

**BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS**

**PASTORAL LETTER TO THE BROTHERS**

**Consecrated by God the Trinity,  
as a Community of Brothers**

**Called to be witnesses of God's love**

**December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013**



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**Consecrated by God the Trinity  
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*Called to be witnesses of God's love*

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC  
Superior General  
December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013

*Therefore, since we have this ministry through the mercy shown us, we are not discouraged [...] For we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for the sake of Jesus. For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us (2 Corinthians 4: 1; 5 - 7).*

We Brothers have associated ourselves for the educational service of the poor, not through personal initiative but because we have been mercifully called by God the Trinity to this apostolic ministry as part of God's mysterious design. This makes us servants, through the love of Jesus, of children and young people, especially those who need us most and who are far from salvation. The face of God, which is love, should shine in our hearts and we must reflect this in our lives. In his discourse to the conclave, before his election, Pope Francis spoke about what he called "the mystery of the moon" which reminds us of the idea that the Fathers of the Church had when they said that the Church is like the moon and Christ is the sun. Therefore, the Church cannot be self-referential and neither can our Institute because the light we have is not our own, it is the light that comes to us in Jesus Christ as the sun. We are called to reflect the light of Jesus Christ and, through it, to dispel the darkness of ignorance, fear, sadness, discouragement and the lack of meaning and affectivity.

This is the concrete way of living out our consecration to the Trinity to seek its glory. This must be our fundamental option to which everything else must be subordinated. We are inhabited beings, we carry within us a great treasure, but in earthen vessels. Pope Francis recalled this in one of his Tweets: *We are earthen vessels, fragile, poor, but inside we carry a great treasure* (August 9, 2013).

This treasure is one that we cannot keep for ourselves in a narcissistic way but we must share it. The Founder, in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, about which we have reflected in the past six Pastoral Letters, gives us some inspiration and means for doing so. Only a heart that is completely converted to God and focused on Him will be able to sense God's work in persons and in history, and will respond with evangelical creativity to God incarnate in concrete situations and in the needs of children and young people today, as the Founder did and as the Brothers have done for so many generations.

The face of God and the faces of children and young people should be for us a kind of God-enlightened revelation. The face of God reflected in the face of the poor and the small. It is difficult to separate one from the other without becoming reductionist. Paul VI reminded us of this in a wonderful way in his closing address to Vatican II in 1965: *In the face of each person, especially those with tears and sorrow upon them, we can and should be able to recognize the face of Christ, the Son of Man. And if in the face of Christ we can and should recognize the face of the celestial Father, our humanity becomes Christian and our Christianity becomes theo-centric; so much so that we can state: to know God it is necessary to know mankind.*

The year that is ending has been filled with great and unexpected events. The 50 years of Vatican II influence have reminded us and invite us to a renewal of the Church from evangelical roots. The resignation of Benedict XVI, in an act of courage, humility and wisdom, has given the

Church a face that is closer to people and their problems. Today we see the Pope as someone who is closer to us and more human, sharing our frailness and vulnerability, recognizing limits...

The election of Pope Francis brings new air and an invitation to go to the periphery, not just in terms of geography, but also existentially in terms of people, to commit ourselves to a Church that is poor and for the poor, to smell the sheep, to touch the flesh of Christ in those who suffer, to not be afraid of kindness or tenderness, to let ourselves be loved by a God who always pardons, to accompany with understanding rather than with harsh judgment, to be builders of bridges rather than walls, to prefer a thousand times over a Church that might make mistakes rather than a Church that is ill because it is closed in and self-referential, to not let ourselves be robbed of hope... It is a wonderful time to be living now.

This year has also been a year filled with important events for our congregation. The International Assembly of the Lasallian Educational Mission, held the year before the General Chapter, helped us to reflect on our mission and its effectiveness and how to ensure the future of the educational service of the poor and the vulnerable through association among Brothers and lay colleagues. The International Assembly of Young Brothers helped us to be part of their dreams and their concerns. The meeting of the Signum Fidei Fraternity, during which they ratified their commitment to a style of life inspired by our spirituality which leads to a mission of service. Clearly, *the Lord has*

*done great things for us and we are glad indeed* (Psalm 125).

Also this year I concluded my visit to the Region of RELEM. This Region comprises nearly half of the Brothers in the Institute, which was the result of the unification of five former European Regions and the District of the Middle East. Among many other things, I would like to underscore two. First, there was the careful and fraternal attention paid to our senior Brothers which was carried out with dedication, love, and effectiveness; secondly, there was the vitality of our educational works, thanks to the mission shared with lay persons and the concern for their Lasallian formation. I also appreciated very much the new initiatives that have been taken to respond to the current and concrete situations of poor children and of problem youth.

Two other activities that seem to me to be very important and which respond to the signs of the times were the Meeting of Young Lasallians in Rio de Janeiro on the occasion of the World Youth Day and the Symposium for Lasallian Women from the United States and Canada. These young people and women represent today enormous and indispensable potential if we hope to continue the educational and evangelizing mission that the Lord has entrusted to us.

