



BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría
Superior General

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE BROTHERS

**Consecrated by God the Trinity
as a Community of Brothers:
Messengers and Apostles sent
by the Church to make present
the Kingdom of God**

December 25th, 2009

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE BROTHERS

**Consecrated by God the Trinity as
a Community of Brothers:
Messengers and Apostles sent
by the Church to make present
the Kingdom of God**

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC
Superior General
December 25th, 2009

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3: 14 - 19)

Brothers,

The letter to the Ephesians is really more than a letter – it is a prayer to the Trinity as we can see clearly in the citation above. The Father, the Son and the Spirit intercede actively so that each of us as members of the Church might grow interiorly, feel inhabited by Christ, experience and be a witness of that love that surpasses all knowledge and fills us with the fullness of God. It is the triune God who, as Saint Paul says later, *equips the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ* (Ephesians 4: 12 - 13).

I believe that it would be difficult to better express our mission in the Church. By belonging as consecrated men and in the words of Vatican II to the *life and holiness* of the Church (*Lumen Gentium 44*) it is up to us to be the heart. We are in

a position to identify more with John, the beloved disciple and the lover, than with Peter, the head, as the Brazilian Sister Lucía Wiler has written so eloquently: *The beloved disciple is a challenge for Peter, inviting him to the apostolic Church which he represents, to constant conversion, opting for love. Therefore on almost all occasions, Peter and the beloved disciple appear together and in contrast or complementarity... It is not the institution but the love relationships that determine how the community is to follow Jesus.* By vocation, as the 2004 Congress on Consecrated Life reminded us, we are the human and compassionate face of the Church.

Along these lines, Dominican Jesús Espeja thinks that within the Christian community religious life is a vocation “with a special nature,” which he defines in these terms: *Religious in the Church should be witnesses of something very different than power which oppresses and is imposed by force; they need to manifest in history gratuitous love that is given without hope of return. They are superior to no one within the Christian community; nor have they received power to govern, consecrate or teach Christian people, which is conferred to ordained ministers. Their mission has to do with significance or moral authority: that Christians and those who think about us can conclude that human beings are called to dialogue with God.* And I would add to be brothers with one another.

It is up to us to continue making the following citation a reality: “*The kindness and generous love of God our Savior for humankind*” (Titus 3: 4). Therese of Lisieux grasped the essence of consecrated life very well when she said: *When I thought about the mystical body of the Church, I myself had not*

recognized in any of her members what Saint Paul enumerates, but rather what I wanted was to see myself in all of them. I understood that the Church has a body as a result of the union of her various members, but that within this body the most necessary and noble part was not lacking: I understood that the Church has a heart and that this heart burns with love...In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love; in this way I will be everything and my wish is that it be filled.

John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter, *Novo Milenio Ineunte*, said that the Church in this new century must *commit to practical and concrete love for every human being* (49). That is to say, the Church must be human and give witness to the God of Jesus, merciful and compassionate, always close to the *concrete* poor and to those who suffer. The letter goes on to say that this must be done with “*imagination and creativity*” (NMI 50), in a way that others can see that the hands and feet are ours and that they recognize us, according to the image suggested by our Founder, as guardian angels of children and young people who have been entrusted to us in the Lord’s loving providence (cf. Meditations 197, 198). *The needs of the young, the growth of the Church, the advancement of God’s Kingdom* are our essential objectives.

This in reality summarizes the contribution that we, as religious Brothers, are called to give to the Church and to the world. *We are called to be brothers of Christ, deeply united with him, the firstborn among many brothers (Rom 8:29); brothers to one another, in mutual love and working together in the Church in the same service of what is good; brothers to everyone, in their witness to Christ’s love for all, especially the*

lowliest, the neediest; brothers for a greater brotherhood in the Church (Vita Consecrata, 60).

This text from *Vita Consecrata* no doubt awakens an echo in many of us concerning what the Rule of 1987 already told us: *By the fraternal character of their community life and their active and selfless presence among those they serve, the Brothers witness to the possibility of creating true brotherhood among people and nations (Rule, 9).* I am convinced that as Brothers we can offer to the Church the witness of Christ as brother and the call to continue his mission for building of a world where all can feel that they are brothers and sisters, starting from the spirituality of communion which today we all want to live out in the Church.

This is our principal contribution to building up God's Kingdom and we can always live this commitment, regardless of age or the process of association with which we work with lay persons; our fraternity is open to unexpected horizons. Our vocation advances the egalitarian eschatological state of God's Kingdom, in whose service is the Church and our fraternal life in community makes present. I like to think of the Brother as the *sacrament of the horizontal dimension* that keeps us from calling persons father or teacher and invites us to call one another Brother and live like brothers.

I have no doubt that this witness can become one of the more attractive elements of our vocation for young people today. As Enzo Bianchi, the community prior in Bose tells us: *I think that there will be new vocations to the religious life*

if we know how to avoid fossilizing in immutable forms and perceptions, all of which are incomprehensible to young people who are accustomed to mobility and to “fluidity.” It seems to me that a young person may feel attracted to a religious community when he sees in it a place where love is experienced, where his person can grow and mature; a place in which his questions about meaning are recognized and welcomed, and where he finds a credible and convincing response, that is to say, one that is transparent, without falsehood or hypocrisy, and which deals with concrete proposals for Christian life. A life that is sufficiently serious and not “sweetened.”

As was the case for the past two years, this Pastoral Letter finds its inspiration in some of the Meditations for the Time of Retreat. In this particular case, it deals with Meditations 197 and 198, in which the Founder invites us to think about our service to young people as their Guardian Angels, and with Meditations 199 and 200, in which the Founder encourages us to live out the ministry which the Church has entrusted to us with ardent faith and burning zeal.

1. The Church of Vatican II: People of God, Body of Christ, Dwelling Place of the Spirit

As John XXIII said, the Second Vatican Council opened the windows of the Church so that fresh air could enter. Possibly one of the refreshing changes was the ecclesiology that was proposed to us. A Church that, rather than being centered on itself was proclaimed a mystery and a sacrament, and it put the focus of its interests in the mission and the salvation of all, especially the estranged, the poor, and

the small. Through the Church God reveals his maternal face to us. A Church that opts for life and love. This is the source of hope, as Gabriel Marcel stated, as we share her faith: *If there is something today I believe in wholeheartedly, it is that a world abandoned by love must immerse itself in death, but where love perdures, where it triumphs above all over that which wants to degrade it, it is there where death is definitively conquered.* A Church of the Trinity: the People of God our Father, the Body of Christ our Brother, the Dwelling Place of the Spirit our strength.

A Church born from the Trinity and which leads us towards the Trinity can do no less than infuse us in love, as Saint Augustine says when speaking about the Trinity: *Here we have three things: The Lover, the Beloved, and Love.* As the Italian Bishop Bruno Forte remarks: *Through the Son and the Spirit is how the Trinity comes to offer us the origin, the heart and the guardianship of love: loved by God, humankind can become capable of loving his neighbor.* This action of the Son and the Spirit which the Fathers call the two hands of the Father summarize the essence of the vocation of the Church.

We know that before Vatican II, ecclesiology put the stress on the visible and institutional aspects of the Church rather than on the joyful proclamation of the saving mystery revealed in Jesus, a mystery of communion and mission that arises from the Trinity. *The Trinity, fountain and exemplary image of the Church is, therefore, its goal: born of the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. Ecclesial communion must go back to the Father in the Spirit through the Son until the day in which all yield to the Son and He delivers all to the Father*

so that God may be “all in all” (Bruno Forte). This final day will mark the full establishment of God’s Kingdom, that Kingdom by which the Church is working and which overflows its borders. We cannot forget that this mystery, which opens salvation to all humankind, was what motivated our Founder to gather a group of Brothers in community to collaborate in this saving plan, aware that *God wants all to be saved and to come to the realization of the truth*, and if that is what God wants, he must give the means and one of those means is our Institute and the mission of giving a human and Christian education to children of artisans and the poor.

If the Church as mystery is an icon of the Trinity, then as sacrament it is an invitation to unity. A unity that is revealed as a task, gift, and goal, and which is committed to a passionate search for the good of all humankind for which it senses a solidarity, which demands ongoing conversion and purification, patient and understanding dialogue, evangelical awareness, respect for diversity. A unity that has its prototype, strength and dynamism in the Trinitarian unity, the origin of an ecclesiology of communion. *The Church structured in the example of the Trinity will have to stay away from a uniformity that crushes and tortures originality and the richness of the gifts of the Spirit, as well as all ruthless comparison that does not resolve the tension between the diverse charisms and ministries; there must be a fertile and mutual reception of persons and communities in the unity of faith, hope, and charity* (Bruno Forte).

Starting from the Trinity it is clear that within the Church there is community and relationships between persons that

give origin to the institution; the point of departure is equality rather than the differences of ministries or functions and that we are all called to holiness starting from our specific vocation. In reality, it is more about what unites us than what differentiates us.

