a liking for the school and will sometimes even cause them to become an example for the others. Much must be done to win them and to attract them, at times being firm with them and correcting them when they do wrong or absent themselves, but showing them much affection for the little good they do and rewarding them for little."

– "The third reason why students absent themselves is because they acquire a distaste for school. This may be due to the fact that they have a new teacher who is not yet sufficiently trained. Such teachers do not know how to conduct themselves in school. They at once resort to corrections, or they are too lax and have no order or silence in the classroom.

The remedy for absences of this sort is to leave a teacher neither alone in the classroom nor placed solely in charge until thoroughly trained by a teacher of great experience in the schools...

The remedy for teachers who are lax and who have no order in their classrooms will be for the Director or the Head Teacher to watch over them and require them to account for all that takes place in the classes. They will particularly be required to account for their actions when they have neglected to look after the absent or have been remiss in any of their duties, however small and of however little consequence it may appear."

— *“The fourth reason why students absent themselves is that they have little affection for their teacher. This is due to the fact that the teacher is not pleasant and in almost every situation does not know how to win the students. This kind of teacher resorts only to severity and punishments, and consequently the children are unwilling to come to school.*

The remedies for this sort of absence will be for the teachers to endeavor to be very pleasant and to acquire a polite, affable, and frank appearance, without, however, assuming an undignified or familiar manner. Let them do everything for all of their students to win them all to Our Lord Jesus Christ. They should all be convinced that authority is acquired and maintained in a school more by firmness, gravity and silence than by blows and harshness, and that the principal cause of frequent absences is the frequency of the punishments.”

— *“Parents are the fifth principal reason for absence. Parents either neglect to send their children to school, or do not take much trouble to make them come or be assiduous. This difficulty is quite common among the poor, either because they are indifferent to school, persuaded that their children learn very little, or for some other trifling objection.*

The means of remedying the negligence of parents, especially of the poor, is to speak to them and make them understand their obligation to have their children instructed. They should understand the wrong that they do to their children in not making them learn to read and write, and how much this can harm their children, since lack of this knowledge will leave the children incapable of any employment. Then they must be made to realize the harm that may be done their children by lack of instruction in those things which concern their salvation, with which the poor are often little concerned...

When parents withdraw their children from school to make them work while they are too young and not yet sufficiently instructed, they must be made to understand that they harm them a great deal. To have their children earn a little, they will make them lose a very much greater advantage. It should be explained to them how important it is for an artisan to know how to read and write well. It should be emphasized that, however limited the child's

intelligence, the child that knows how to read and write will be capable of anything."

– For John Baptist de La Salle, this ideal of attention to reality is attuned to an attitude which is, for the Christian teacher, a gift from God for his mission: discernment. And so, after comparing him to the good shepherd, "*who lovingly tends his sheep and one of his qualities must be to know each one individually...*" De La Salle ends by saying:

"This special conduct must presuppose knowledge and discernment of character, and this grace you must beg of God most earnestly, as being one of the most essential for you in the direction of those over whom you have charge" (Meditation 33,1).

For reflection and sharing:

1. What picture emerges when we consider the needs our students have? What critical situations are they facing? What are we doing, or what can we do, to respond efficaciously to those problems?
2. Does what our school have to offer to provide answers for the needs that we verify in it? (see successes and failures...) What aspects of our school program have the top priorities?
3. How does our Program of Education take into account the relation of the school with the other "scenarios" in which are youngsters are developing?

Theme 9.

The lasallian school: a gospel-inspired program

1. As it was from the beginning

a) An innovative program

The school of De La Salle came about as an “innovative” institution. It was launched into society and in the Church in a singular process. This innovative character has been its great contribution to modern society.

It is important to fully understand this concept of initiation, of “launching”, in all of its anthropological richness. It is the process through which an individual enters into a social group, comes into relationship with its components, participates in and impacts upon its history. The result is the acquisition of an identity and the full incorporation into the group.

The first Lasallian program of education, as described in *The Management of the Christian Schools*, is a *program of initiation*. The school, as De La Salle would write, will be organized in such a way that “*the children, under the direction of their teachers from morning until night, are taught by them to conduct themselves properly, being instructed in the mysteries of our holy religion, inspired by Christian maxims and given, in this way, the education that is so important for them*” (Rule of 1718, 1.3)

– The school provided the students with the basic structures needed for their introduction into society: reading, writing and arithmetic. Above all, they were given the key upon which modern society began to take its proper form and was being born at that time, namely, order and organization.

– It introduced into a system of relations of mutual dependence through practices of school organization, the offices, the assistance for the slower students by the more advanced, the sharing of food, etc.

– It trained them in the mechanisms that permit communication and relations in society, for example, employing the *Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, a work published by De La Salle in 1703.

– On the explicitly religious level, the school introduced the boys to the Christian Mystery, in religious terms, in attitudes with reference to God and in the life of the parishes. For that end they were helped by catechetical instruction, the use of Biblical phrases in their school exercises and the frequentation of the sacraments in the parish church. Especially through the practice of recalling the presence of God and the morning “reflection” they were initiated into a personal relationship with God, a relationship understood as the history of salvation.

Through this process, the students,

– *found their own voice*: they learned to express themselves and communicate;

– *acquired self-awareness*, as a consequence, and established their identity;

– and *felt a sense of belonging* to society and to Church through the identity they shared with their companions.

In this way, *they emerged from the margins of society* and entered into history (and the History of Salvation) as they became actively integrated into Society and Church.

b) To educate in the spirit of Christianity

De La Salle used the expression, *to educate in the spirit of Christianity*, to show the final objective of his school. With it he went beyond the material aspects of the school that limited itself to “gathering in” the children and loading their minds with facts. Here we find something more dynamic and vital: *“It is not enough that the children remain the greater part of the day assembled in the school and occupied with it. It is necessary besides that those who receive the mission of instructing them make every effort to especially inculcate the spirit of Christianity in them, that they may receive the wisdom of God...”* (Meditation 194.2).

He was speaking, then, of a style that ought to characterize all education and that would engender a type of person that typifies and incorporates the dimensions and the values of the Gospel.

The education proposed was his response to the serious situation of marginality in which the children for whom the Lasallian school was intended found themselves. These children would not be saved by religious instruction alone. It had to be an integrating

response that would join the human dimensions with the evangelical ones in a single process of education.

Priority of importance within this unity was given to formation in the Christian message, a priority reflected in the direction the program took. We are speaking of "*making true disciples of Jesus Christ*" (Meditation 162,2) and that they be active members in the life of the Church.

But this process was not going to take place from the outside in, nor was it something imposed. De La Salle's chief insistence was directed toward the inner life of the boys, in order to form enlightened Christians, who would act through convictions, who would discover the nexus between faith and the way they should live. For that reason the teacher would have to frequently ask God for "*the grace to touch hearts*" Meditation 81.

2. The Lasallian program of education today

The Lasallian School cannot renounce the fulfillment of its Gospel-inspired program. However, it is wise to avoid fundamentalist interpretations. A text of the "Declaration: The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today" directs our steps along the right path:

"The act of faith is the free response of a person to the Word of God. Working for the education of free persons is already a way of disposing them to faith."