It is in this context that I would like to reflect on a document, perhaps little known, of our Founder – his Last Will and Testament. A copy of this Testament, certified by Brother Barthélemy, Superior General, is preserved in the Archives of our Generalate. The signature on the Testament,

duly notarized, is dated April 3, 1719, four days before the Founder's death. This Testament is very realistic. It speaks of the goods that go to Brother Barthélemy, in the name of the Institute, and of income for the children of his younger brother, Jean-Remy, who was incapacitated. But in the Testament's second paragraph, after the invocation to the Blessed Trinity, he shares his feelings with the Brothers and offers them some last advice. I will limit this Pastoral Letter to this part of his Testament. Nevertheless, I am moved by the last part of the Testament wherein you can see the Founder's concern for concrete acts of support for his natural family. I see this as a wake-up call for all of us not to neglect our family relationships, which surely for everyone are among the most wonderful experiences of gratuitous and disinterested love that God has given us.

Why did I make this choice? Basically for two reasons. The first reason is, because, when one comes face to face with death, secondary things lose their value and we focus more easily on the essential things. Secondly, because the final recommendations that someone may give at that time no doubt represent the elements that they think have marked their life and that may be useful to others. The final words of a loved one are listened to with respect and affection. Those of the Founder have two centers of interest: his personal relationship with God the Trinity and his concern for his Brothers and for children.

But there is yet another reason why this document has been in my head in recent months, perhaps because I feel that my time may also be approaching. It seems to me that the



moment of death is the most radical and wonderful consecration that we can make to God the Trinity, who consecrated us in Baptism, but with no awareness of this on our part. Of course we consecrate ourselves through our religious consecration, but how many reservations may we have had, infidelities, inconsistency, small or great betrayals...! In death there are no more excuses or loopholes, we are all that we hand over to God. This means, then, total dedication and total trust.

Let us reflect, then, on the Testament of our Founder.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

*I, the undersigned John Baptist de La Salle, priest, being sick in a room near the chapel of the house of Saint Yon, in the suburb of Saint Sever in the city of Rouen, wishing to make a Testament to conclude all the matters which still remain to my charge.*

*I recommend to God first of all my own soul, and then all the Brothers of the Society of the Christian Schools with whom he has united me. I urge them above all else to have entire submission to the Church, especially in these evil times and, in order to give proof of this, never to separate themselves from the Church of Rome, to ask God for the grace that their Society be always entirely submissive to it. I also recommend to them to have a great devotion to Our Lord, to have great love for Holy Communion and the practice of meditation, to have a special devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin and to Saint Joseph, the*

*patron and protector of their Society, and to fulfill their assignments with great zeal and without self-interest, to have a close union among themselves and blind obedience toward their superiors, which is the foundation and support of all perfection in a community (...)*

*Done at the above cited house of Saint Yon, on 3 April, 1719.*

## **1. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.**

*You, God, my neighbor (...) my thoughts separated from you are without a homeland (R. M. Rilke).*

The Founder begins his Testament with the invocation of the Most Holy Trinity. This no doubt reminds us of the beginning of our formula of consecration and its ultimate purpose: to seek above all the glory of God: the God revealed in Jesus, who wants all to be saved and whose greatest glory is that no one be lost, God the Trinity who is communion, the movement of love and of encounter. Certainly this is about three persons, as affirmed by Christian dogma, with unyielding individuality but in openness to ongoing love. The category of relationship, which is love, is constitutive of the triune God. As Saint Bernard states: *In the Holy Trinity, what is it that preserves that supreme and ineffable unity if not love? Love is the law, and the law is the law of the Lord. This love constitutes the Trinity in unity and in a certain way it unifies the persons in the bond of Peace. Love creates love. This is the eternal and universal law that creates and governs everything* (Saint

Bernard, *The Book of God's Love*, c. 12, n. 35: PL 182, 996B).

Because God the Trinity is Love, our own experiences of love reveal this in the best way. That is why our communities of Brothers throughout the Lasallian world should be an icon of Trinitarian life in the world and the Church of today, as the Founder proposed to us when he says that in our communities there should be *the essential union of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit* (Meditation 39.3). The Trinity, in fact, is the source, the model and the goal of all communities. The same love relationship must take priority in our mission. It is enough to recall the number of times the Founder repeats this idea when he tirelessly invites us to love tenderly the children and young people that the Lord has entrusted to us.

As with the Trinity, our love assumes distinction and unity at the same time. As the French Jesuit F. Varillon expressed it so well: *To love is to live for the other, through the other, for others, through others; never through oneself or for oneself. Each of the three divine persons is no more than a being through and for the other two. Being for the other is a gift, through the other is welcoming. To welcome is to give, it is to love... In this way the love relationship revealed to us is the original way of being or, put another way, what is at the foundation of one's being is love or communion. The Trinitarian mystery clarifies all the avatars of human existence.*

I am somewhat concerned that in recent years, under the pretext of a more intense interior life, we could fall into the

temptation about which Pope John Paul II warned us: *We must reject the temptation to offer a privatized and individualistic spirituality which ill accords with the demands of charity, to say nothing of the implications of the Incarnation and, in the last analysis, of Christianity's eschatological tension. While that tension makes us aware of the relative character of history, it in no way implies that we withdraw from "building" history.* (Novo Millennio Ineunte, 52). At the end of his life the Founder was able to contemplate with confidence the work done in the building of the earthly city as a response to God's saving plan. For that reason he was able to recommend himself with confidence, at the moment of his transition, to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, whose glory was his existential goal in his journey towards the Trinity.