Baptism is the essential sacrament of the People of God that forms each person, starting from their specific vocation, in reflection of the Trinity. Reflection of the Father and the gratuitousness of his love, reflection of the Son in his mission that all have life and have it in abundance (John 10: 10), reflection of the Spirit establishing bonds of love and friendship that enables us to enrich others and to allow ourselves to be enriched by them. Baptism consolidates that original equality, as our Founder expressed it in his Meditation on the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity, when he spoke about the children and young people we teach: *They, too, were consecrated to the Most Holy Trinity in baptism, just as you were; they bear in their souls the indelible character of their belonging to God; they are indebted to this adorable mystery for the anointing with grace that has been poured into their hearts* (Meditation 46.3).

• **People of God:** *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light* (1 Peter 2: 9).

This is one of the most beautiful names we can give the Church. We are people of the Father, our origin is in the heart of God. As Lumen Gentium affirms in citing Acts, *At*

all times and in every race God has given welcome to whosoever fears Him and does what is right(Acts 10: 25). God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness (Lumen Gentium 9).

Primarily it is about people who are equal. Before the fact of there being diverse vocations, structures, ministries, functions or organizations is the ecclesial community in which all of us are children of God, brothers and sisters, a holy nation, a royal priesthood. The Council replaced the pyramidal structure with a circular one, reminding us that in the Gospel it says that *it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all* (Mark 10: 43 - 44). In this People of God, as Saint Paul says, *there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, man or woman*, we are all brothers and sisters, interwoven in a family relationship with divine traits.

But we are also a pilgrim people in search of the *future lasting city*. Therefore, we should feel that we are always on a journey in our history and our world, growing as persons, believers, consecrated men, as a community... aware of our weaknesses and infidelities, in need of God's mercy and pardon.

This image of the Church as People of God has enormous potential and explosive power as Divine Word Father John

Fuellenbach tells us. It is an ongoing call to always stress and put in first place the community character of the Church, *a community in which there are no bosses or subordinates, but only equals who serve one another as brothers and sisters in a community in which compassion and justice are the glass through which essential values are seen, an alternative way of thinking about society. In short, the Church is called to be, here on earth, an icon of the Trinity.*

In this sense we can also speak about sharing our charism with the People of God and not keeping it exclusively for ourselves. In one of the recent documents on Consecrated Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ*, we are expressly asked to do this when it says: *The fact that the charisms of founders and foundresses, having been born of the Spirit for the good of all, must once again be placed at the center of the Church, open to communion and participation by all the People of God, is being increasingly discovered (Starting Afresh from Christ, 31).*

• **Body of Christ:** *For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another (Romans 12: 4 - 5).*

If the concept of the People of God indicates multiple ways of belonging, the Body of Christ emphasizes the unity that should characterize all those who follow Jesus. *The multiplicity of the members and the variety of roles cannot work to the detriment of unity, and unity cannot annul or destroy the multiplicity and the variety of the members and their roles (John Paul II).*

The Body of Christ expresses the relationship of all members among themselves. They are different but necessary and complementary. It is not about a heterogeneous sum but a unified organ – we could speak about a collective identity or a corporate personality. It is about a dynamic integration in which each one feels that he is accepted, loved, respected, a main player and the one in charge; in which joys, pain and uncertainty are all shared. From that idea comes the constant connection that the Body of Christ and love have in Saint Paul. In the letter to the Romans, after presenting us with the different charisms in service of the community, Paul concludes: *Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold on to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord* (Romans 12: 9 - 11).

It is also very clear for Saint Paul that Christ is the head of this body and therefore everything should be directed towards him. The Church cannot be focused on itself but on Christ and his saving mission for humankind: *...living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love* (Ephesians 4: 15 - 16).

Church doctrine on the Body of Christ has a very close relationship with the Eucharist and it reinforces the communion to which all of us members of the Church are called. *We, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf* (1 Corinthians 10: 17). Saint John Chrysostom

tells us in his commentary on this text: *What is bread? The Body of Christ. What happens to those who receive it? The Body of Christ. Not many bodies, but just one body. If, then, we all exist for the same thing and we all do the same thing, then why do we not show the same love, why do we not also do one and the same thing in this regard?* The sequence is very logical. Love, service and dedication to others are normal consequences of the reception of the Eucharist.

Therefore there is a fundamental relationship between the institution of the Eucharist and fraternity. But there is also a connection with service and commitment as expressed in a parallel text by John in the episode of the washing of the feet. *Therefore, the bond between the Servant and the Supper is not accidental, but it is a part of the very meaning of the Eucharistic banquet. In virtue of the fraternity of the social gathering, the Eucharistic community must share in the fate of the Servant, also becoming a servant: it must eat the body which is offered up, by the strength of that body that is communicated it becomes the Church-body-given, the body-offered-for-the-many* (Bruno Forte).

Like the disciples of Emmaus we feel called to share our story with our brothers and sisters within the Church in the heart of our communities, and to build a body of love together with them. Then as a Church community we can go anywhere and reach out to all people, especially the young people we teach with *open eyes and burning hearts*.

• **Dwelling Place of the Spirit:** *For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or*

free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12: 13).

People of God and Body of Christ, the Church is also the temple and the dwelling place of the Spirit and, says Saint Paul, this is a result of being the family of God and having Jesus Christ as the cornerstone, in him *the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built spiritually into a dwelling place for God (Ephesians 2: 21 - 22)*. The Spirit is the soul of the Church, a living presence, transforming force, ardent fire, living water. It is also the authentic teacher who leads us down paths that are often unforeseen unexpected, tempestuous and full of surprises. Today in the Church and in the Institute we have the tendency to plan everything and to take the place of the Spirit with our projects and programs and sometimes we do not leave even a crack for the Spirit to enter.

Along these lines it would be well to recall what Sister Sujita said to us during our last General Chapter: *Saint Paul saw the Church not as an efficient organization but rather as a community that is a communion of believers filled with the Holy Spirit, enriched by a multitude of gifts, all committed to the transformation of the world into God's Kingdom (1 Corinthians 12: 4 - 7)*. This can also be said of our communities. This means building communities who are *in and for the mission*. No community can exist for the mission without self-transcendence. Have we not experienced the oppressive effects of members whose lifestyle reflects individualism, consumerism and excessive professional efficiency? We religious have chosen many world values in the name of efficiency, prudence and common

sense. We know that Jesus was not particularly known for his prudence, efficiency or strategic planning. But he was known for his intimacy with Abba, his compassion which empowered him and brought him to his mission until the very end. Jesus let himself be led by the Spirit, not only in the desert but also in each step of his life and death, faithful in everything to the will of the Father that was his nourishment and this is the path that the Church should follow and, along with the Church, we ourselves should follow as well.

The Founder defined the Church as *the sanctuary where God dwells through his Holy Spirit* (Meditation 199.3). The Spirit is the true protagonist and the one by whom we should let ourselves be led. It follows then his insistence that we live and act by the movement of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who unifies the Church in communion and in service; he guides it and sustains it in time; he unceasingly renews and revitalizes it.

As Brothers Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos expressed it so well in a text that synthesizes the book *“Announcing the Gospel to the Poor”* *the Holy Spirit is the one who gifts the Brothers with the gifts of faith and ministry. It is He who introduces them to an ever deeper “mystery” of God, the Living Savior...The Spirit is the one who makes them aware of their responsibility in the realization of the salvation of the world...The Spirit is the one who inspires the Brothers in the decision to place themselves among the poor and to “make history” with them, snatching them from their hopeless condition, to introduce them to filial freedom, to the ability to serve their brothers and sisters, to the eschatological wait of future assets.*

2. The Church and the Kingdom of God

During my years in Rome I have been able to participate in many international meetings of our Institute, including the last four General Chapters. One topic that always creates a certain controversy and which is often repeated is if the Institute's message should be directed towards everyone, keeping in mind the plurality of situations and the different religions of our intended recipients, which means it must be a general message and not specifically a Christian one, or if, on the contrary, Christian specificity that characterizes us should be stated clearly. I suppose that this tension also is played out in our educational institutions when our students come from different religious traditions or are nonbelievers.

Personally I think that this is the wrong approach. The Rule, for its part, tells us that *The purpose of this Institute is to provide a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor, according to the ministry which the Church has entrusted to it* (Rule 3), and that *the Institute desires to be present to the world today as part of the Church's work in spreading the Gospel*; it also affirms that *John Baptist de La Salle gave a new meaning to the school by making it accessible to the poor and offering it to all as a sign of the Kingdom and as a means of salvation* (Rule 3); also *The Institute, is concerned above all for the educational needs of the poor as they strive to become aware of their dignity and to live and to be recognized as human beings and children of God. The Institute establishes, renews and diversifies its works according to what the Kingdom of God requires* (Rule 11).