Thus the Lasallian teacher, "*exercises his apostolic ministry whenever he strives to awaken the young to an awareness that life is to be taken seriously, to a conviction of the greatness of human destiny; when he helps them to be able to experience, with intellectual rigor and a desire to seek the truth, the autonomy of personal thought; when he helps them use their liberty to overcome their ready-made prejudices and ideas, as well as to overcome social pressures and those that derive from the forces of disintegration within the human person; when he disposes them to use their freedom, their intelligence, and their training in the service of their fellow human beings, to open them to others, to teach them how to listen and try to understand other people, to trust and to love them; when he instills in the young a sense of justice, brotherhood, and fidelity*" (Declaration 41,2).

We participate in a program of education that at the same time we want to be a program inspired by the Gospel. To understand this statement, which is really an invitation, we begin by making clear two concepts that are often used ambiguously, *school* and *evangelization*.

"School from morning until night", school, in the Lasallian meaning, is not just "a learning environment", but a life-giving atmosphere, an educational stage that advances the formation of the various facets of the person and the interrelations between individuals at very different levels. It transcends, therefore, the reductionist concept of "class" or "social milieu", and spreads far out beyond the official syllabi of subjects. It tends to become a "full-time school" in order to accomplish its purpose, which is the integral education of the individual.

"Evangelization" is a dynamic and all-inclusive process; it promotes interior conversion in the person and the renewal of humanity, transforming with the strength of the Gospel the criteria, values, points of interest, patterns of thought and models of life styles... that are in conflict with the Kingdom of God. It leads gradually toward adhesion to the program of Jesus, to the Kingdom announced by Him: and that adhesion is revealed and is made effective by integration into the ecclesial community (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 19; 23-24).

We will represent the all-inclusiveness of our program of education in three concentric circles. Each of them explains and details a proposition, not an imposition. We must count on the liberty of the person to accept or reject it.

a) First circle: Threshold pedagogy (or "of the thresholds")

The objective of this first circle, the widest one taking in all scholastic activity, is focused on the passage from the earlier situation of passivity in the world to an active and critical situation. The young person learns to "interpret" what he sees in the world, he discovers its meaning and lives according to certain values.

It is the proposal to exist and act in the world. It is the Christian frame of mind, or style, as it faces life, society and God Himself. It reveals, especially, the worth of the person, not in isolation but in reference to others. In the process of evangelization this level already makes sense in itself because "personalization" is the first

effect of the Good News. At the same time it is “threshold pedagogy” for it nudges the student forward, and develops his ability to excel; it stimulates “the crossing of thresholds”, that is, making choices that will serve to shape his life; it educates him in those dimensions that permit him to enter more deeply into his own mystery to the very threshold of faith.

Let us now consider three complementary perspectives of this *threshold pedagogy*. They are also three dimensions that indicate in what directions a program of evangelizing education should develop.

1) Education in values

We reach the threshold of faith with the support of certain fundamental human values. Before we feel the need of Someone that saves me, I must myself discover how someone (not “something”) is in need of salvation, discover the dignity of the human person, realize the capacity to make choices and the decisions that characterize the person, etc.

Values translate and take on substance in *attitudes*, reflecting, socializing and also assimilating one another's social *norms of behavior*. Values, attitudes and norms go on to become *content matter of the curricula* that should be taught and learned in the school. Our school develops a pedagogy of values that, in synthesis, is grounded on the priority of respect for the neighbor, responsible solidarity, creativity and interiority, seen from the evangelical perspective of Christian love. For that, experiences will have to be conceived and content developed, programming them at each level; also by means of the occasional campaign, but especially through the interaction with the teachers and the different scenarios of the surroundings.

2) Education for “the Utopia” (or, “in hope”)

The expression itself is risky. One might think it deals with spinning dreams of a world that does not exist, which would only cause frustrations and persons out of synchrony with the real world. But even accepting its ambiguity, it appears to us to be an appropriate concept to express this dimension that distinguishes human education from taming an animal; not a simple accommodation to reality but to the improvement and transformation of the present reality.

A human education ought always to have something of "utopia", head-in-the-clouds, about it, and with even greater reason, a Christian education. It has a great deal to do with this affirmation of the Council: "*The future of humanity is in the hands of those who know how to give reasons to live and reasons to hope to coming generations*" (Gaudium et Spes 31).

To educate "in hope" or to educate "for the utopia" means to cultivate expectations, to prepare men and women that will refuse to accept the present reality as the only one possible and will insist on its transformation. In a Christian perspective it is to cultivate openness to the Kingdom of God that is coming and is already here; it is the awakening of the student to the desire for the Savior and, in this way, bringing him to the threshold of faith in Jesus. It is education in life's worth, its significance and its destiny, its sense of the beyond, the rising above structures, the capacity to improve the present, etc.

The school is not limited to replicating the existing social model, nor preparing the students to perpetuate the system. To the contrary, it must show that mankind is incomplete if it does not rise above the ordinary and opens itself to God for, "*The Christian message cannot separate persons from contributing to the edification of the world, nor from concern for the good of others; rather, it imposes on them the duty of doing so.*" (Gaudium et Spes 34).

Without a doubt the dimension we are speaking about has some very definite traits that are embodied in *an education for justice*. An evangelizing program of education should develop education for justice by means of a global, coherent plan of the curriculum that begins by reviewing those structures of the school that impact on the way this value is perceived. Such a plan would include "key moments" to be enacted throughout the school, such as campaigns and special days on the effects of injustice and marginalization in human situations. It would provide experiences, adapted to the class levels, that could place the boys and girls in contact with their surroundings: promoting an acquaintance with real life situations, aiding in a critical interpretation and leading to a commitment. It would encourage social volunteerism and the active involvement in organizations such as *Caritas, Justice and Peace, Manos Unidas*, etc.

3) Education to seek the truth

The third sector of the “threshold pedagogy” reminds us that the best school is not the one that gives the most answers but one that raises questions in a person's inner self and encourages him to search for the answers.

To educate for the search supposes:

- developing the capacity for self questioning, and not just learning;
- developing the critical sense, one that can transform, not just lining up in the system;
- developing an openness to Mystery, discovering the “sacramental” meaning of life and the world, instead of limiting oneself to the scientific research that narrows the view of reality.

It is an aspect that touches on everything, especially on the methodology used in the different scholastic areas: if, more than storing up knowledge, it advances the faculties of observation, imagination, judgment and foresight; if, activities aimed at investigation and personal expression are preferred to dictation from “the rostrum”; if there is a strategy that accustoms the students to reflection, recollection, meditation and study, that facilitates access to spirituality and respect for the mystery of beings, that awakens the instinct for the sacred, etc.