## **2. I – You – We**

*Why should I concern myself? It is not up to me to think about myself. What is up to me is to think about God. It is up to God to think about me* (Simone Weil).

In his Testament the Founder recommends his soul to God and then he immediately forgets about himself and with the same confidence he recommends his Brothers, the Brothers of the Society of the Christian Schools, with whom he has united himself. His two great loves appear again in an indissoluble union. The "You" of God is inseparable from the fragile "I" that leaves earthly life and the "We" created by those Brothers with whom his existence played out in service of poor children who were

far from salvation. I would imagine that in those final moments the Founder looked back and recalled concrete faces, difficult moments, his flight to Parmenie, but especially the letter he received in 1714 and the terms of filial affection that were used in it and which brought about the most profound and essential aspects of spirituality that he had tried to pass on: *We the Brothers*. This collective “we” is used throughout the letter and it expressed the vow of association that had united them for a mission that was of great use to the Church. It dealt with the Body of the Society which, in the name of obedience, asked him to take up its governance again. The great concern that motivated the letter is, as expressed in the formula of vows, the greater glory of God, to which is added the good of the Church and of our Society.

As Brother Jean-Louis Schneider expresses it so well: *Throughout the entire letter, the Brothers show that they have internalized the spiritual teaching and vision of their Father, and the process lived with him for over thirty years. Often, their expression is very close to that of the Meditations for the time of Retreat and the various formulas of vows. If the Brothers used this language it was because they were in intimate communion of mind and heart with John Baptist de La Salle, because it is the same language that they have practiced throughout their journey and during community exchanges. In the same way, De La Salle was able to recognize himself in their way of life, speaking, praying, thinking, understanding and re-reading God's actions in the Christian Schools and in the Society.*

This was about God's work for which he was the privileged instrument in placing the means of salvation within reach of the children of artisans and the poor. Going back in the past a bit, no doubt the Founder recalled the first 12 Brothers from the beginnings with whom he made perpetual profession in 1694, whose names appear explicitly in the formula that he used, written in his own handwriting and which we retain as a precious treasure in the Archives of the Generalate.

It is these Brothers, with whom he had united himself irrevocably, that he recommended to God. I believe that in a certain way, each one of us, the Brothers today who continue his work, were also in his mind, just as Jesus kept in mind during his own farewell all those who would come to believe in his name and in the Father who sent him.

### **3. The Church.**

*Love this Church, remain in this Church, be this Church*  
(Saint Augustine).

In his Testament the Founder recommends that we have, in his words, "submission" to the Church. In his writings, especially in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, he asks us to love it and to work for it. As I recalled during the International Assembly for the Lasallian Educational Mission in May, the Founder and the first Brothers lived in the context of a Church during the Counter-Reformation period, when the Church was on the defensive and where more importance was given to the institutional realm than

to the community realm. Therefore it was the hierarchical aspect that dominated the scene. But the closeness of the poor and the work with the first teachers were leading the Founder to intuit a servant Church starting from a community ministry.

In any case, his familiarity with the writings of Saint Paul, particularly in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, gave him a mystical view of a servant Church in which the Brothers, with their lay vocation, are *ministers of God and dispensers of his mysteries, ambassadors of Jesus Christ, builders of the Church*. There is no doubt that these were prophetic words for the Church of his time and that this view anticipated some of the insights of Vatican II that are up to us to make a reality, some 50 years after the Council. We are aware that today this responsibility and this ministry are not solely up to the Brothers but they also belong to lay people and other Lasallians with whom we share the mission. Attitudes of service and community ministry are two fundamental elements of our Lasallian charism.

It is almost unbelievable to see the similarity between the Founder's experience and his concept of the Church with his renouncing the canonry and making his own the cause of poor children and young people and what we are called to live today. Without a doubt the central elements of French spirituality of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in which he lived are today gaining new strength. The Trinity as foundation and purpose, Christocentrism, contemplation and the apostolic commitment that all spring from the mystery of the Incar-

nation, allow us to be led by the movement of the Spirit, closeness to the poor and the small, the ministerial commitment of all sons and daughters of the Church.

Today the Church invites us to a pastoral conversion. This insight in the Document of the Aparecida, in which Cardinal Bergoglio was very involved, is today a call to the universal Church and not only to Latin America. We are called to build and to be witnesses of a Church that is poor and is for the poor, a Church that touches the flesh of Christ in those who suffer. Therefore, this ecclesial renewal is an invitation to return to the Gospel and to live as disciples as we follow Jesus. His views should be our views. This means a Church that is open, close to people, welcoming, simple, and humble, with no ambition for power, a servant Church. *The Disciples, to the extent that they know and love the Lord, experience the need to share their joy of being sent with others, to go out to the world to proclaim Jesus Christ, dead and risen, to make real the love and service for each person, especially the neediest – in a word, to build the Kingdom of God* (Document of the Aparecida, 278).

This pastoral conversion should lead us to incarnate a Church that is wife, mother, servant, facilitator of the faith and not controller of the faith, merciful. This conversion should lead us to build a Church on Jesus Christ as cornerstone and one which tries to avoid, based on its own frailty, temptations to self-reference, nostalgia, a disembodied type of Utopia, self-complacency, defeatism, seeking effectiveness and efficiency as values in themselves. This



conversion should also lead us to be a Church where persons, just as they were for Jesus, are always more important than structures, norms and rites.