I believe that these texts from our Rule gather together the best of the tradition of our origin, when our Founder told us forcefully: *What ought to engage you further to have great zeal in your state is the fact that you are not only ministers of God, but also of Jesus Christ and of the Church* (Meditation 201.2). He adds in the same Meditation: *You must also show the Church what love you have for her and give her proof of your zeal, since it is for the Church (which is the body of Christ) that you work. You have become her ministers according to the order God has given you to dispense his word* (Meditation 201.2). Our first Brothers, in the letter of 1714 that they sent to the Founder to again take up the leadership of the Institute showed by their words that this spirit had penetrated them deeply and marked their lives; they told him to return, *bearing in mind the greater glory of God, the greater good of the Church and of our Society...and they stated: Everyone is convinced that God has granted you the necessary grace and talent to govern this new enterprise, which is so useful for the Church.*

It seems to me that among our personal convictions we should feel that we are ministers of the Church, sent by her as an evangelizing presence and we should seek the greater good of the Church since we work for her. This should always be the case, no matter the religious context in which we find ourselves. Only the form changes. Whenever possible, explicitly proposing without imposing, and when this is not possible, we do it indirectly, working for the Kingdom, that dream of God of a world where we all feel that we are sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters among ourselves in a reconciled creation. A Kingdom that

was the principal objective of the preaching of Jesus and, therefore, the ultimate objective of the Church, which in the words of John Paul II is, the seed, sign and instrument of the Kingdom (Redemptoris Missio, 18), and which is made manifest in an attitude of respect, welcoming, dialogue, of unconditional tenderness, openness to differences. We are always called to open our horizons and to not close in on ourselves in a ghetto. *Our religious life feels itself called by the desire to go: there, to the borders; to be close to people, to their problems and hopes; to descend below, to meet the needy; to go inside, in the compassion of God for his children* (Carlos del Valle, SVD).

We cannot separate Church and Kingdom. *They are not the same but nevertheless, just as the Church cannot separate herself from the Kingdom she serves, neither can the Kingdom separate itself from the Church in which it is received. Diversity and, at the same time, inseparability seem to be the correct understanding of the relationship between both realities which the Council assumes and contributes to theology* (Carlos Palacio, SJ).

To speak about the Kingdom is to raise the issue of the tension between the present and future. The Kingdom as the ultimate reality but already present in history. An eschatological reality but also a historical one. Jesus insisted on the presence of the Kingdom starting from now (Mark 4: 30 - 32; Matthew 13: 31; Luke 17: 21)... Our ministry is not only to work for the Kingdom but to discover its presence within and outside of the Church. *Are we able to realize the presence of the Kingdom? God does not need us so much for establishing the Kingdom as for noticing its presence among us.*

If we are nurtured by the Kingdom we will be able to discern its presence in our daily experience, we will be able to perceive its presence, to show it and to give witness to it in the midst of the lives of persons (Lohfink).

What is important is to not forget the universal design of salvation and the mysterious paths of the Spirit, which blows where it wills. Therefore, as Bruno Forte tells us: *This concept motivates an attitude of openness and profound respect (for other religions), it takes note of the different kinds of worlds that are lived there, aware that Christ handed himself over to death for everyone and that the gift that the Father made of him to the world is made known fully and is updated by means of the Church, but also knowing that the Spirit also acts outside the Church's visible limits.* The fundamental criterion for all is the law of love, so that in a way we can state that without fraternity there is no salvation.

As Brothers we make our contribution to building the Kingdom when we are witnesses to Jesus, whom we can think about as the incarnated Kingdom. He is the Kingdom already. We do this when we proclaim his Word, when in community we live fraternity and we even anticipate it, when we offer an alternative model of society based on Gospel values, since, as Saint Paul says, *the Kingdom is justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit* (Romans 14: 17), when we serve the poor to whom the Kingdom belongs as Jesus said in the first beatitude and as Saint James reminds us: *Listen, my beloved brothers. Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him* (James 2: 5)?

I would like to spend some time with two meditations that seem to me to be very current and effective in our service to God's Kingdom. This task of humanizing and caring for creation and instilling this in others is more important today than ever.

• ***To Humanize is to Evangelize***

Paul VI reminded us of this in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* as did the Brothers themselves more than forty years ago in the *Declaration*. The *Declaration* tells us that to work in educating free persons is already preparing them in the faith, that we evangelize when we awaken convictions in young people, a reflection of what is really valuable in their existence, the sublime which is their human destiny, when we help them to find the truth, to conquer their own freedom, to know how to listen, love, serve others, when they are inculcated with a love for justice, fraternity, fidelity. *Opening people to life, to knowledge, and to love is already doing God's work, whose kingdom is not built by the activity of the Church alone, but also by work in the world* (Declaration 41.3).

Not to make differences, as the Founder invited us, acquires here a special value and it is part of God's work that we are called to do. That is why the *Declaration* concludes this section by telling us: *To develop in people an awareness of the world and of life, to bring them to marvel at the beauty of creation, the diversity and richness of art, the conquests of science and technology, the depth of human thought and reflection, the varieties of civilizations and cultures, to prepare them to experience the joys of friendship and to give of them-*

selves to others – such are the ways whereby people are led to recognize “the word of God who, before he became flesh in order to save all things and to sum them up in himself, was already in the world as the true light that enlightens every one (John 1: 9)” (Gaudium et Spes 57; Declaration 41.3).

More than words, experiences are convincing. For that reason I want to share the testimony of Vinesh Naidu, a young person of the Hindu religion and coordinator of the Young Lasallians Services of Malaysia. He tells us of his experience as he participates in the Lasallian educational mission in a multi-religious context: *Thirteen years of integral Lasallian education have greatly helped me to form my mind and heart to be the person I am today. Those years have created in me the need to be aware of the power there is when one becomes interested in the very needy.*

The life of De La Salle is a model and his message is sufficiently universal to transcend race and religion. The society of Malaysia is multi-racial and multi-religious and a Lasallian education here is an excellent example of how different races and cultures can join together and share a common fraternity and brotherhood that goes beyond the limits of religion and race.

My classmates were Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus. Race, religion and creed were not anything we were conscious about nor did we see any need to worry about them. Our Lasallian education considered us all as equals. I am a practicing Hindu and today I work in the Lasallian mission as a youth coordinator. I have taken strength from De La Salle’s life and I am enriched in my personal faith life.

My attitude concerning the Lasallian mission is to touch, move, and inspire people according to my own ability. To work with and for the lay mission gives me a very broad field to spread the idea of spirituality, especially when working with the last, the lost and the least in the society in which I live. I am convinced that Lasallian spirituality is more valid than ever for today's society.

This very revealing testimony reminds us that there are many Brothers and other Lasallians who do their educational mission with young people of other religions. On the level of ecumenism, our schools and universities have played an extraordinary role as a Church presence and as institutions that are in dialogue with life. The unity of Christians continues to be a priority and, as the former Patriarch of Jerusalem Michel Sabah has said: *Is it not worth more to take one step together than three alone?*

In terms of interreligious dialogue, we have schools where the majority of students are Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or a mixture of different religions. I am convinced that they represent one of the most wonderful presences of the Church. The same as with the Founder, in these environments it is not the controversy of ideas that interests us, but only and starting from a life dialogue, offering children and young people possibilities for their full development so that *they might have life and have it in abundance*. As we facilitate dialogue, tolerance and mutual respect, these works offer the world an inestimable service. Without forgetting the above, we ought to feel, at the same time, very close to and in solidarity with those Christians such as those in India or Pak-

istan who have recently suffered persecution and even death.

In any case, our world today is going through a process of incredible dehumanization towards which we cannot remain indifferent. Today it is important that we offer a human, integrated policy based on ethics. As the philosopher Edgar Morin said, it is about a policy with *a sense of value and a poetic quality of life*, as we face the fragmentation of “homo economicus” who favors a view of utilitarian and quantitative development. A policy that promotes a deep planetary solidarity.

We should not forget that we are part of the Church that wants to present herself as an “*expert in humanity*.” Therefore, humanism should characterize the Church in her members and institutions, it is not something we can take or leave, to give importance to it or not, but it is a fundamental dimension and an integral part of their identity, because it is the historical presence of Jesus, a human par excellence. The passion for humanity that should characterize us today is above all tenderness, solidarity, warmth, presence, a welcoming spirit, accompaniment.

If we fix our eyes on Jesus, the perfect example of our faith, we can discover his profound humanity, his special sensitivity to the poor, the marginalized, the least loved. *What was lacking, according to the vision of Jesus, was not to accuse but to heal. Jesus did not see sin and guilt in others, but a wounded and broken condition, and also infirmity, confusion and fear. Those who were sinners according to the scribes and pharisees Jesus saw as sick people who were in need of a physi-*

cian. The healthy do not need a doctor but the sick do. I have not come to call the just but sinners (Mark 2: 14) (Albert Nolan). Compassion was his chief trait and it should continue to be the principal trait of the Church and of religious life, called to follow his steps.