Attention to those “missing links”

It is increasingly more frequent that certain objectives of an educational program of evangelization cannot be reached because continuity has broken down in the process. We are speaking here of the “missing links” in the context of present day culture that the pedagogy of the thresholds must be very aware of in order to remedy them. And we refer especially to *the religious dimension of the person*: the development of the religious dimension is the characteristic objective of the pedagogy of the thresholds. The religious personality, understood in its broadest extension, is the soil in which the Christian identity or other faith choices can grow.

The process of initiation carried out by the Christian school molds the religious personality of the boy or girl and it does so when:

- it foments attitudes favorable to the religious spirit, with positive appreciation of religious manifestations, independent of the faith that celebrates them;

- it cultivates the capacity for the religious experience that will permit the girl or boy to enter into communication with mystery: interiority, symbolism, the expression of the deepest experiences, etc.;
- it stimulates a sense of responsibility for the transformation and betterment of the world, and links all religious feelings to this responsibility.

At the present day, and especially in the highly developed consumer societies, it is often noted that the religious dimension of the person is a “missing link” of the chain that makes up the initiation in the faith, without which it is not possible to build a Christian identity. The tactile, the superficial, the easily obtainable, the prefabricated solutions, the easily affordable, the fascination with the magical and the ersatz of mystery,--all tend to occupy the attention of youth, leaving little room for the transcendent.

The program of education of the Lasallian school ought to include the cultivation of this human and religious dimension in its planning as something previous and also simultaneous to the education in the faith. The threshold pedagogy will show how to do it.

b) Second Circle: The dialogue between faith and culture

Two tasks, one more important than the other, demand attention at this level:

1st. Evangelization of the culture

The first refers to the transmission of the culture, a culture open to spiritual and religious dimensions, to Christian and Gospel-influenced perspectives.

Culture is not the equivalent of an “entirety of eruditions”. The Christian school provides the keys and the human and Christian discernment so that “knowledge” joined to “skills” and “values” acquire meaning and significance and are transformed into a “culture” capable of informing the thought structure of the person. It is a delicate, sensitive, task but an unavoidable one, that must be identifiable in each area of subject matters, every bit of the curriculum, without taking the disinterestedness or neutrality of content and method for granted. For example, in teaching the mechanics of mathematics, problems are sometimes chosen that

subtly and systematically instill the wish to have more wealth, with little consideration of solidarity with those who have none. Contrariwise, the program can incorporate elements that encourage sensitivity to the difficulties that the needy endure.

2nd. Inculturation of the faith

The second task is the proposal to instill the Christian meaning of the world, of humankind and of history. It is the work of providing the Christian keys of interpretation to the lived experiences of the student and the announcement of the Message of Salvation. This belongs, although not exclusively, to the Teaching of Religion, and carries with it another task as a counterpart to the "evangelization of the culture", namely, the inculturation of the faith. It requires a great sensitivity to the challenges that culture poses to the faith, also a disposition to confront the problems that man faces today from science, civilization, etc.

Religious teaching, within the educational process of evangelization, is connected to the other two circles and assumes some of the functions proper to them for, in education in the faith, continuity is more the rule than are the interruptions. So, from threshold pedagogy it utilizes the capacity to ask questions, focusing on the most transcendental questions of human existence and on the ultimate sense of history and the universe. It furnishes a scale of values based on the Gospel that it can critically apply to the present society while, at the same time, suggesting strategies and the hope to change it. Besides this, by explicitly announcing Jesus and his message, it even places itself on the other side of the threshold in order to invite entry to those who have traveled the previous path and wish to take the following step. In this way it serves as the nexus between the first and the third circles.

At times it may also take on some of the characteristic functions of catechesis, especially when the number of believing students forms the large majority, encouraging these to live out the Christian message and offering them moments of prayer and celebration, including retreats and Christian youth assemblies. In this manner, it awakens the wish for a complete catechetical formation that can be completed in groups that meet to deepen their understanding of the faith.

c) Third circle: The explicit catechesis

This circle is the open invitation to the Christian faith and its deepening that will lead to full incorporation into the Church community.

The Lasallian school extends this invitation and proposal in different degrees throughout its structures: first of all by the witness of the life of its Christian teachers; then, in the classroom through religious experiences, such as the prayers and the morning reflection; also with the opportunities for free participation in youth gatherings, retreats and religious celebrations.

In the measure to which the religious makeup of the student body will permit, and always reconciling our offerings with the freedom of conscience of the students, the Lasallian school should include an adequate initiation into prayer and the celebration of the faith in its planning sessions. These ought to permeate the whole scholastic curriculum. There should be special attention to the religion class and the celebrations of the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation because of the importance they have in the formation of the Christian identity, in the insertion into the Church Community and in the process of personal conversion.

Strengthening the faith: study groups and clubs

The nucleus of this third circle is found in *the study groups for a deepening of the faith* (or the catechumenal groups) where a systematic process of Christian initiation is developed and where all the other catechetical elements mentioned above converge or take on consistency. The groups contribute that experience of community of faith that is necessary to fully understand what the Church is and how to opt for it. Participation in them is *completely free*; nonetheless they do form part of the process contemplated in the program of education as an offering of the Christian community of the school and they function in coordination with the rest of the process.

The groups are given times and spaces within the schedule, outside the hours of class, of course, but avoiding as far as possible timetable conflicts with sports and cultural activities.

The sponsors and moderators of the groups are integrated into the teaching staff, recognized as forming part of the overall program of Christian education. The groups allow for a much closer

accompaniment of youth and one that extends over a longer period because the process should continue beyond graduation, linking up with other Church structures that strengthen the individual's commitment to and living out of his faith. This would be in the parish settings for the majority, but for some it will happen in consecrated communities, or movements and societies of apostolic work, or in the same Christian community of the school, etc.

The adults of the educational community (teachers, mothers and fathers of the students...) are also eligible participants of these "*groups for the strengthening of the faith*" or "*catechumenal groups*" and frequently they must be the first target of attention because they will constitute the adult Christian community that is the point of reference for the initiation of the children and young people.

The school classes benefit from the context that the entire program of education brings to them. The formation of the Christian identity and the initiation into the community acquire, in the secular framework of the school, an important reference for later life — living one's Christian identity in the workaday world and living the Christian community as leaven in the world. This is the meaning of Incarnation. Additionally, the signs of the times, grasped by an educational community that is alert to them and included in the options of the program of education, will necessarily be part of the guidance of the groups and in the urgencies stressed throughout the catechumenal process.

The highest aspiration of Christian groups is achieved in the formation of "just" men or women, not simply persons who are free. That means persons who assume service for, and in solidarity with, their neighbors have more important values than control over natural resources or individual welfare. And it will all culminate in identification with the program of Jesus and faith in the Gospel.

In their initiation in the faith, Christian groups must emphasize this component that is essential to them: an education in social commitment, finding it to be what the Kingdom of God demands.

A fruitful tension

This concept of the evangelization program in three circles, far from separating the educational aims or fixing them in isolated

compartments in the process, permits us to underscore its continuity in such a way that when we consider the higher objectives, proper to the third circle – the strengthening the faith – we realize that we reach them by starting from the first circle, the pedagogy of the threshold. Here are some examples:

– Initiation to prayer includes and advances education in the interior spirit, in the capacity for contemplation, in the appreciation of silence, in the attitude of listening, in the recognition of the “other-ness” of the person that addresses us, etc. All of these are bases that sustain the human personality and can be accomplished from the earliest grades in school.