A few days before his death, Cardinal Martini spoke to us about a Church that is tired. It is up to us to rejuvenate it. We are privileged to work in favor of children and young people whose hope, energy and openness to an unknown future should “infect” us. Our mission in the Church continues to be needed and current. Beyond cultural or religious differences we need to submerge ourselves in the depth of the human experience of young people and find in that experience an openness to the Gospel that is capable of truly touching lives and placing ourselves in service of the mission from the God who wants all to be saved (1 Timothy 2: 3), who looks at each person and the young with tenderness and mercy, and who in Jesus Christ wants “*all to have life and life in abundance*” (John 10: 10). We must live this out with humility knowing that it is the Holy Spirit and not us who is the principal player and that the Church, as the “*universal sacrament of salvation*” (Lumen Gentium 48) is called to dialogue with all, not only to teach but also to learn, and to go out into the streets to reach not only the geographic peripheries but also the existential peripheries as Pope Francis invites us. The young must see a Church with a kindly face, capable of dialoging with men and women of today, with the world, the culture of our time and with diverse religions.

The challenge that we have today is to love the Church,

such as it is, holy and sinful. To love it from the inside as children and not to judge it from the outside as judges. As Henri de Lubac put it: *I love our Church with its misfortunes and humiliations, with the weakness of each one of us, but also with the immense network of its hidden holiness [...] I love it today, with its enormous and difficult efforts to continue under the signs of the Council.* I believe that in this we will be faithful to the Testament of our Founder, recalling what Chesterton said: The Church asks us to remove our hats when we enter, but not our heads.

#### **4. Have great devotion to Our Lord.**

*Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith* (Hebrews 12: 2).

In his Testament the Founder invites us to have great devotion to Our Lord. The term “devotion” here is equivalent to the word love. We should not forget that Lasallian spirituality is basically Christocentric, as we can see very well in the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* where the mysteries, virtues and maxims of Jesus are the connecting thread. In the Collection we find an even stronger motivation in the invitation made to us to *have deep affection for the knowledge, love and imitation of Jesus Christ and union with him.* It’s about being fans, not of a sports team but of Jesus, since it deals with living in the spirit of Jesus. That is to say, to let our whole life be imbued with his person, his plans, his practical actions, his values, attitudes, criteria, his preferences. This is because, as Pope Francis tells us, *God’s love has a name and a face: Jesus Christ.*

To follow Jesus means to live out a spirituality of the Incarnation that helps us to have and to live the experience of a God made in historical, concrete flesh as expressed mystically by the Mexican poet Alfonso Junco:

*This is how I need you  
in flesh and bone...*

*To anoint your feet that seek my path,  
to feel your hands on my blind eyes,  
to immerse myself, like John in your lap,  
and to kiss you without the betrayal of Judas.*

*I am flesh and I love you in the flesh.  
In charity you came to my indigence,  
and how well you can speak my language!*

To follow Jesus is not to be so concerned about our own perfection, as if his love and friendship were the result of our own efforts, but to walk in his footsteps, *doing good* (Hebrews 10: 38) and by trying to make an offering of our own life, as he did with his, to put it in the Father's hands, in our service of the young, especially the most vulnerable and the abandoned. It is in all these things where we can truly touch the flesh of Christ.

The Founder in his Testament gives us privileged means that help us to keep alive the fire of our love for Jesus: the Eucharist and interior prayer. I have the sense that as Brothers we have to make a greater effort so that these

things occupy the place they ought to occupy in our lives. Certainly in our senior Brothers' houses, in general, they do occupy a privileged and exemplary place, but in other situations where daily Eucharist has become difficult and where interior prayer is a personal responsibility with no community framework we run the risk of relativizing these means that our Founder considered essential at the end of his life.

- **The Eucharist**

As F. Varillon told us: *The Eucharist is the recapitulation of everything, the point of departure for all diverging and converging lines. It signifies the unity of God and man in Christ; the past, the present and the future; nature and history; welcoming and gifting; death and life.* The Eucharist helps us each day to rekindle sacramentally the bonds of our brotherhood. The Eucharist should be for us the center of our spiritual life and the strength of our communion with our Brothers, with children and young people, with humankind. Saint Augustine, for his part, said that *when we eat the Body of Christ we join humankind.* We know that the first Eucharist was a family supper. We should not forget the importance the Lord gives in the Gospels to meals as places of intimacy that anticipate the Kingdom of heaven and that help us to live out the joy of being Brothers and of sharing.

The Eucharist also helps us each day to listen to the Word of God and to let ourselves be challenged by it. To listen to the Word is, as with a field, to receive the fertility that water

can bring. It is to continually look at yourself in the mirror of Christ and his Gospel. The Word of God teaches us, corrects us in our anti-Gospel tendencies, it invites us to say our “amen” to God’s will, and it offers us communion with Christ made Word. Daily Eucharist helps us to unite our daily life with its times of happiness and sorrow in the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus and his total surrender as a servant to others. We must remember not to separate the Table of the Eucharist from the table of the poor, and that communion should end with a mission that extends the Eucharistic mystery, commitment and giving.