• ***New heavens and a new earth (Revelation 21: 1)***

*We will share the earth, beauty, love.
All of this tastes like bread,
has the form of bread, the germination of flour.
Everything came into being to be shared,
to be given, to be multiplied.
(Oda al Pan, Pablo Neruda)*

In recent months I have received a suggestion from various Brothers to say a word about the care of creation, which no doubt today should be an integrated part of our educational ministry and there is also no doubt that this is a way of collaborating in building the Kingdom, that the entire creation is made manifest in *eager longing*. Saint Paul tells us this clearly: *In hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now* (Romans 8: 20 - 22). The saving design of God, the Kingdom of God is not outside of creation. This, too, is called to be transformed, and therefore we can talk about new heavens and a new earth. This assumes a commitment to our world and to our history, the coordinates of God's saving plan.

The Church makes this call to us also today, and Benedict XVI made it to young people during his visit to Loreto: *The future of the planet is entrusted to the new generations, a planet in which the signs of the development of the delicate balance of nature have not always been taken into account. Before it is too late, it is necessary to take bold measures that can reestablish a strong covenant between humankind and the earth. A decisive “yes” is needed for the protection of creation and a strong commitment to reverse the trends that can lead to degradation.* The Pope made special mention of the poor who could have the most to lose in this situation: *Currently, the gift of God’s creation is subject to serious dangers and lifestyles that degrade it. Environmental contamination is making the lives of the world’s poor particularly untenable...we must promise to care for Creation and to share its resources in solidarity.*

Without a doubt the concern for climate change and its consequences should be part of the educational curriculum of our schools, as well as the interiorization of attitudes of respect, gratitude, love and solicitude for our mother earth. We all need to make an effort in this regard as the Guarani Indians of Paraguay said as we search for an *earth without evil*. It has to do with a covenant with creation and a decisive “yes” for its care. The earth is our common house, we are fulfilled in it, we meet others in it, and there we discover God.

We have the duty to awaken in young people a sense of solidarity for sharing their resources and for taking the means, no matter how small or disproportionate they seem to be, to leave future generations a habitable world. And we need to learn this point from young people, as Cardinal Martini

tells us: *Young people lead us forward in the direction of justice. Who warns industries about the destruction of the environment and who participates in protests? Young people have a new and sensitive awareness of what we theologians call creation. In this point we can allow ourselves to be dragged along by the young.*

3. Our Mission in the Church: Messengers and Apostles

We can ask ourselves what was our Founder's experience of the Church? Seventeenth century France was marked by a great pastoral reform inspired in Sulpician spirituality and in great saints who were reformers, among them our Founder. At the time he resigned his canonry, he discovered a new model of Church with which he identified, the Church of the simple and poor. The discernment he underwent at that time, as Brother Miguel Campos has recorded for us, made him discover a provident God attentive to the needs of the poor and the small, a God who wanted all to be saved. In his discernment he never separated the glory of God from the good of the Church. With the first Brothers he believed that *the glory of the Triune God is the center and the origin from where their common history stems. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom they consecrate themselves, to procure their glory. If associates and the poor are the relational context of discernment, God present in history is their reason for being. It is God who calls them, convenes them and consecrates them.*

At a historical time marked by doctrinal tensions such as Jansenism and Gallicanism, our Founder did not enter into

theoretical discussion, but his concern was that children and young people achieve salvation. Surely the legacy of the French school of spirituality will mark his decisions that would be carried out little by little, as he himself confesses, *from commitment to commitment*, to get involved in a very different world: the world of teachers without resources and with little preparation for their role, abandoned children and young people, the families of workers, young people without greater goals.

It is in this Church context where we need to place the spiritual writings on the Church left to us by the Founder. These writings had a clear pastoral vision and they were aimed at the ministry which the Church entrusted to us.

• **Guardian Angels:** *You share in the ministry of the Guardian Angels by making known to children the truths of the Gospel, which you have been chosen by God to announce. You must teach them how to put these truths into practice and you must have a very great zeal to procure the accomplishment of this practice for them* (Meditation 198.2).

Brother Miguel Campos, in a wonderful reflection on Lasallian discernment which was presented at the 2006 International Assembly on Lasallian Mission and Association, told us the following as he commented on the two Meditations in which our Founder invites us to be Guardian Angels for our students and to connect our ministry with that role: *The messenger “Angels” are those who are familiar with the situations of children and young people, of the world, and who are familiar with God’s mysterious plan. They are mes-*

sengers who know and who reveal, who go up to mediate and come down to reveal. Teachers who know God's mysterious plan and who know the human situation. Teachers who incarnate and who transcend.

To go up to mediate and come down to reveal, teachers who incarnate and who transcend. *You must do the same thing for the children entrusted to your care. It is your duty to go up to God every day by prayer to learn from him all that you must teach your children, and then come down to them by accommodating yourself to their level in order to instruct them about what God has communicated to you for them in your prayer as well as in the Holy Scriptures, which contain the truths of religion and the maxims of the holy Gospel (Meditation 198.1).*

It seems to me that there is no better way to describe the mission which the Lord in his kindness has entrusted to us. We are called like Angels to be mediators and messengers and, for that to happen, we have to know precisely the areas we are trying to unite: the kindness of God and the frailty of children and young people. As I was reading Meditations 197 and 198 again, what impressed me the most was, on the one hand, the descriptions that these two meditations make, in a tone that may seem to be too pessimistic about the frailness and vulnerability of children and, on the other hand, the repetitive insistence about our being the mediators of the Gospel. This last idea is repeated nine times in these two meditations.

Surely today we have a more positive view of the situations

of children and of human nature, but it is no less true that children continue to be the weakest link in many senses of the word, and vulnerable in our society and, therefore, the call of the Founder continue to be fully valid. The importance we have given to the defense of the rights of children in recent years makes us see more forcefully than ever the need to be mediators and messengers of God, close to the young, able to lend a hand, witnesses of the compassion and tenderness of the Father. *Admire this goodness of God, providing for all the needs of his creatures, taking the means to procure for us the knowledge of the true good, that is, the salvation of our souls. Offer yourselves to him for this purpose, to assist the children entrusted to you as far as he will require of you* (Meditation 197.1).

The Founder also insists that we do not involve ourselves in this area with theories and lucubrations, that we need to get down to the practical level, that in a certain sense we need to become children and to matriculate in their schools since they are also our teachers, accommodating ourselves to their age and discovering God's face in their person: *Such is the function you ought to perform for your disciples. It is your duty to act toward them as your Guardian Angels act toward you. You must win them to practice the maxims of the holy Gospel, and to this end you must give them means which are easy and accommodated to their age* (Meditation 197.2).

As Guardian Angels, we are also called to be mentors. One of the best icons in this regard is that of Raphael who accompanies the young Tobit. To accompany the young is one of our most important missions. We know how diffi-

cult it is to be young today and how many of them find themselves in a desert with no reference points nor any sense of meaning, almost abandoned to their fate: *Young people need companions on the journey, people who share bread and life wisdom with them, who share a profound spiritual experience, who teach them to pray and to contemplate, to read events of their own lives in the light of faith, above all during those critical years in which their faith will be assailed by relativism, pluralism, indifference and other challenges that post-modern times will present to them* (Pedro Castillo, CM).

The secret of accompaniment is in seeing that each person accept himself as a unique person who needs to contribute his own gift to others, because if he does not do this no one will be able to do it for him and there will be a void in history. To accompany is, therefore, to make the young people feel that they are not alone, that they are valuable and irreplaceable and that they have a mission to complete. To accompany is to help the young know themselves, to appreciate themselves and to face life with Gospel values or, as the Founder tells us in his meditations in the language of his time, with the *maxims of the Gospel*. The Vincentian mentioned above tells us that to accompany the young we need to accept, reverently, God's invitation to Moses before the burning bush: *Take off your shoes, for the ground on which you stand is holy* (Exodus 3: 5). We are before a mystery we can approach only with amazement, humility, respect, and with an attitude of not only giving but also of receiving. To accompany is an act of profound love, of that love that make us say along with Gabriel Marcel: *You will never die*.

To accompany the young is to help them face the most important questions that arise for humans. Cardinal Martini in his book *Night Discussions in Jerusalem*, gives us some examples: *How do I find my true path, What is my task in life? How do I learn to love myself and others? How do I get the strength not to succumb in conflict situations – in the real world as it is – but to be stronger, to change something with the force of hope? How do I go forward each day in faith, hope and love? What love do I have and how can I give it to others?*

To be a mentor for the young has no age limits. The wisdom of years can be a very valuable tool in this ministry. Let us not forget that in today's society, the relationship of grandparents to grandchildren tends to substitute in many cases for that of parents to children.