– Initiation to the Word of God as the fount of faith includes the discovery that words are vehicles of culture and experience and religious language as approximation, by analogy, to the expression of the most profound human experiences and the introduction to the meaning of literary symbolism.

– Initiation to commitments follows the critical reading of reality, education for justice, introduction to movements for volunteers, etc.

On the other hand, when we consider the process of education as a whole in the light of the grand goals of evangelization as spelled out in the third circle, we find that these goals are not “the finishing touch” but that they have been present throughout the process, as long as the direction has been constant, independently of having reached the final or not. Each stage of human maturity is seen in this process as a *time of grace*, a *time of salvation*, a place of the revelation of God and the presence of the Kingdom which is a value in itself and, in its turn, is proclaiming the fullness of grace and salvation.

The revelation of God that Jesus made is presented in the catechism as the final chapter of that more wide-spread revelation found in the *seeds of the Word* (Vatican II, *Ad Gentes* 11,15) that are found in all cultures and peoples. In sowing in youth a restlessness to seek the truth and an openness to the mystery of beings, we are preparing them for the encounter with God in the faith. God is found by one that seeks Him. To come to the portals of faith it is necessary first to wonder about God. The *pedagogy of the thresholds* in a program of evangelization presumes that consciences have been stimulated to ask directly questions about

God, about Christ, about the Gospel. Even before these questions, the stimulation will have begun with those “*whys?*” about life, questions that ought to mark the road proper to *the pedagogy of the thresholds*. We try to avoid, therefore, that the questions about the “*hows?*”, the subject matter of most courses, do not absorb the attention of the school.

The Word of God contained in the Bible and presented in religious instruction is but the explicit expression of that much wider dialogue that God carries on with humanity through different signs, a dialogue that a program of evangelization strives to show from the start. The daily interpretation of events in the world, and of ordinary life — what might be grist for the mill of *the morning reflection* — must be like a sacramental, by accustoming our students to discover their profound meaning, with which the Holy Spirit speaks to us.

The participation in the history of the Church is the culmination of participation in the History of Salvation which began with the first human couple and is effected in each person. Integration into the Christian community is not inclusion into a closed circle, “us” on the insides, “them” on the outside. It is the culmination and sign of a process of integration with the People of God, having a universal character. This integration happens when we educate youth in fraternity and solidarity.

The Christian educator lives, then, in a fruitful tension between those two poles. On one side, he has the conviction that evangelization is happening at every moment of the process of education, and the consequent satisfaction of knowing that he accomplishes his apostolic ministry in all his efforts, however “simply” human they may appear. On the other side, there is the tendency to reach the highest levels of evangelization and present them to those youngsters disposed to receive them. He knows that a demand of the process of education is to strive for the greatest perfection and accomplishment of each person. As a mediator between the Message of Salvation and youth, the Christian teacher feels the urgency to communicate the gift that he has been given.

For reflection and sharing:

1. Beginning with the knowledge that each of us has of his own students, all of us together should be able to make an analysis of *values*:

- those that the boys and girls are living most intensely;
- those that we do find present in our school;
- those that, in our judgment, receive the least attention, in spite of their inclusion in our program of education.

2. Does an explicit program of values formation exist in our school? At what levels? Are the values incorporated into our curricular programming? Are they the subject of our discussions and reflection as much as, or even more than, our talk about academic results?

3. What channels do we create in the school to induce our students to be men and women who are "seekers": a critical conscience? The ability to be honest in self examination? The ability to interpret reality and transform it? Living a spirituality, in awe of Mystery? Do we use the morning reflection for this purpose?

4. What does our school do to help our students reach a personal synthesis between faith and culture? Without having to "baptize" it, is the "profane" culture that we impart in the school one that is open to spiritual and religious dimensions? Does it embody any Gospel values? Is our religious instruction open to the problems and challenges that present day culture has? Are they included in the lesson plans?

5. What importance is given to the challenge, strengthening and celebration of the faith in the framework of the school setting? Are there gatherings of Christian and Lasallian Youth? Prayers and celebrations?

3rd Part

Sharing the lasallian
mission

Theme 10: “Sharing” is one way to go

“Sharing” is one road to follow because it consists in a process by which persons are changed and come together.

“Sharing the mission” is a way in which the “*Lasallian association for the education of the poor*” is built up. It is a *process of communion for the mission*, in which all Lasallian educators are invited to participate, each according to his or her proper identity.

1. Joined together for the work of education

Let us take as our point of departure the existing situation in our school. The work of education has brought together a very diverse group of persons. Some are regular classroom teachers, others are educators of various specialties — guidance counselors, moderators of groups, coaches, mentors, etc. Still others are responsible for the organization and administration of the school — attendance clerks, cashiers, secretaries, kitchen and janitorial services, etc. It may be that some are Brothers, others are lay persons; there are practicing Christians and those who belong to other faiths.

Once we are together, what is it that we share? The work? This leads to the organization of *working teams* that will address the organization, coordination and efficiency of the school. So, the meeting has taken place. Toward what end? Is it only for the purpose of each applying his or her skills?

The encounter of persons is the threshold that leads to shared mission. On the outside of that threshold we share our skills and abilities. And we cross the threshold when we share our persons. From this point we can begin to speak of “shared mission”, for we have crossed the threshold.

From this moment:

- we not only happen to be materially present in the same workplace, but we share (that is, we communicate) our identities;
- we not only carry out coordinated tasks, but we perform them with an attitude of communion with the whole team;
- we not only get organized into teams for the most efficient work, but we do it in a spirit of solidarity with one another.

However, these changes of attitudes do not happen in a single day; they are the result of a process that oftentimes extends over a long period.

“Shared Mission” is a process of communion. In the degree to which it is part of the process, do the persons learn to share who they are and not just what they do. At the core we have the person, and not the work.

The process consists in “*creating bonds*” (permitting ourselves “to be affected” by the others). This takes time and patience, as the Fox tells the Little Prince in the work of Saint-Exupery:

“What do I have to do?” asked the Little Prince. “You must be patient”, answered the Fox. “To begin with, you should sit over there, a bit of a distance from me, there in the grass. I will glance at you sidewise, but you are not to say anything. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But each day you can sit a little closer...”

- There are bonds that bring about personal appreciation: mutual support, respect, acceptance and esteem.
- There are bonds that effect integration among persons: interdependence, collaboration, communication and complementarity.
- There are bonds that produce co-responsibility, which is the capacity to be in solidarity with the others in reaching the goals of a common project.

The immediate fruit of this whole process is that the community of educators little by little becomes a place of friendship, dialogue, communication and integration.