- **The prayer of the heart**

In his Testament the Founder shares with us a conviction that he had throughout his life and which was expressed in these words in the Rule of 1718: *The Brothers of this Institute should have a great love for meditation and they should look upon it as the first and principal of their daily exercises and the one most capable of drawing God’s blessing on all the others.*

The best model for silent and personal prayer is Jesus himself. It is repeatedly stated in the Gospels that Jesus withdrew to lonely places to pray and this is the most convincing argument for us that Jesus prayed, that his prayer was an ongoing part of his life. Our prayer, rather than focusing on theory or technique, should focus on his person. We can add an existential reason to that statement. Each one is unique before the Lord, therefore each one should have a unique way of communicating with God,

with a God that always treats us in a personalized way, a God who *called me by name before I was born and had my name engraved on the palms of his hands* (cf. Isaiah 49: 1 - 16). Therefore, community prayer is not enough even though it is very important and necessary. Personal prayer and meeting with God alone is also fundamental and should be part of our daily life, the community should encourage this and it also should be part of our personal annual program.

I always remember an image of witness that the Brothers in Marsabit, Kenya, gave me and which I have shared several times over the years. There is a community there that is in charge of a school and boarding residence for nomadic families in the interior of the country. Before their community prayer they gather for personal prayer for half an hour. During that time many students come to make a visit to the chapel. These students have the experience of seeing the Brothers as praying men and not just as teachers. Our personal prayer should make visible the face of God for young people. That is why in the school of Jesus each of us should become a master and witness of prayer, as Jesus was for his disciples, in such a way that our students can say: *Brother, teach us to pray*. Masters and witnesses who always recognize ourselves as babbling beginners and weak instruments in God's hands.

The Lasallian *Method of Mental Prayer*, as we know, finds its inspiration in the Sulpician method formulated by Olier and it has three fundamental elements: to keep Jesus before our eyes, in our hearts and in our hands. It is about,

therefore, looking upon Jesus, uniting with Jesus and acting like Jesus.

- **To have Jesus before our eyes**, to look at how he adored God, glorified his name, in accordance with the first invocation of the Our Father. This is **adoration**. At the same time it is the way in which all persons are filled with silence before the interior action of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.
- **To have Jesus in our hearts**, and thus enter into communion, into **union**... In this part of the prayer we abandon ourselves to Him in order to participate in what He is and in that which makes us come alive through Him. Prayer becomes a privileged time to adhere to Christ, who bestows on us the transforming and life-giving power of his Spirit. The second part of the prayer makes reference to the Lord's invocation: "*Thy Kingdom come.*"
- **To have Jesus in our hands is cooperation**, and it has to do with the third invocation of the Our Father; "*Thy will be done.*" As Olier tells us: *To have Christ Our Lord in our hands means to desire that his Divine Will be done in us, Jesus Christ has to act in us and through us.* It's about giving more importance to the divine gift and the action of the Spirit than to our own efforts. That is why Olier prefers the word **cooperation** instead of the word "resolution." This shows clear dependence and submission to the actions of the Spirit so that his plans are done in us (cf.

Michel Sauvage: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité Ascétique et Mystique*, 925 and ss).

I believe that this Sulpician view can help us to interiorize and understand better the Method left to us by our Founder: Look upon Jesus, Unite with Jesus, Act like Jesus. The loving encounter with God in the person of Jesus and the encounter with Jesus in the person of our brothers and sisters are inseparable. The God I encounter each day in the silence of my personal prayer I encounter again in the faces of children, young people, my Brothers, all those who cross my path daily and especially in the faces of the poor.

## **5. The Most Blessed Virgin Mary.**

*Mary's entire existence is a hymn to life, a love hymn to life* (Pope Francis).

We approach Mary, our mother, with deep filial affection. She was present during our childhood, as we grew in our vocation, she is present now in our crises and in our hopes. She has always been the Queen and Mother of the Christian Schools and more recently we invoke her as Our Lady of the Star. The Institute has developed under her maternal shadow. The Founder invites us to *consider her as the principal patroness of our Society: we place ourselves under her protection every day at the end our prayer in the morning and in the evening, and after each exercise. We have recourse to her, placing in her, after God, our entire confidence* (Meditation 151.3).



In his Testament the Founder invites us to love Mary tenderly and his last prayer before dying, according to his biographers, was: *Mary, Mother of grace, sweet mother of mercy, defend us from the enemy and help us at the hour of death. Yours is the glory, oh Christ, the hope of people, the Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever.* The fact is that Mary is inseparable from the Trinitarian mystery, the foundation and end of our vocation as Brothers. As the Rule tells us: *The Brothers discover the meaning of their own consecration in the total “Yes” that she spoke to God. They learn from her how to be docile towards the Spirit who brings them to the likeness of Christ by faith, hope and love, and so leads them towards the Father from whom all good flows and to whom all apostolic activity is directed* (Rule 76).

Mary is the revelation, the eschatological anticipation of the mystery of God the Trinity, the sacrament of tenderness through her maternal love. To approach Mary is to know God better as a Father-Mother being. Mary appears, then, first as **God’s revelation**. A God who is compared to a mother gives comfort, is unable to forget the child of the womb, who at the end of history will wipe the tears from our eyes. Mary adds a new sense to the Incarnation: *In this sense, Mary’s position as being the mother of Christ and our mother explains something about Christ’s redemption, a fact that is not explained in and of itself and cannot be explained even in that act. That fact is the feminine and maternal quality of goodness [...] Nevertheless, Jesus as man cannot manifest that generosity, that sweetness, that tender affection, that “something” of a mother. Such a manifestation is only possible in a feminine and maternal being. God chose Mary to*

*represent in her person this maternal aspect* (Schillebeeckx).