• **Ministers of the Word:** *Consider that since you should be working in your ministry for the building of the Church on the foundation which has been laid by the holy apostles by the instruction you are giving to the children whom God has entrusted to your care and who are entering into the construction of this building, you must do your work as the apostles carried out their ministry (Meditation 200.1).*

As Brother Luke Salm reminded us, one of the most surprising elements in De La Salle's Meditations for feasts of the apostles and for the Time of Retreat is the boldness of relating the Brother's vocation with the ministry of the apostles. This is a repeated topic in Meditations 199 and 200. An analogy is also made of our ministry with that of

Saint Paul when the Founder tells us: *Without comparing yourself to this great saint (and keeping in mind the due proportion between your work and his), you can say that you are doing the same thing, and that you are fulfilling the same ministry in your profession. You must, then, look upon your work as one of the most important in the Church, one which has been entrusted to you by pastors, by fathers and mothers* (Meditation 199.1).

Faith is a gift from God and we are called to accompany it as it matures and grows. Father Arrupe said: *An effective apostolate is not proportionate to what humans do, but to what humans let God do. It is the strategy of recognized weakness and of being convinced of the strength of our experience of God.* Jesus told us in the Gospel: *Everything that the Father gives me will come to me* (John 6: 37). This deals with a loving, inner attraction, it describes that spark that ignites when two people fall in love. Jeremiah described this relationship between God and Israel in these words: *I have loved you with an everlasting love* (Jeremiah 31: 3).

This is the basic essence of faith; it is up to us to facilitate in children, young people and all those who are the object of our mission that attraction of the Father in their hearts. This is not about an external assignment, of a rational conviction, an imposed obligation or a moral imperative but rather a spark of love, capable of igniting one's life. Therefore faith *is not a serene and discounted presence, it is an acceptance of God's great surprises that often disconcert our criteria and our opinions and that invite us to recognize God in persons and at the most unexpected times as "Joseph's son."* An

English writer, Henry Dawson, correctly stated that “faith is not a serene and comfortable inclination within us. But the concerns of the angel are one thousand times gentler than the animal’s calm” (Gianfranco Ravasi).

The Founder in Meditations 199 and 200 presents four priorities to us that are inspired in the practices of the apostles that we should continue: catechesis, sacramental life, initiation in prayer and a Christian commitment to life. *You, then, who have succeeded the apostles in their work of catechizing and instructing the poor, if you want to make your ministry as useful to the Church as it can be, you must every day teach them catechism, helping them learn the basic truths of our religion... (Meditation 200.1). The chief care, then, of the apostles, after instructing the first faithful, was to have them receive the sacraments, assemble for prayer together, and live according to the Christian spirit. Above everything else, this is what you are obliged to do in your work... (Meditation 200.2).*

These four priorities continue to be just as current today. Nevertheless, in today’s climate which tends to become more and more secularized, even on those continents that for the time being are giving more importance to religious values, these priorities should be central in our community witness.

I believe that God’s word is what can unify all these dimensions and that our principal ministry is to be Ministers of the Word. *It is obvious that one of the privileged ways that has wide impact is the Word of God contained in Scripture, through a reading method that can relate the text with life. A religious life that dares to be seen as a community of persons*

who live under the primacy of God's Word, who are able to share a human and humanizing life in charity is, certainly, the greatest help that young people can receive in the midst of their searching. For this to happen it is necessary that religious communities take on an attitude of profound sympathy toward all that is human and that they believe – because they experience it – that the Gospel can guide and give full meaning to all that is human (Enzo Bianchi, Prior of the Bose community, VR, July-September 2009, page 36).

Along these same lines Cardinal Martini tells us: For myself, the basis of Christian education is the Bible. If that is the basis, there are many possibilities and paths that lead everyone to God. If we do not think in Bible terms, then we become narrow-minded, acquiring blinders in place of broad-minded views of God. He adds: God leads us to fullness when we listen to Jesus and we look at the poor, to those who are oppressed, to the ill, when we reach out to them and have physical contact with them. It is then that God teaches us to think broadly.

Previously, I quoted from Cardinal Martini's book *Night Discussions in Jerusalem*. I believe that every Brother should read it. It is a high-stakes wager on young people and an act of faith in and love for the Church. *There was a time – he tells us – when I dreamed about a Church that was poor and humble, that did not depend on powers of this world. A Church that gave space to persons who thought broadly. A Church that passed on values, especially to those who thought themselves small or in sin. A young Church. Today I no longer have those dreams. After 75 years I have decided to pray for the Church.* But the Cardinal asks young people to be dreaming prophets, able to com-

mit themselves and to be critics in order to move forward and in that way they will keep us open to the surprises of the Spirit. Among some of his thoughts about young people, I would like to highlight the following:

- *In the diocese of Milan young people have helped me greatly to look for answers to new questions (page 16).*

- *In responding to the question: If Jesus were to come now, what would be his most urgent concern? I believe that he would really wake up “comfortable” young people and that he would convince them to change the world along with him. Change the world means to free humankind from fear...Above all, to give men and women a place where they would feel protected, no matter whether they were small children, foreigners, senior citizens, dying or ill. I believe that Jesus would look for this response among the strongest, first and foremost among young people (page 41).*

- *What has helped me most to be Christian is working with young people (page 43).*

- *I am very happy that there are many Catholic communities that are alive and that also have many young people and that there is a good youth ministry program. Nevertheless, we cannot lose sight of the fact that in recent decades the Church has lost many young people. I wonder how we can get them back (page 69).*

- *Young people have something to tell us. They are the Church, with an independence that may or may not coincide with our thoughts and our actions or with ecclesiastical prescriptions.*

Dialogue among equals and not from the position of a superior to an inferior will guarantee the dynamism of the Church (pages 76 - 77).

- *What is surprising is that more and more young people are enthusiastic about leading other young people and about being attentive about others who may be in difficult situations. For them it is a marvelous experience to see how easy it is to gain trust, when they hear about how happy these youth are when someone listens to them (page 84).*

- *Perhaps we should start from the difficulties and questions from young people and not from what they are being taught (page 89).*

- *We cannot teach anything to young people: what we can do is help them listen to their interior teacher. These are the words of Saint Augustine and they sound strange. He expressly says that we can only create the conditions in which a young person might understand. Understanding must come to them from the inside (page 91).*

- *We can only open ourselves to young people starting from where they are. What are their interests? Where do they live? What are their relationships like? What are they critical about and what commitments do they demand of us? (page 94)*

- *To be frank, I am concerned about the lack of courage... What I would say to young people and to the Church is... Be courageous! Take the risk! Risk your life! Who else would put his/her life on the line except those who are rooted in God? (pages 98, 100)*

- *If I help a human being, I then sense what makes me strong... The first task of social and charitable institutions to everyone of good will – and in first place to the young – is to provide them with persons and situations that they need (page 191).*

4. Our community: a domestic Church

Often pray to Saint Michael to have the goodness to protect this little family, this Church of Jesus Christ according to the expression of Saint Paul, which is our community, that he give it the means of preserving within itself the spirit of Jesus Christ, and to all its members the graces they need to persevere in their vocation, and procure the spirit of Christianity for all those who are under their guidance (Meditation 169.3 for the Feast of Saint Michael the Archangel).

If our mission in the Church is to be Messengers and Apostles who are involved in building the Kingdom, especially in the hearts of poor children and young people, this does not mean that our Church connection ends here. This also has an important community aspect. We cannot separate Mission from Communion; we make and we are the Church. It is deeply moving to see that how for our Founder, each community of Brothers, no matter how small, is a presence of the Church, a small family, the Church of Jesus Christ, a living cell of the organized Church. It is a real challenge that allows us to better grasp that our community life itself and the witness of fraternity that we live is a constitutive part of our mission and a foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

Vatican II uses the expression *domestic Church* to describe the family where the parents should be, by word and example, the first preachers of the faith to their children (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). Saint John Baptist de La Salle says something similar to us when he reminds us that our community is the privileged place where the Gospel is lived, where we support one another mutually with reciprocal affection.

In this sense we can recall that one of the means of recalling the presence of God that the Founder proposes to us, is to recall the presence of Jesus Christ in the midst of those who are gathered in his name thanks to the Spirit. Here he does not use the word Church, but there is no doubt that he is describing a Church reality. It is about that small family in which Jesus Christ is in the midst of the Brothers to give them his Spirit, to encourage them in their mission and in all their actions, to keep them united, to reinforce them in their vocation, to teach them the maxims of the Gospel and to commit them to his practice, so that they might be one in Him (cf. Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer, 24 - 32).

• ***Our small Church***

Our community, that small Church should radiate faith, hope, and love. We should strengthen the visibility of our communities. Many times we are recognized by for what we do and, generally, this is very good; fewer times are we recognized for who we are. What do young people know about our prayer life and about how we share the experience of God? About our living together as Brothers, sup-

porting and loving one another? We should make visible the community dimension, that dimension that makes us the Church of Jesus Christ. The Spanish theologian Luis González-Carvajal Santabárbara tells us that evangelization in the future will be based more and more on the “*come and see*” model (cf. John 1: 39); come to my community and you will discover an alternative lifestyle, characterized by:

- *Familiarity with God* “which makes us cry out Abba, Father!” (Romans 8: 15).
- *Human equality*: “As for you, do not be called ‘Rabbi.’ You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called ‘Master’; you have but one master, the Messiah” (Matthew 23: 8 - 10).
- *Service*: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave” (Matthew 20: 25 - 28).
- *Freedom*: “For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5: 1).
- *Sharing* as opposed to *having*, like those first Christians who “All who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2: 44).