2. Brothers and lay persons, sharing the mission

Let us now look at this same reality with another perspective that completes the previous one. Let us posit Lasallian education as a mission in the Church that we are sharing — Brothers and lay partners. Until not very long ago lay persons *assisted* the Brothers in what was believed to be their mission. It is not easy to change a way of thinking and acting that goes back centuries in the Church, that is, the leadership of a few as opposed to the passivity of the majority, the paternalism of the priestly and religious state, as compared to the “under age” condition of the lay state.

But the process of shared mission has been producing a series of discoveries, especially on the part of these Christian lay people:

- that they are not simply carrying out a work of education, rather they are sharing in *a mission of the Church*;
- that in this mission they are not “on loan”, helping those who really have been entrusted with it, but, on the contrary, they are *protagonists and leaders* and, for that reason, *responsible* for that mission to complete its objectives;
- that in this mission they are not substituting or replacing anyone; they are not occupying a position that belongs, in principal, to someone else; they do not have to assume the identity of the other. Each one *acts according to his or her own identity*, with all the potential and also the conditions and limitations that are implied in that identity: some from their consecrated celibacy and others from their experience of family and the reality of society.

The Brothers also have been making discoveries in this process:

- that they have no tasks reserved to them in the mission; that what is expected of them does not consist so much in special work but in the sign that they must give with their life for the work that they share;

the sign of brotherhood and their experience of communion,

the sign of a life dedicated to seeking God and His will,

the sign of gratuity in the free and total gift of their life, recalling the free gift that God made of Himself to mankind;

- what they had previously been receiving – motivation and formation – are gifts that they cannot keep just for themselves but must share with their lay partners. The Brothers strongly value the mission because in it they have discovered the profound meaning of the education of youth, especially the poor. This is what they must share with their lay companions so that these may also discover it.

- that the Lasallian charism for Christian education, which they had thought was theirs alone, is a gift that the Holy Spirit has given to the Church, not just to the Brothers, and that this charism today belongs to lay educators as well.

And both the one band and the other are finding that what is the hardest, and the newest, in this mission is that they are together,

not on opposite sides. They *mutually complement each other* and are in solidarity with one another.

3. The mission that we share

When we discover each other as persons, and not just as components of a work force, then we are ready to understand why we can speak of "mission" and not just of "task", even though we are dealing with the task of education.

To discover the mission behind the work of education means that beyond the programs that must be developed, we encounter *the person of every student* and we situate him at the very center of our concerns as teachers. The whole person and not just his intellectual side or his skills.

My work as a teacher begins with the person, with his needs and in his human situation and not in his place in a project or subject. It means that I find that I am a *mediator* in his process of growth in maturity, which goes beyond my lesson plans for it requires my involvement as a person. To see myself as a *mediator* I have to have a bit of humility. I have to step down from the platform as "star of the show" to take on a secondary role. I must stop being that "*magister*" (the one who is the most because he knows the most) in order to become the "*minister*" (who is least, because he serves). I have to be able to tell myself: "I do not know beforehand what my student needs. I have to ask myself that question every day and look for the right answer, without knowing it before."

The faith is not a pre-requisite to begin this process of shared mission but whoever has received the gift of faith can enter into the shared mission with greater depth:

- discovering that our educational program is, in reality, a program of evangelization;
- discovering that that program can only be assured if there is a community of faith that sustains it. For that reason the teacher will feel encouraged to share his faith with the other believing educators and form a support community in the process of education;
- and discovering himself as one sent, a mediator of God for the growth in maturity of his students and for discovering the call of God in the needs of his students.

Once we are living this faith-based dimension we are able to speak of our "*awareness of ministry*", of knowing ourselves to be an "*instrument*" of the Work of God, of acting as "*ambassador*", "*representative*" and "*minister of God*", in the expressions of St. Paul. "*For we are God's co-workers*". He it is that "*gives the increase*" to what we plant and water (1Cor 3,5-9). John Baptist de La Salle took these expressions of St. Paul and he used them to give a name to our experience as Christian teachers.

My awareness of being a mediator leads me to discover the need of *the community*. The community is the group of persons who together seek and help each other to find the best possible response to the needs of youth. And the community is the reference point for youngsters when we try to initiate them into a life of community.

4. We share the mission inspired by a charism (a spirit)

The process of shared mission that gave rise to the Lasallian Association is the hinge upon which the whole process turns. Stated in another way, it has a spirit that enlivens the entire process and that is the *Lasallian charism*.

We have said that the process consists in "creating bonds" between persons, promoting communion among as many as take part in the Lasallian mission. Communion is the *relationship* that occurs between persons with a common spirit. The process of communion foments the *participation in the common Lasallian charism*, that is to say, it forges a relationship of the spirit proper to the Lasallian charism.

The Lasallian charism is the gift of the Spirit that has permitted us to discover, value and give an appropriate response to the Christian education of the poor. It is the *North Star* that must guide the whole process, all done in a unique style, a special sensitivity to certain necessities, determined preferences in choosing the beneficiaries, certain criteria and options in its approach to the responses and a way of evaluating the mission.

And it is the charism that has given birth to the Lasallian *spirituality*, the expression of the profound meaning of our lives. And it is the deepest part of our relation with God. Thus, spirituality is

also a way of relating to God, starting from our lived experience, the experience of our work in education, our human relationships, our perception of the world and the social reality. Lasallian spirituality permits us to discover and live the work of education as the very special place of the relation of the teacher with God.

5. The common charism goes back to the Founder himself

We refer to John Baptist de La Salle as our Founder. To think of him as “Founder” means the same as saying that he *possessed a charism* that permitted him to *discover, discern and appreciate* aspects of daily life that are ours as well. He had exactly that same charism that we have just described.

De La Salle is not Founder for having “invented” a structure that is called the “Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools”. If that were the case, only the Brothers would recognize him as Founder. Nevertheless, today there are many persons besides the Brothers who consider De La Salle, in all justice, to be their “Founder”. Let us clarify that:

The present Rule of the Brothers states:

“John Baptist de La Salle was deeply moved by the way in which ‘the children of the artisans and the poor’ were abandoned and left to themselves. As a practical response to his prayerful consideration of this fact in relation to God’s plan of salvation, he came to discern, in faith, what God wanted the mission of the Institute to be.” (Rule 11).

The first thing that we notice here: there is a continuum between his own experience of faith and the call that he had through the charism.

Secondly, the center of gravity is not in the Institute as such but *in the mission*. It is previous to the Institute in every instance.

What did that “discovery of the mission” signify for John Baptist de La Salle?

- that he was attentive to the surrounding reality: *“the way...(they) were abandoned...”*
- that he was moved by an interior attitude: *“his prayerful consideration of ...God’s plan of salvation...”*

– that, as a consequence, John Baptist was “*deeply moved*” by that reality. He “*came to discern it*” as the call of God and “*as a practical response*” he acted. It is the action of the Spirit in John Baptist, through the charism that he had been granted.

This is to say that his charism as Founder permitted him to discover Christian education for children, especially for the poor, as the “*privileged*” place of the presence and the coming of the Kingdom.