Mary is the path to spiritual maturation and contemplation. Therefore, secondly, we should see in her the **icon of our prayer**. Mary unites the two great traits that characterize the life of faith and prayer: she is Virgin and Mother.

- **Mary is the Virgin**, who lives while totally listening to God in the silence in which the divine word resounds. Karl Barth has emphasized that Mary's virginity is a hymn to the absolute primacy of God, to the *soli Deo gloria*, to the pure glory of that God before whom we must be engrossed and amazed, letting ourselves be transformed by Him.
- **Mary is the Mother**, in whom silence has become the word, virginity has turned into maternity which is characterized by delicateness, tenderness, gift. She helps us to understand that the experience of God in prayer is only fruitful when it translates into maternity, in engendering children for God in delicateness, tenderness, gift.

Mary is, in the third place, the **ideal human being**. She is an invitation to live and rediscover the value of the feminine side in our person and in our culture. The Founder himself invites us to this when he asks us to have the firmness of a father and the tenderness of a mother. *If you have for them the firmness of a father to restrain and withdraw them from misbehavior, you must also have for them the tenderness of a mother to draw them to you, and to do for*

*them all the good that depends on you* (Meditation 101.3). This symbolic aspect should not make us lose sight of the historical aspect, because Mary is also Joseph's wife, the virgin mother of Jesus the carpenter, the woman who is attentive to the needs of others, the strong woman at the foot of the cross, the happy woman at the resurrection, the companion of the apostles at Pentecost.

For that reason, Mary is also, fourthly, ***the hope of nations***, the hope and cause of their joy. In Mary we find all that we want to be. We want to be persons, free, building an unselfish world, at the side of the poor while giving them hope. All of this is realized in Mary, by integrating the most sorrowful tensions and conflicts with a clear view of God's will; by integrating the joy of Cana with the sorrow of Calvary. *On the cross Mary represents the sorrow of humankind. Your sorrow is great like the sea, says the prophet. The people who live in sorrow, who are participants in this cruel inheritance from humankind, find in the Virgin an operational model to support hardship and not succumb to anguish [...] Good Friday sees Mary at the foot of the cross hoping against hope and representing the immense and inexhaustible trust of the poor* (Brother Noé Zevallos).

Mary, finally, is ***the privileged path to live out our consecration***, as our Rule affirms: *The Brothers discover the meaning of their own consecration in the total "Yes" that she spoke to God* (Rule 76). Mary's attitude in the Visitation can serve as a frame of reference for us for reflecting on our consecration. Mary, in the mystery of the Visitation, helps us to see that God, who had chosen her to be his tabernacle

in the mystery of the Incarnation, is the same God who inspired her to go with haste to render service to her cousin in need. In Mary, consecration to God translates into service of one's neighbor. For us also, consecrating ourselves to God should mean, first and foremost, dedicating ourselves to those who need us through our vow of association for the educational and evangelizing service of the poor.

This is also what our Founder suggests to us when he invites us to be open to the Word in order to be able to communicate it to others and in that way to be Tabernacles of the Word of God, sacraments of his Presence, as Mary was: *Honor the Most Blessed Virgin today as the tabernacle and living temple that God built, adorned by God's own hands. Pray to her to obtain for you from God the grace that your soul may be so well-adorned and so well-disposed to receive the word of God and to communicate it to others, that you may become through her intercession tabernacles of the divine Word* (Meditation 191.3).

## **6. Saint Joseph, our patron and protector.**

*A strong and brave man, a worker, but in his soul he felt great tenderness [...] strength of spirit and the capacity to give attention, compassion, to be truly open to others, to love* (Pope Francis).

The Church has just introduced Saint Joseph into the Eucharistic Prayer, right after the mention of the Virgin Mary. But already for the Founder they were inseparable

from the very beginning and he chose Joseph as our patron and protector. When I think about the many Brothers whom I have met throughout my life and about those with whom I had the good fortune to live, I think about Saint Joseph and his humble paternity. How many children and young people have found in so many of our Brothers that humble figure, whose fundamental mission it was to protect, mentor, help to grow and then to just disappear!

To protect does not seem today to be a verb that is “in vogue.” Nevertheless one of the principal educational dimensions of our mission is to protect. To protect the integrity of the children and young people entrusted to us, and as Pope Francis recalled on the day when he inaugurated his Petrine ministry on March 19<sup>th</sup> of this year, to protect creation in order to ensure the future of those children and young people, as Joseph kept vigil on the future of the Child Jesus. To protect *with discretion, humbly, silently, but with a constant presence and with total fidelity, even when he did not understand [...] With constant attention to God, open to his signs, available for God’s plans and not so much for his own [...] It’s about protecting people, being concerned about them, for each one, with love, especially the children, the elderly who are more fragile and who often remain on the periphery of our hearts.*

Our Founder makes a similar invitation to us in the Meditation he wrote for the Feast of Saint Joseph: *You must have a similar great attention and affection for preserving or procuring the innocence of the children entrusted to your guidance, and*

*to keep them away from whatever might interfere with their education or prevent them from acquiring piety, just as Saint Joseph had for all that could contribute to the welfare of the Child Jesus. For you have been made responsible by God for these children just as Saint Joseph was made responsible for the Savior of the world. This is also the first care you should have in your work, if you wish to imitate Saint Joseph, who had nothing more at heart than to provide for the needs of the Child Jesus* (Meditation 110.3). This is a wonderful summary of our mission: to attend to the needs of the children and young people that God has entrusted to us.