- *Unconditional love*: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (John 13: 34), that is to say, even if you have to give your life for others (John 15: 13).

As a small Church, we are also the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Dwelling Place of the Spirit. As the People of God, we are on a historical pilgrimage, carrying within us the joy and happiness, the pain and anguish of all humankind. We are pilgrims in search of a final homeland, and this makes us feel that we are on the move as we diminish the importance of many things, always going towards the utopia of the Kingdom. As members of religious life we are called to be aware of the pilgrim condition of the Church, responding with initiative and creativity to the calls of God in history. As pilgrims we should concern ourselves so that no one is orphaned along the road; that is the basis for our preferential love for the poor, the small, the fallen.

As the Body of Christ, we are characterized by fraternity which assures unity and communion. Joining forces for the mission, friendship, open dialogue, vital, fraternal and expressive relationships, co-responsibility, shared mission, association for the educational service of the poor, starting from different vocations within concentric circles that are more and more broad within a common search.

As the Dwelling Place of the Spirit, we are characterized by being witness of the transcendent, interior men, visible witnesses of the maternal face of God, making real what was asked of us by our last General Chapter: *We are called to be*

companions for others along the pathway of their own spirituality. We need Brothers and communities that live the Gospel authentically. We need Brothers and communities that unleash an unstoppable process of conversion that will help us to respond to what God asks of us! (44th General Chapter, page 14, 2.9).

• **Love the Church: The Church is our mother (Meditation 106.1).**

If the Church is our mother, we need to be deeply united to her, the Founder tells us. But at the same time he invites us to have, in vital imitation of Christ, a spousal love for her. The Founder presents us with a mystical view of the relationship inspired in the words of Saint Paul. If Christ loved the Church and delivered himself up for her, we should contribute, according to all our strength, to *purify her by the word of life, so that she may be able to appear before him full of glory without stain, without wrinkle, and without any defect, but completely pure and completely beautiful* (Meditation 205.3). The Founder invites us to make manifest the love we have for the Church in our unconditional commitment to the children and young people we teach. *Act in such a way through your zeal that you give tangible proof that you love those whom God has entrusted to you, just as Jesus Christ has loved his Church* (Meditation 201.2). The best way for us to express our love for the Church is through our burning zeal in the service of children, young people and all those whom the Lord has confided to our care. It is about love made history, reflected in many faces, especially those of the poor, that makes us go out of ourselves and live for others. It is a love that is neither platon-

ic nor blind. We sense that the Church is both holy and sinful, divine in her origin, human and fragile in her members, she has set up her tent in our mud...she is young and at times she is tired, and once in a while she disappoints us and we would want her to be more Gospel-like, but she is always our mother, and we feel that we are in the same boat and on the same adventure as children, with our own inconsistencies which are judged from within and not like judges that condemn her from outside.

Father Jesús María Lecea, who this year completed his ministry as Superior General of the Piarist Fathers, wrote to them in one of his letters: *To this Church, the one that exists, in spite of incoherence, infidelity and even sin, all united in the witness of holiness, we owe the transmission of the Gospel and of the person and life of the Word incarnate, Christ Jesus. A story is told of Jacques Maritain, having just converted to Catholicism, was rebuked by a friend of his who said that it was foolish and meaningless to inscribe his name in an institution so despicable as the Church. He responded: "I have discovered in Christ the precious pearl and I have found this in the Church; even though it might be like a dunghill I would plunge my head into it in the hope of catching it." There is a "mystery of faith" in love for the Church and in belonging to it.*

One of the most impressive testimonies of his love for the Church was that of Paul VI who, along with his testament, left a meditation on death in which he expressed his deep love for the Church. When he died, his meditation was published and I remember the profound impression it

made on me when I was a young Brother in my first community. *Therefore I beg the Lord to give me the grace to make of my impending death a gift of love for the Church. I can say that I have always loved the Church; it was love for her that took me out of my small-mindedness and selfishness and put me on the road to service; I have lived for none other than for the Church. But I would want the Church to know this; and if I had the strength to say it to her, as a heartfelt confidence that only in life's last moment would one have the courage to do. Finally, I would want to include all this in her history, in her divine plan, in her final destination, in her complex, total and unitary composition, in her human and imperfect make-up, in her misfortune and suffering, in the weakness and the poverty of so many of her children, in her less sympathetic aspects and in her constant fidelity, love, perfection and charity. The mystical body of Christ. I would want to embrace her, love her in each of the beings that make her up...* (Paul VI, Meditation on Death).

At the same time, as Brothers and as a community, a small family, the Church of Jesus Christ, we should work to make that Church that we all dream about a reality. A Church community of communities, whose heart is based on the Beatitudes, whose face is lovingly compassionate. A modest Church without pretensions of grandeur just like the mustard seed; a Church that does not exclude nor discriminate; where the last are first as in the Gospel; concerned, above all, for those who have left their homes and those who do not want to enter, like “prodigal” father in the parable with his two sons, or like the good shepherd with the lost sheep.

When I participated in one of the two meetings of young Lasallians in Turin, Italy two years ago, we visited the “Peace Arsenal,” a military structure transformed into a welcoming center for young people and an assistance facility for the abandoned. We were all very impressed. It was facility transformed into one that offers peace and service. Its founder is Ernesto Olivero, who also founded the Youth Missionary Service for volunteers. His words, his vision, his dream of the Church are backed up by a witness of an exceptional life: *For many today the Church is synonymous with severity, boredom, prohibitions. It would be wonderful, on the contrary, if people could see the Church with open arms, as Jesus thought about the Church. When Jesus said: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11: 28), he showed the true face of the Church. If a man lives in unending anguish, who can lend him a hand? If he is divorced, what future can he have within the Church? If a kid is struggling with homosexuality, if his body is exploding with feelings, who can help him or liberate him? If a former prisoner who murdered someone, after having paid his debt, continues having sleepless nights due to his remorse, who can calm him down? If thousands of young people are attracted to self-destruction, who can look them in the eyes with tenderness and listen to them? If men and women in the Church have a stick in their hands, judgment on their lips, hardness of heart, and are very severe, to whom will these people go? Possibly to a fortune-teller, or a guru, or to some sect, but not to the Church.*

Therefore, Ernesto Olivero and his movement are fighting for a Church that has the great heart of the Father, the compassion of Jesus, especially towards the lost, the love of the

Spirit, the welcoming of Mary. We can also ask ourselves: What image of the Church do we project?

5. Lasallian Icons to bring the Kingdom into the present time:

As in previous years, I would like to conclude this letter by sharing with you some icons that may serve as guides in our ministry of being messengers and apostles to bring the Kingdom into the present time.

• **Successors of the Apostles:** *Thank God for the grace he has given you in your work, of sharing in the ministry of the holy apostles and the principal bishops and pastors of the Church. Honor your ministry by making yourselves, as Saint Paul says, worthy ministers of the New Testament (Meditation 199.3).*

It is the Founder himself who proposes this icon. Once again, Brother Luke Salm tells us: *In his meditations composed for the Brothers, De La Salle proposes the figure of the Apostles as a source and model of particular practices for the spiritual life. He proposes Peter as the model of the spirit of faith, John for his love for Jesus and devotion to Mary...Paul for his apostolic zeal.* I will limit myself to focus on some of them that seem to me to be very current for us today.

As in the primitive Church and the experience of the apostles after Pentecost, I suspect that we have among ourselves some like James, who are more focused on the past and fearful of the future, afraid to open the doors beyond the com-

munity in Jerusalem and the Jewish world. Brothers who have difficulty opening themselves to a charism that does not belong to us exclusively and to a mission that today is the responsibility of Brothers and lay persons; to new initiatives that respond to the needs of the young, to the unpredictable blowing of the Spirit. Or some like Peter who are surprised when faced with innovations that come about, but at the beginning it is difficult to find a place for these innovations. Or some like Paul who open themselves to new roads and places, with unprecedented community perspectives, living side by side with those who previously did not belong to the Covenant. Personally I would like there to be more Pauls, especially among the younger Brothers.

I would also like to spend a bit of time on two other apostles who are especially significant for us – John and Andrew. John, the apostle of love, the friend of Jesus; Andrew, the companion on the journey. At the beginning of this letter I alluded to our identification with John the apostle. In the meditation that the Founder left us on Saint John, he insists in the love that Jesus showed him and he tells us that we also in our state need Jesus to honor us with his friendship; at the same time he invites us to address ourselves to Saint John in order to be worthy of the tenderness of the Virgin Mary (cf. Meditation 88).