As a consequence and, thanks to his charism as Founder, he considered dedication to that work to be a *ministry of great importance to the Church*.

And finally, his charism as Founder also brought him to seek a practical response: of all the possible ways to devote himself to that mission, De La Salle chose and developed one: “*the Brothers*”, celibate religious living in community for a mission; but he experimented with another, “*the rural school teachers*”, lay persons who would carry on their work almost in isolation.

As we will now see, his third step – his practical response – receives its consistency in the first two and cannot be separated from them.

But the third step, *his implicit response*, is today very much expanded. We are in a new situation, one that was unimaginable in De La Salle's time. It is the collaboration between the Brothers and other men and women religious, lay partners and priests, but it is also with the faithful of other religions. So then, all of us who are in this new “response that was coming” can call De La Salle “*Founder*” because his charism has finally arrived, as the present Rule recognizes: “*The Spirit of God has given to the Church, in the person of St. John Baptist de La Salle, a charism which even today inspires the Brothers and a great number of other educators.*” (Rule 20).

Thanks to that charism that acts in us, we are able to find new paths. And that is also affirmed by the Rule of the Brothers in its latest edition:

“*Today, as in the past, he challenges the Brothers, not only as the one who established the Institute but as the Founder who continues to inspire and to sustain it.*” (Rule 149).

For reflection and sharing:

1. In section 2 we spoke of the various discoveries that lay partners as well as Brothers have been learning in the process of the shared mission. Let each one speak of his or her own experiences, his or her own discoveries in this area, and also of wishes and hopes.
2. Draw up a list of things that ought to change or improve in our school so that the process of shared mission can continue to grow.
3. How can the experience of communion between Lasallian educators be promoted? Between Brothers and lay partners in the concrete situation of our school and district? What bonds should be strengthened, apart from those that already exist?
4. What aspects of the Lasallian charism have we already experienced in depth in our life as teachers? What aspects can be improved upon? What are we doing to be formed in, and better acquainted with, the Lasallian charism?

Theme 11:

The challenge: building the community

The need for the support of a community is felt with ever greater force throughout the life journey of a teacher. And the road that an educational program of evangelization must follow bears the same name: community.

Community is the goal of our program and it is also the road we must travel. Community represents the *content* and the *method* of our educational program. And community is also the subject of that program.

All this would be taken for granted in whatever school but it acquires a *prophetic character* in the Lasallian school. It is very likely the most relevant trait of the charismatic Lasallian response to the educational needs of the poor. This contribution, far from losing strength over the years, has become more and more important for it corresponds to the challenge that the poor face in education today: that everything today should be built around community, promoting relationships between persons in solidarity with the rest. Only in this sphere will the poor be able to grow and express themselves.

1. The community of educators: existing in order to transmit

The Lasallian school has set the life style of community as its goal and so strives to organize all its internal workings around this goal. Now, *the movement toward community* receives its impetus *from a community*. If we speak of the school as community, in its broadest sense, it is so only to the degree to which the community of educators exists, in the more restricted sense.

We are not just referring to the group of professors and teachers, even though traditionally they were the only ones, together with the administration, who controlled the life of the school. That is no longer the situation in most cases. The educational needs in today's society have become so complex that they require the collaboration of a broad spectrum of educators who are all pulling in

the same direction, even though from different angles. These are the teachers of all the different subjects, the moderators and coaches of the various cultural and sports activities, the moderators of the Christian organizations and groups, the "liaisons" with social and ecclesiastical institutions, etc.

This diversity of educators will have to make room for proper structures of relations and encounter. They will have to supersede the "team" model in favor of the community.

- A *team* is a group of persons who have joined together with the intention of completing a common action. The team meets to work together.

- The *community*'s principal interest is the persons that comprise it, independently of whether they are working together in a common action or not.

There need not be opposition between team and community, but they do not have to coincide.

- In the *team* the functions that each member carries out are what matter. The team tries to coordinate those functions in order to produce the best results in the joint project. The "being together" of the team really means "doing together".

- The *community* unites persons from within, in its internal workings, and not simply in its functions. In this way, common feelings are achieved and work toward the fulfillment of its members in their personal inter-communion. It is a "being together" that leads to "fulfillment together", in solidarity, one with the others. Interpersonal relationships are the medium in which this growth of "being" happens. This is the essence of the community of matrimonies, the community of families and also other communities-political and religious.

Once these differences are understood, we have to answer the question: Are we a team or a community? How are we to categorize this group of educators? And the answer must be: *team and community*.

Certainly the functioning of a scholastic institution calls for a *team of educators* who distribute the jobs to be done, and a director to coordinate it all. However, the program of education will have no life, nor can it contribute to the "gestation" of the personality of

the educators, if it is not elaborated, lived and sustained by a *community* of persons who have accepted and decided, not only to draw up the program, but to live it and support it as one in order to give it life. In this way all the members of a community of educators become the authors of the program.

This does not have to do, therefore, with an “association” that is purely “functional”, organized so that all the school activities run smoothly. What must be achieved is an authentic community in which the person of the educator may grow, feel satisfaction and a sense of joy to be part of it all. This would be a basic condition for the ultimate purpose of the school to be reached, the good of the students.

2. The process for the growth of community

Given the recognition of personal identity of each educator, given the experience of pluralism and diversity today – in commitments, in methods, in procedures and interests, in the levels of faith – how can we advance in the *process of communion* for the formation of the educational community?

Naturally, it is not enough to be together. What is needed is a process of integration in which the operative element is the *will to be jointly* associated, and that cannot be taken for granted.

Three interdependent dynamics must take place for the life of the educational community if it is to grow and mature:

– *Appreciation of the person*: This is built up “from below”, from the recognition of our human limitations; so, we can speak of different levels of “appreciation” that are incorporated into the process – mutual support, respect, acceptance, esteem for the different identities, the possibility that each can express himself and apply his talents;

– *Communion of persons*: In working together in a common program, personal appreciation is not sufficient; it is important that persons let themselves be affected by the others, to promote communication, to establish constructive relations;

– *Co-responsibility*: which is a consequence of the communion between persons and the consciousness of carrying out the same mission. The program must be the work of all but, for that to hap-

pen, each must feel that he is a protagonist, moved by the needs that present themselves, responsible for the stated objectives and in agreement with the decisions of the community.

What consequences do these dynamics have for the community of educators? (And here, the greater responsibility falls to the director and the coordinators):

—It must be established as a *place of friendship and mutual appreciation*. Times for gathering, celebration, recreation and festivity should be programmed;

—Great importance should be given to *communication* within the group, and this with even greater emphasis in the larger faculties. So many problems arise in relationships and the workings of the school when this is lacking. Effective channels for communication must be provided between administrators and the teaching staff and between teachers themselves as well as with the other elements of the school community;

—*Dialogue* must be encouraged in the group. All should have the chance to express themselves. Listening to each other stimulates the participation of all. The decision-making process should be done, as much as possible, by consensus or mutual agreement rather than by a vote. For that to occur, it is necessary to pass from discussion to sharing: discussion is the exposition of one's ideas to defend them; sharing means to propose one's ideas so that they can be improved upon with the ideas of others. Progress will only be possible through shared dialogue.