## **7. Zeal and ministerial gratuity.**

*I, the Lord, am the first, and at the last, I am he* (Isaiah 41: 4).

The Founder, in his Testament, asks us Brothers to *carry out our ministry with zeal but very disinterestedly*. We know well that the spirit of zeal left to us as an inheritance from the Founder is inseparable from the spirit of faith, just as in the Gospel love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable. *The spirit of faith kindles in the Brothers an ardent zeal for those confided to their care in order to open their hearts to receive the salvation revealed in Jesus Christ* (Rule 7).

The zeal that Saint John Baptist de La Salle proposes to us is often accompanied by an adjective that gives it even more strength. In fact, it is about an *ardent* zeal because what is in play here is the salvation of the young. In this sense his words invite us to radicalness: *For this has to be the kind of*

*ardent zeal you had for the salvation of those you have to instruct, when you were led to sacrifice yourself and to spend your whole life to give these children a Christian education and to procure for them the life of grace in this world and eternal life in the next* (Meditation 201.3). The Founder devotes two Meditations for the Time of Retreat to this topic, as we have already seen in a previous Pastoral Letter.

Encouraged by this ardent zeal, we Brothers should see to it that a Lasallian school is the manifestation of the human face of the Church where each member of the educational community – administrators, teachers, board members, students, parents, former students – all have the opportunity to live as God’s People in ways that are fraternal, humble, compassionate and in solidarity with serving others. Zeal awakens in us a passion for God and a passion for humankind.

It deals with, therefore, a school that is not closed in upon itself but one which is open to the world and in particular to the world of the poor. From here it follows that all programs, curricula, and methodology and all school activities should be marked by respect and love for each person, by limitless dedication, by the perspective of awareness and social commitment and, above all, by the desire that each one live out the values of the Gospel, reach full realization and salvation and be committed to the building of the Kingdom. This is what the Church asks of us today, through Pope Francis, when he invites us, as we have already seen, to smell the sheep, touch the flesh of Christ in

those who suffer, to accompany with compassion rather than to judge strictly, to be builders of bridges rather than of walls.

Disinterestedness is another constitutive element of our educational model. One of the topics that is repeated most often in the spiritual writings of our Founder is his invitation to act with purity of intention, to look at nothing else but God, to purify our motivation... and this should be manifested in our mission because as Saint Paul says when speaking about love, this must be disinterested. The Founder says: *Your profession commits you to teach children the science of salvation, and you are bound to do this with total disinterestedness. Do you do this with the sole view of procuring the glory of God and your neighbor's salvation? Declare to God that you will never have any other intention than that* (Meditation 108.2).

There is no danger in exaggerating this, as he himself gave us an example in the Heroic Vow that consolidated the Institute: *You cannot carry disinterestedness too far in your work; it is the poor that you have to teach; instruct them by your example; in order to teach them to love poverty, let your disinterestedness lead you to practice it as far as it pleases God. You know, too, that you have committed yourself to keep schools gratuitously, and to live on bread alone if need be, rather than accept anything* (Meditation 153.3). That is the reason for his insistence: *Guard against any human attitude toward your disciples; do not pride yourselves over what you do... Keep, then, the goals of your work as completely pure as those of Jesus*



*Christ himself; by this means you will draw upon yourselves and all your labors his blessing and grace (Meditation 196.3).*

## **8. Close Union.**

*We should not be afraid of kindness or tenderness (Pope Francis).*

We come to the last recommendation of our Father and Founder, and it is no less important. He asks us to have a close union among ourselves and, to do this, we keep in mind that obedience is the most effective means of ensuring community life.

I was struck by the term used by the Founder that goes beyond living in community when he invites us to have a close union. A close union like the one lived out in the heart of the Trinity, a God who is nothing more than love. It seems to me to be a strong and engaging expression. It also seems to me to be an echo of the priestly prayer of Jesus at the moment of taking leave of his disciples. We know that this topic is also repeated in the Meditations left to us by the Founder. *Since God has given you the grace of calling you to live in community, there is nothing that you should more earnestly ask of him than this union of mind and heart with your Brothers. Only by means of this union will you acquire that peace which ought to be all the joy of your life. Entreat the God of hearts to keep your heart and those of your Brothers one in the heart of Jesus (Meditation 39.3).* Close union is a union of mind and heart. This union is not a platonic or disembodied kind of love.