Cardinal Martini, for his part, sees in John an icon for young people. He was young and we also know that one of the values that young people most appreciate today is friendship. John shows us that only love can lead us to Jesus. Despite his ambition in seeking the first place, he

knew how to be with Jesus at the time of his suffering and death. Love is always stronger than death. *The Church has to look today for burning hearts like that of John. From them something new will emerge. The Second Vatican Council was convoked by a Pope who had taken the name of the friend of Jesus. That Pope was so enthusiastic about Jesus that jumped over walls and give ample space to the action of the Spirit, which blows where it will. His boldness came from love. There is nothing else that I want with such desire than that today we encounter among the young some who feel that love, recognize it, and afterwards take the risk to make a great decision.*

Andrew is very human and that is the meaning of his name - someone who knows how to accompany. He accompanies the boy who had some bread and a few fish at the multiplication of the loaves (cf. John 6: 8 - 12), he brought his brother Peter to Jesus (cf. John 1: 40 - 42), he facilitated a group of blind people in their encounter with Jesus (cf. John 12: 20 - 22).

Andrew could be our model for knowing how to accompany our Brothers and young people. A direct type of accompaniment that leads to Jesus. *From his own experience he communicates what he has discovered. He proposes, without being pushy or trying to convince. Whoever listens to him will have to walk his own road, keep his distance, look at, contemplate, let himself be captivated by the person of Jesus...and then make his own decision. Andrew does not limit himself to dialogue and communication...but he encourages others to have the same experience: "Come and you will see" (John 1: 46). To encourage means to give inspiration, to give spirit, to en-*

thuse...and this is an important task for all who accompany. Encourage others with life and with words, by means of closeness, understanding, exigency and the silent witness of our own dedication (Pedro Castillo, CM).

We could not end this view of the apostles without remembering Mary, the mother of Jesus, icon of the Trinity and of the Church. The Acts of the Apostles perpetuates the presence of Mary along with the apostles during those very important days that preceded Pentecost: *All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers* (Acts 1: 14). Mary, like religious life, presents to us a different and complementary aspect of Church, not characterized by the hierarchical aspect but rather by her discreet presence that is with us in difficult and uncertain times and that in prayer places all trust in God. Truly her maternal example is inspiring for us, since we are invited by the Founder to have the tenderness of a mother and we are moved in the deepest part of our humanness to integrate the *animus* and the *anima* dwelling within us. As the Council Constitution *Lumen Gentium* tells us: *The Virgin in her own life lived an example of that maternal love, by which it behooves that all should be animated who cooperate in the apostolic mission of the Church for the regeneration of men* (LG 65).

Mary is the icon of the Trinity and of the Church because she reveals to us the profound and inscrutable mystery of God. A God who is compared to a mother who consoles, a mother who is incapable of forgetting the child of her womb, who at the end of history will wipe away the tears

from our eyes. The maternal dimension that we and the Church are called to make visible, starting from a perspective marked by more fraternal, more tender, more contemplative relationships in solidarity and communion with the earth. As Bruno Forte tells us: *In the school of Mary, the Church continuously learns about the style of a generous and attentive motherhood, of a love that does not hesitate, but which moves forward to the needs of humankind and tends to them concretely, giving them not only life, but joy and the meaning of life itself.*

- **Blessed Brother Rafael Louis Rafiringa:** *Therefore the missionary teacher should use everything in his country for the education of children: mountains and hills, plains and valleys, forests and jungles, the beautiful nature of the countryside, the singing of the birds, the cascading of the waterfalls, and the peaks of the high mountains, the beautiful sight of the sky at sunset...* (Brother Rafael Louis).

I had the good fortune in June to participate in the beatification ceremony of Brother Rafael Louis Rafiringa. I have an indelible memory of that Eucharist on the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity when, in the presence of over 200,000 persons, our Brother Rafael was raised to the altar. I was impressed by the singing, dancing, the respectful silence of this immense multitude of people. I also admired the Malagasy Church and our Brothers from the District of Antananarivo for the careful and inspiring way in which they prepared the different activities of those days. They were really days of grace and blessing.

Brother Rafael is also an icon for us in the way he lived out his belonging to the Church and in his dedication to young people as a teacher, catechist, and leader. During the time when foreign missionaries were expelled from the country, Brother Rafael was chosen as the President of the Catholic Union for Madagascar, directing the Church during a period of great opposition. A postulant of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny, after talking about the care he took of her and her companions so that they could continue their formation process, added: *For three years of absence from the mission, Brother Rafael was head of Christianity. Almost every Sunday he was the one who provided instruction and exhortation for the faithful. He was impressive in that his exhortations truly reignited the courage of the faithful* (Symphora Rafaraso).

I was especially struck by three viewpoints of our Blessed Brother, that seem to me to be very current today especially in those younger sectors of the Institute.

- His desire for an *inculturated evangelization* that was clearly expressed in a small book on missiology that he left us. Above all it reflects a deep love for his country and culture and he gives us an example: *Because uses and customs, the ways of each nation are not inventions of men but works of divine wisdom is why we should respect them.* He adds: *When one arrives in a country for his mission, missionaries should take, as it is said, the native peoples as they are, with their uses and customs, their habits, their ways, their language, and accompany them in the Christian religion, form Jesus Christ in them.* Recalling the Pentecost event, when each group heard the apostles in their own language, he said: *This event teaches us that the apostles and missionaries are successors*

when they carry the Gospel to other nations, they should practice the Christian religion there, without wanting to change any uses or habits. Brother Rafael insisted that Malagasy religious and priests *have an in-depth knowledge of the Malagasy language: without that, the Malagasy people will treat them like Malagasy puppets and not like true Malagasy people.*

- *The qualities that a missionary should have.* The first of all of them should be the constant seeking of God's will, of his plan of universal salvation and in this he should be perfectly obedient: *saying often in the midst of his apostolic work: I have not come to this country to do my will, but the will of God who sent me here through my superiors...obedient until death, renouncing my own spirit, ways, in order to immerse myself into the spirit of the country, in all things that are not contrary to God's law.* Furthermore, the missionary, he tells us, should have a deep faith life and be *a living teacher in all his being*; he should also possess an uncommon piety; a deep humility; a great detachment from all things; love for the cross; a broad view and an attitude of wanting to see his work continue. As we can see, the divine and the human fully integrated in accord with the Lasallian spirit of not making differentiation.
- *Advice for formation* appear often in his letters, especially those addressed to the European Brother Visitor. Very clearly, honestly and with a critical spirit he often points out aspects that, as an indigenous Brother, he thinks should not be neglected. Here he insists that the Malagasy style and mentality should be kept in mind. Thinking about the formation of Malagasy Brothers, he writes to the Brother Visitor, asking him to especially keep in mind four things. As we can see, the

goals he proposes are very demanding:

- *They should have more piety than an ordinary European Brother*, if they do not it will be difficult for them to persevere since they will be more exposed than Brothers who come from abroad. I am talking about a type of piety rooted in strong convictions.
- *They should receive a manly formation and be cultured*, and for this to happen I would suggest a basic philosophy and the broad development of their intellectual faculties.
- *They should know the Malagasy language and literature in depth*. We can see that this is a recurring theme to which he devotes much space and interest. He is interested that the young Brothers are able to speak in public and be respected and he tells us that if this is not the case they might put their perseverance in jeopardy since disdain kills.
- Finally, he touches on the theme of ongoing formation: *No matter what knowledge a Malagasy Brother may have...he should always continue cultivating all the gifts that Providence was kind enough to give him*.

Brother Rafael Louis was the first African Brother. He certainly is a model for all but I think especially for the Brothers from Africa and Madagascar. A man of God, an authentic Brother, an exemplary religious, a mystic and a prophet. I hope that his example and his protection may be a call to all the Brothers in this Region of the Institute that is awakening so many hopes, to live our ministry authentically as Messengers and Apostles, sent by the Church to make present the Kingdom of God on that

continent which is in such need of education, solidarity and compassion.

• ***Mauléon: To be servants here or there***

One of the best experiences I had this year was to be able to participate in the celebration of 125 years of the presence of the Brothers in Mauléon, France. This coincided with the closing of the community there, since in the coming months for reasons of greater presence the Brothers will go to different communities and the house will be closed. The calmness with which the Brothers are taking this and their fraternal quality as well as the leadership of their Brother Director impressed me a great deal.

The slogan chosen for this event – *To be servants here or there* – seems to me to capture well the spirit that animated the Brothers of the community, sad certainly for having to leave a house which for many was the Novitiate, and which during the Second World War was the Generalate from 1940 to 1946. Many Brothers emerged from that house as Messengers and Apostles for our works in France, to strengthen the District of Bilbao and for many faraway missions. Sad for the end of a period that lasted 125 years, but serene for knowing if one door closes, many more open and that they will be fraternally received. The important thing is not the here or there, but always being servants.