—The integration of the group members will be carried out, not by the reduction of differences, but by means of *complementary attitudes*. It is often the case, especially in smaller groups, that many initiatives go unheard for fear of standing out, or fear of "finger pointing". The group should be aware that a leveling off frequently responds to the lowest common denominator, not to the most demanding.

In the panoply of all the decisions made in a community of educators, the motivation of our association must always be a factor, that is, the educational needs of our students. Only by always returning to these, by letting ourselves be challenged by them, can the community be energized.

3. The community of faith in the educational community

The mission of the Lasallian school is a mission of evangelization. For this we must also consider the Christian community, that is, the group of believers who commit themselves to further, together, the program of evangelization in the Lasallian school. From within the community of teachers, in union with the other members and working shoulder to shoulder with them, but discreetly as far as possible, this group of practicing Christians develops *the ministry of Christian education* as a community. In other times this function belonged to the community of the Brothers. Today we must speak of the community of faith, in which Brothers and the other believing Christians work together in the educational community.

In the educational community not all are found to be on the same level of faith. The range of belief may be quite extensive, from those who have distanced themselves from it in their lives to others for whom it is considered a fundamental dimension. Both take part in the program of education of the Lasallian school. Of course, in order for that program to be a concrete expression of the mission of evangelization, it will be necessary that the community of faith — as part of the community as a whole — be supported and nurtured.

Two bonds, *faith and mission*, unite these believers, lay partners and Brothers. For them the community of faith becomes a “place of encounter” and a “road leading to the mission”. When believers, through a motive of faith, take their work of education seriously and understand it as a mission that they receive from God and the Church, they feel drawn to communion. They are motivated to share the ministry so that the sign of God and of the Church manifest through them becomes more visible. They wish to better discern the response they must offer for the needs of youth to guarantee the continuity of the program. But, even more, their mission aspires to “initiate into community”, to build up the Church and create brotherhood. It must be founded, therefore, on an experience of brotherhood, on the reality of the local Church and on the witness of a community. *Their mission leads them to community.*

The community is the "fount" of the mission. It is the place where many begin to experience their work as mission. Community, as "sacrament" of God's love, presents the experience of God and of his love to those that comprise it so that it may subsequently become part of the mission. The objective of our "sharing" is not to live pleasantly with one another, just as the purpose of the Christian community does not reside in itself, but in the mission that has been confided to it.

The first thing that must be done to launch the community of faith among believers who are already collaborating in the school, is to become aware that the community of faith does already exist even though in germinal form. The only thing that need be done is to prod it forward from that same starting point. Thus, structures will begin to take shape that will increase communion among the members and permit them to be the leaven in their educational community.

We should understand this community of faith in the school in the framework of ecumenism, in which the community of faith can develop in diverse circles, more or less concentric. The Brothers and the other practicing Catholics may form the initial nucleus, but the circle will tend to spread out in order to envelop believers of other Christian churches. This can be accomplished without having to turn a blind eye to differences but rather respecting the characteristics proper to each one and bringing out what we have in common. Likewise, the community of faith tends to integrate teachers that belong to non-Christian creeds in respect for their beliefs and feasts. As experience attests, there are multiple aspects of Lasallian spirituality, and not just of its pedagogy, that facilitate the convergence and participation in the faith from religions that apparently are so very different.

The first role of the community of faith, as sign, is to be visible. It must be a testimony of unity, solidarity, collaboration and openness. As such it will be able to attract those who draw close to the members of the community. In this way, and in the same sense, it will also set an example for youngsters and adults as to how a community project can be realized, as well as the construction of the community of the Church through different ministries and charisms. By reason of its visibility and its openness, through its cordial relations, the community must be a living

witness of how the faith can be lived in an authentic communion of persons.

In the school the community of faith will be a sign of being in tune with "*the hopes and joys, the sorrows and anguish of the men and women of our time*" (Gaudium et Spes 1). It will be a prophetic sign to bring about the commitment of the school to a humanizing culture, not a dehumanized one. To do that it must be careful that the curricular programs of the school do not become its only preoccupation because they are not the culture but simply plans or paths to arrive at culture.

It must be the critical conscience in the school so that, at every moment, those "paths" of culture are at the service of the person and do not close in upon themselves. They must raise questions, be seekers, be uncomfortable, rather than being complacent and giving pat answers. The "paths" should lead to the encounter with other persons, without exclusion, in place of provoking competition and the will to dominate.

As a prophetic sign it ought to focus its prophetic denunciation on the structures that its own school community has promoted to advance its program of education. It should do so when it confirms that the existing program favors contradictory interpretations: of power, of an abusive utilization of people, of giving more importance to efficiency than attention to the more underprivileged, etc. It will be necessary to transform or eliminate such structures.

For reflection and sharing:

1. How do we qualify, or, better expressed, describe, the sort of relations that should be established within our community of educators?:

- Between the administration and the teaching staff?
- Between the religious and the lay people?
- Among the teachers as a whole?

Is there a spirit of working together? How is that evident? If it is not, what are the causes?

What aspects need the most attention in these relationships?

2. Is communication sufficiently guaranteed in our group? Does it work at all levels? Would it be worth it to set up channels or dynamics that would improve it?

3. How do we perceive the diversity among the different members of the educational community? Are the differences accepted in a positive spirit? Are they shared, do they complement each other, or are there frictions and mutual recriminations?

4. Do initiatives prosper in our group of teachers with regard to the mission of education? Do the difficulties arise from within or from the outside? Do we sense that our creativity is stimulated, or is it held back? Do we share and support the initiatives of the others?

5. Have bonds of faith developed among the believing members of the community, for example, between Brothers and lay partners? Are there occasional gatherings for prayer, celebration, reflection and formation? Does a community of faith exist among the teachers?

Theme 12: To associate: A special spirit, perhaps a commitment

1. The “subplot” of the lasallian story

The history of the Lasallian Association began a little more than 300 years ago. When we begin to tell this story the main plot or central theme on which the whole narration revolves stands out immediately; the core that makes it all hang together is *the Christian education of the poor*.

However, the interesting aspects of a story do not depend on the central theme alone. They are often found *behind-the-scenes*, in the *subplot* or what was happening at the same time. In the Lasallian story what imparts a special tone is the will to provide an answer *together and by association*. to the need for a Christian education of the poor.

In our story there was an event that assumed the function of a “center of gravity” because of its special importance: “*The foundation event which links the Institute today to its origins is that of June 6th 1694, when John Baptist de La Salle and twelve of his followers came together to consecrate themselves for life, to the Christian education of poor boys*” (43rd General Chapter, Circular 447, p.2). “*(It) is the source of Lasallian associations of lay persons and religious who wish to be part of the Lasallian Mission*” (ibid , p.3).