One of the memories I have that impacted me greatly during my visits took place during a meeting with all the Brothers of a District who were gathered together for a celebration. Before speaking to them, as I was walking to the room where my address was to be given, a Brother came up to me and said: *Brother, please tell us that we should love one another.* I believe that this is what our Founder meant when he spoke to us about close union. Love that is not manifested and expressed is not authentic love. We cannot be content with saying that the Brothers should know that I love them. We need to show it *without fear of kindness or tenderness.*

I believe that the quality of our fraternal relationships in community plays a major role in our future. I have recalled this many times: all interventions made at the Congress on Religious Life sponsored by the Union of Superior Generals in 2004, given by young men and women religious from many different nationalities and congregations, had to do with community. That is why I am convinced that the close union that the Founder asks of us is one of the fundamental elements of our mission, perhaps the most important one. It makes visible to a world divided by thousands of things that fraternity is possible, it makes visible God's gratuitous and unconditional love, God the Trinity who is nothing more than love. But this close union is also one of the strongest supports for our perseverance, recalling, as was said in times past in anthropomorphic terms, that nature abhors a vacuum. It is almost inevitable to seek affection outside when it is denied to us from within.

We may be surprised when the Founder speaks to us about obedience being the most important means for community support. The Founder's teaching on obedience is very broad and contrasts sharply with the modern sense of the word. Nevertheless, this idea does offer us some fundamental ideas that continue to be current today. I believe that the Founder himself experienced the very close relationship between community and obedience when, as a response to the letter that the Brothers sent him in 1714, in the name of the Body of the Society and in virtue of the vow of obedience that he had made, he returned to Paris to be available to them.

I think that the union of community and obedience should be translated today into community discernment, where together we seek God's will and we conform ourselves to Christ who made his Father's will his nourishment and through this love he handed over his life for the full liberation and salvation of humankind. What should concern us is how as a community we can respond to God's saving plan and the building up of the Body of Christ: *We should obey them [superiors] only because, according to the expression of Saint Paul, they labor for the perfection of the saints and the building up of the Body of Jesus Christ, who is our Head. Thanks to the submission rendered to him in his ministers, he joins and unites all the parts of his body in proper proportion to make one and the same body. By practicing this virtue, then, you will become one of those truly chosen by God in your community* (Meditation 72.2).

Obedience makes us all players in the search for God's will, making all of us responsible for making the Gospel our first Rule, responding to God's calls, discerned as a community, in the calls of the poor, the young, the world, the Church.

### **Conclusion:**

*If you will not do it for us, who will?*

I would like to conclude with the sentence from a boy from Scampia, the wonderful ministry that we Brothers have in Naples, in a neighborhood where drugs are a huge problem. This sentence came about because of the service work done by our students from the Merode Institute near the Spanish Steps in Rome. The word "children" does not appear in the Testament of our Founder, but it is certainly understood in each line he wrote. They were the reason for his life and they continue to be the reason for ours. We came into being for children and young people, especially the poor, the vulnerable, the least loved and cared for. *If we do not do it, who will?* At this time in our history, this idea of "we" has opened the doors to young volunteers, lay associates and collaborators.

It is for this reason that my Lasallian icons this time are about children. Concrete children, with a face and a story, many times one of sadness, abandonment and frustration in their weak and overworked backs.

I think about little Genny from Scampia, barely one and one-half years old with a ball in her hands, as a tiny icon

that the young volunteers from Saint Joseph of Merode found. These young people were willing to sacrifice their vacation time in order to help break the cycle of violence that numbs everyone and conditions the children of Scampia from an early age. These young people have demonstrated the desire to create a healthy space for them and to restore a smile and provide some peace for the little ones, as they form new friendships. I would extend this icon to include all young



Genny from Scampia



Carlos and Jimena

Lasallian volunteers for whom I have great admiration and I wonder if we can do more so that other young people might imitate their example.

I think about Carlos and Jimena, those small siblings who survived the massacre of their family

in Villa Canales, Guatemala. The photo of the 6-year old child embracing and protecting his little sister was published widely in the world press. At six years of age he acted as the older, more responsible person and the officials at the “*Our Little Brothers and Sisters*” welfare house said that during the first week after the massacre the small siblings were seen always embracing one another in silence. How many children like them have had to learn to be responsible adults at such an early age?

I think about Malala, the extraordinary little girl from Pakistan, who was shot at the age of 14 for the crime of defending the right of girls to study. In her talk at the United Nations in July



Malala

she said: *Let us pick up our books and pens because they are our most powerful weapons. One book and one pen can change the world.* As she was sharing her feelings of forgiveness toward those who had attacked her, she added: *This is the compassion that I have learned from Mohammad,*

*the legacy I learned from Martin Luther King and from Nelson Mandela, the philosophy of non-violence I learned from Gandhi and Mother Teresa, the forgiveness I learned from my father and my mother. We cannot forget today the 57 million unschooled children for whom Malala was at the point of giving her life. What about us? What can we do?*

I think about the children in Syria who are refugees in neighboring countries, whose number United Nations humanitarian agencies affirm is already up to one million, not to mention the 7,000 children who died during the armed conflict. Speaking about this, Anthony Lake, the Executive Director of UNICEF, said: *It is not just a number. These are children who were torn away from their homes, perhaps even from their families, facing horrors that only now we are beginning to understand.* It is not easy to imagine the physical



Syrian refugee children

harm, the fear, trauma and suffering endured by these children and the dangers that are lying in wait for them such as child labor, forced marriage, organ trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Given these realities, we cannot remain indifferent. These little icons should profoundly touch our hearts and awaken not only our most noble feelings, but also our evangelical creativity to respond, as our Founder dreamed, to the needs of children and young people who are far from salvation. I believe that this is the best way to honor his Testament.



Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría  
*Superior General*