The presence of so many Brothers who came for the celebration, many of them former novices from there, as well as a good representation from the District of Bilbao, headed

by their Brother Visitors, was a show of fraternal support and esteem. But above all, the presence of the people from Mauléon who celebrated with the Brothers on this occasion, the recognition made by priests from there, the presence of the Bishop for the Eucharist, all were a testimony that the mission realized was worth the effort and was a visible sign of God's goodness for many. An expressive icon of the value of community life for the Church.

I will conclude this section with a statement from a Brother participant. I had asked him to give me some of his impressions about this event and they were published in the newsletter of the District of Bilbao: *That celebration made it clear to me about the meaning of our presence in this world: it shows that a community does not exist to do any particular type of work but to awaken hope or to offer direction. The people of Mauléon never knew any type of Lasallian school, as people often do in other places where Brothers are. All they knew about was the presence of our community and its efforts at preparing Christian teachers who would live in community in service of a town, region or territory. They did know about this and it was enough for them to experience that celebration as if our community had no secrets for them.*

That is the mission: to give witness to the faith with meaning, that is to say, in God. To give witness to it as a community and to do it in a simple, close way, not being pretentious, accepting of conditions of the place, dedicated, faithful. To show that we believe in God and in our people because we believe in others with whom we live. To those who want to see this, it tells them that life has meaning. Or that at least there are those who be-

lieve it and that persons are able to dedicate their lives to something (Brother Pedro Gil).

- **Latin America:** *We need a new Pentecost! We need to go out and meet persons, families, communities and nations to communicate to them and to share with them the gift of the encounter with Christ, who has filled our lives with “meaning,” truth and love, joy and hope!* (DA 548).

This year I made the pastoral visit to Latin America, accompanied by Brother Edgar Nicodem, General Councillor for this Region (RELAL). It was a time of grace and fraternity. I began this section with a text from Aparecida, the Fifth Latin-American Bishops’ Conference, which asked all Christians on this continent, representing 50% of all Christians throughout the world, to be *“disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that our peoples might have life in Him.”* Latin American is an icon for a Church that is close to people, attentive to the young, with a theology that starts from life and a cordial and affective spirituality.

Aparecida urges the necessity for a strong religious experience, community living, Biblical training in sharing the Word of God, missionary commitment for all starting from one’s own vocation. Elements that in other words we find expressed in our last General Chapter. These are providential convergences that allow us to discover God’s ways and the signs of the times for those to whom we must be attentive.

This year also we celebrate the 50th anniversary of CLAR (Latin-American Conference for Religious) which for the first time in its history has elected a Brother as President, our own Brother Paulo Petry from the District of Sao Paulo. This Conference, for its part, invites us to a religious life that is both mystical and prophetic. I believe that this double message needs to reach the heart of all Latin-American Brothers, and it goes in line with what the Founder has proposed to us in the Meditations that we wrote about in this letter.

Latin America is a Region of the Institute that has the most young Brothers. This fact is both a great hope and a strong challenge. Thanks be to God we have candidates in our houses of formation and I was impressed when I met with groups of postulants, novices, and scholastics...We cannot let them down and we need to care for them especially during their first years of community life and the years that follow perpetual profession. The pastoral ministry of vocations continues giving satisfactory results and, in general, it is a District priority. At the same time, the meeting with senior Brothers was a moving experience, in that they made manifest their deep love for the Institute, their witness of fidelity and their fraternal spirit.

I appreciated especially the commitment on the part of many young Brothers to pastoral ministry leadership roles in our works. It seems to me that we have made progress in this area and I am happy to see that we are conquering the temptation to entrust our Brothers only with administrative responsibilities which, whether we like it or not, does remove us somewhat from young people.

The Lasallian Region of Latin America is characterized by the creation of superior and university centers of education in recent years. I believe that it is a response to a need, made manifest in a request from the local Church, from a group of former students or from society itself. But to be Lasallian a university has to offer something different and it should give priority to degree courses that have a social, educational, or religious impact. Learning and research need to culminate in the transformation of reality. I had the joy of meeting with young university students and see for myself their desire to commit themselves to building a different world and their suggestions and desires that there be university programs along those lines.

As the Ninth IALU encounter in Philadelphia last June declared, none of our universities and centers are immune from the temptation to be elitist, from unsustainable growth, from appearing to be what we are not, from being content with a type of business excellence. To respond to these threats, we are called to continually review our being and actions, in light of the mission that has drawn us together. This implies, it seems to me, that we need to be more intentionally aware of that mission, at least with the same intensity with which we attend to academic quality and to financial resources for the work. What should distinguish us is Gospel excellence, and this is made manifest fundamentally in our option for the poor, the excluded, the unloved, for those who have fewer opportunities which makes their cause our own.

Poverty, unfortunately, has not diminished on the conti-

ment and the Institute, with creativity and effectiveness, needs to have its eyes very much open in order to respond to a vast number of needs. It was, therefore, a great joy to be able to visit new projects or renovated works, as well as to meet with youth groups committed to the service of the needy. I remember especially a meeting with young indigenous students in a boarding school taken over recently by the Brothers, where they welcome students from many distant villages, thereby giving them an opportunity which they otherwise would not be able to have. On this occasion many of them were accompanied by their parents. It was moving to listen to them. Another wonderful experience was participating in the inauguration of a Lasallian Educational Observatory for the rights of children and young people from Latin America and the Caribbean under the sponsorship of RELAL. This is a very concrete response to situations that are often tragic and to which we cannot be indifferent.

CONCLUSION

As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers (Matthew 23: 8).

As I conclude this letter I wanted to recall the text from the Founder already cited in which he invites us to go up and come down, like angels on Jacob's ladder. I think that these two dimensions are essential in our lives as Brothers, in our service to the Church and in our commitment to building the Kingdom. To go up because it is the Lord in whom we put our strength, with the certainty that, as the prophet Isa-

iah tells us: *Though young men faint and grow weary, and youths stagger and fall, they that hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar as with eagles' wings; They will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint* (Isaiah 40: 30 - 31). To go up to discover better in the silence of prayer God's saving plan, his will that all be saved, his dream of the Kingdom, the final objective for those who work for the Church, who go beyond their borders and who follow paths that many times escape us.

And to go down like Moses, with his face flushed for the encounter with the Transcendent, with a burning heart to be instruments of salvation wherever the Lord has placed us, in our direct work with children and young people, in our service to the poor, in sharing our charism, in explicit catechesis and/or in human formation, whatever the case may be, in our communities, in the serene atmosphere of our houses for senior Brothers. As Joan Chittister said, we need to get up and move permanently from *contemplative wisdom to compassionate action*. Without forgetting about the direct line of Jesus. *Our God is an incarnated God who has repeatedly come down to us: he has come down to the human and has gone down, within the human, to the lowest of the low, the poor and the weak. That going down is not accidental or fleeting, but it is in the going down in history that God has found his place...* (J. Sobrino).

The best gift we can give to the Church is to live the preceding as Brothers. As Brothers with a heart without borders, open to everyone with no desire to be above others. As Brothers who discover the presence of the Father in his

Word and in the Sacraments, but also in nature and in other religions and especially in the faces of the poor. As Brothers who do not impose but who accompany, making our own the advice of Saint Vincent de Paul: *Do not have any desire at all to seem superior or a master. I am not of the same opinion as a person who said to me, a few days ago, that in order to exercise and maintain his authority well it was necessary to point out that he was the superior. Oh, my God! Our Lord Jesus Christ never spoke like that; he taught us just the opposite by both word and example, telling us that he himself came not to be served but to serve others, and that he who wants to be first should be the servant of all* (cf. Mark 10: 44 - 45).

Consecrated by God the Trinity as a community of Brothers: messengers and apostles sent by the Church to make present the Kingdom of God, we continue the mission of Jesus making our own his call.

Become disciples of mine, not teachers.

Become persons, not slaves.

Become journeyers, not sitters.

Become servants, not bosses: BECOME BROTHERS.

Become seekers of truth, not masters of certainty.

Become poets, not pragmatists.

Become rooted people, not spectators: BECOME BROTHERS.

Become prophets, not courtiers.

Become restless people, not satisfied ones.

Become free people, not pettifogging lawyers.

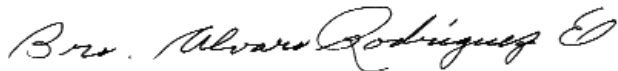
*Become Gospel-like people, not prophets of doom:
BECOME BROTHERS.*

*Become persons of encounter:
with hearts and tenderness,
with promises and hopes,
with presence and patience,
with a mission and a commission: BECOME
BROTHERS.*

*Become my disciples
Give to everyone all that I have given to you
and, therefore, become BROTHERS*

(Florentino Ulibarri, SJ).

Fraternally yours in De La Salle,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Bro. Álvaro Rodríguez Echerverría".

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echerverría
Superior General