In that event of 1694 the consciousness of acting “*together and by association*”, that had been forged in previous years, was “crystallized” for all time. On that date the Brothers, with John Baptist de La Salle, pronounced for the first time the formula that they used to proclaim and seal their association before God:

“I promise and vow to unite myself and remain in society with the Brothers... in order to maintain together and by association the gratuitous schools...”

That commitment was founded on the communion that they had built up among themselves over several years in the spirit or charism that united them interiorly. Along the way they had already created other signs that expressed that “*communion for the mission*” that they had been living. One of those signs, per-

haps the most expressive yet the most simple, had been the name they had chosen: *Brothers of the Christian Schools*.

Why had they decided to call themselves "*Brothers*"? The reason had nothing to do with the fact that they were not priests, as has so often been believed. The real reason was two-fold: it showed, first of all, the kind of relations that they wanted to create among themselves; they were living in a spirit of fraternity, a style of communion among equals, that took as its model what St. Luke had described in the Acts of the Apostles about the way the first Christians had lived: "*They had one heart and one soul...everything was held in common...*" But at the same time it indicated the way they wished to be perceived and appreciated by their pupils. In the creation of a fraternal school the teachers made the first contribution in their very persons, by their closeness to the children and youth, dealing with them as elder Brothers.

Let us emphasize that last aspect: brotherhood is the axis upon which the very identity of the Brother revolves. His religious life essentially consists in that brotherhood, a *ministry of fraternity for the education of the poor* (they are Brothers for the mission, not for themselves).

The religious consecration of the Brother thus becomes a sign for the Lasallian Association which itself is a *communion for the mission*. Above all, the Lasallian Association is constituted, not as a team of workers, but as a communion of persons who feel themselves called by Jesus Christ and sent to represent him. It does not rest primarily on an efficient organization but on the interpersonal relationships of those who know themselves to be called and sent to carry out God's work. That communion is the seal of their fidelity to the mission.

Lasallian brotherhood flows from this double current: Brothers among themselves and older Brothers for their students. In reality it has to do with a single ideal that is assumed for itself first of all and then immediately as a program of education. The Lasallian school looks to transmit a way of life, rather than a series of strategies for life. That way of life is passed on from the fraternal community rather than by words or good advice. The Brothers are no more than the sign that ought to spread out to the other teachers of the Lasallian school: an invitation to live communion among themselves in order to demonstrate the same as a way of living to the students.

2. Today the story goes on

We continue the Lasallian story today but in a different setting from the one in which John Baptist de La Salle lived it. It is now in a very different context of society and Church. In this context we are sharing the mission and, as we said in Theme 10, this is the way that the "*Lasallian Association for the education of the poor*" is being built.

Is "sharing the mission" the same as "being associated for the mission"? The answer is NO. A person can share the Lasallian mission without necessarily committing himself to the Lasallian Association. At the same time we must add: the commitment to the Lasallian Association requires primarily that the mission be shared.

This begins by taking part in the fraternity for the mission and converting it into an attitude toward life. That would be the spirit that brings life to the Association. Afterwards, some may feel called to become *signs* of that ministry of brotherhood. This is the commitment to the Association.

In the ordinary process of shared mission it is enough at first that a school achieves its objectives and that the teachers find fulfillment in it, both humanly and Christianly. Secondly, it is necessary that the commitment to the Lasallian Association be made so that the Lasallian charism can continue in the Church. By the same token, the mission is not reduced to maintaining the actual schools but is extended in search of the children and young people that most need us, there in the place where they live.

We can imagine this as two concentric circles: the widest is that of the shared Lasallian mission. It unites us for collaboration in this mission. The inner circle is the Association. It is a much smaller ring and there the *heart, memory and guarantee of the Lasallian charism reside*. But there is no barrier between the two; in fact, on occasion one may be passing from one circle to the other without realizing it. In reality, more than a step (understood as a specific moment of generosity) it is a path.

The General Chapter of the year 2000 described this phenomenon of passing from sharing the mission to being associated for the Lasallian mission in this way:

“There are partners who have a long record of collaborating in the Lasallian Mission, and who feel a call to deepen the charism, spirituality and Lasallian commitment in which they wish to participate. In particular, their lives are already marked by a number of distinctively Lasallian characteristics:

- a vocation inspired by the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his values;

- a life of faith which discovers God in everyday life understood in the light of Scripture and, for persons of other religions, in the light of their own sacred texts;

- a community experience of some form or other suited to the identity of its members;

- a mission of some duration which associates persons with the educational service of the poor;

- an openness of mind which makes it possible to see beyond the individual and his immediate environment.” (p. 4).

As they progress along this road some persons will feel inspired to make their commitment explicit in order to assure that the Lasallian mission will go forward. The commitment to association can take several forms. All of them have a common denominator which is *the wish to incarnate the Lasallian mission today, in communion with other Lasallians, for the benefit of the Christian education of youth, preferably, poor youth and thus bringing to it a certain stability.*

3. The commitment of association, what for?

The commitment of those who enter into the Lasallian Association is *with persons* (the other members of the Association) *rather than with the works*. Commitment does not refer primarily here to the work or the job; it does not consist in doing more things. *It refers explicitly to the Lasallian community* at its different levels. It translates into *relationships*, in sharing and in communion. Finally, it is manifest in *belonging*. It is a bond of solidarity between persons, and for that reason, makes them dependent on each other. It is no longer a case of *“taking part in but belonging to”, “depending on”,* or even better, *“being interdependent”*. This is what cre-

ates the Association. The sign of commitment of each member makes the sign of the community more visible.

The community is inseparable from its purpose and finds its justification in this. Commitment to the community reinforces the sign of its way of service to attain that purpose: the evangelization of abandoned youth through education.

And so, to commit oneself is to assume responsibility for the beneficiaries of our service and the objectives of the Lasallian community:

- *The preferred focus of our attentions:* “abandoned” children and youth, that is, the poor, and among those, the very poorest;
- *The fundamental objectives:* an integral, Gospel-based education;

And, to follow through, working in the process of evaluation and discernment of our schools so that they may be ever more in accord with the Lasallian program.

(to continue deepening in the theme of Lasallian Association, see Notebook N. 2 of this MEL collection: *Lasallian Association: the ongoing story*).

For reflection and sharing:

1. Can we affirm that brotherhood is a distinctive sign of our Lasallian school? (that is, of the school where we work). Is it an evident characteristic in the relations between the teachers? Does it also mark the style of the relations between teachers and students?

Let us nuance our answers, pointing out advances, suggesting improvements.

2. Is the spirit of the Lasallian Association present in our school? What can we do to make that happen? Do we think that it is important or unnecessary that some, make an explicit commitment to the Lasallian Association?

3. What questions, doubts, fears and expectations does the new Lasallian Association inspire in us? What steps can be taken to better understand it?

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MEL bulletins - Programme

In these Bulletins you will find:

- Specific Lasallian schemes
- Thoughts on lasallian association and identities
- Educational/pastoral approaches

These Bulletins are intended to increase your knowledge of the Lasallian world, and to stimulate school staffs by speaking of what is done in other Lasallian schools throughout the world.

Specific Lasallian schemes

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