

BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

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**THE LASALLIAN VOCATION:  
AN INHERITED TREASURE  
TO BE SHARED**

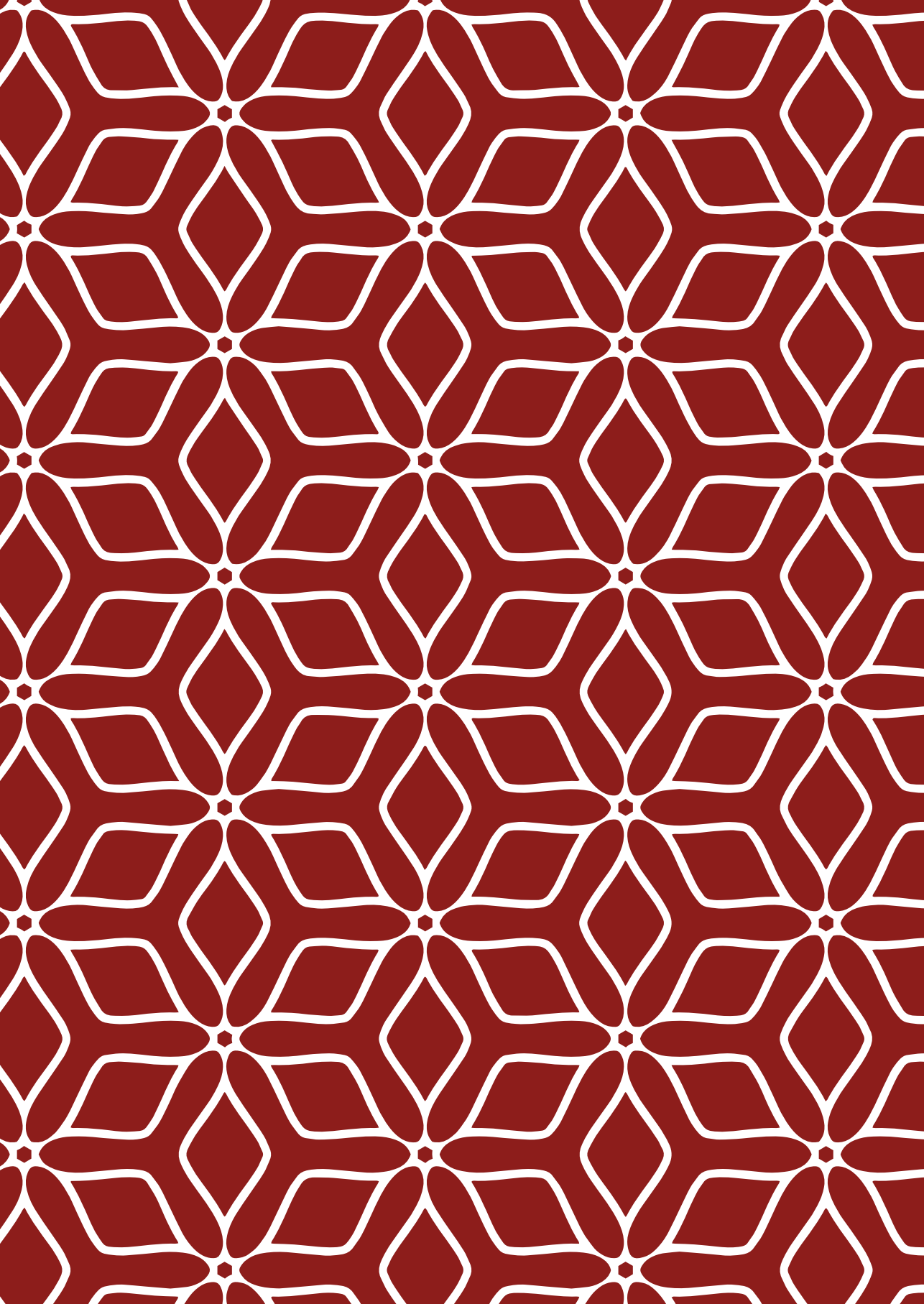
**AUTHOR**

JORGE A. SIERRA, FSC



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# **The Lasallian vocation: an inherited treasure to be shared**

JORGE A. SIERRA, FSC

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Author:  
Jorge A. Sierra, FSC

Editorial Direction:  
Mr. Óscar Elizalde Prada - oelizalde@lasalle.org

Editorial Coordination:  
Ms. Ilaria Iadeluca - comunicazione@lasalle.org

Layout:  
Ms Giulia Giannarini - ggiannarini@lasalle.org

Translator:  
Br. Agustin Ranchal, FSC - aranchal@lasalle.org

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# PROLOGUE

What is a vocation? Are there different vocations in the Church? Is it doomed to oblivion and failure to speak of vocations today? Is the experience of the Christian teacher a vocational journey? What is the “vocational” part in the Lasallian heritage? What kind of pastoral ministry of vocations does our society need? These and many other similar questions can be a motivation to re-read the anthropological proposal of Christianity and recover sometimes unexplicit keys in the mission of evangelization.

On February 9, 2020, the General Council of the Brothers of Christian Schools published the significant *Circular 475*, titled *From Hope to Commitment: Understanding Lasallian Vocations*. After a long period of reflection and writing, in which many Lasallians were involved, the essentials for building a Lasallian culture of vocations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are presented in this document. The aim is to help everyone to get to know the Lasallian commitment and its different ways of life, both for the Association and for the consecrated life as Brothers and Sisters. It is a call to regain the enthusiasm that the future is not limited by numbers or successes and failures and, at the same time, an invitation for all Lasallians, from their specific services, to commit themselves to pastoral ministry of vocations.

As one would expect in a document intended to be read and understood throughout the world, all its expressions are well-kept and have their reflective and theological foundations. In this paper we try to contribute some of these foundations, in order to understand what is meant and, above all, what remains to be said and to make life. From the essence of the Lasallian heritage, we can describe the “Lasallian vocation” as a way of following Jesus inspired by the vital itinerary of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and many other Brothers and Lasallians throughout history, a full “vocation” that, attentive to the needs of the world, listens to the call of God and is committed to the service of his Kingdom in favour of those most in need, through education.

This paper is composed of three parts. The first section intends to define the Christian vocation, an opportunity to highlight the essential aspects of theological anthropology. The second section reviews the calls to

shared communion and mission, which are made explicit in the different ways of life that have developed in the Church: laity, ordained ministry and consecrated life. Finally, in the third part the foundations of the Christian vocation are formulated from the Lasallian heritage, with an invitation to construct, in a daily commitment, a new “culture of vocations”.



**I. THE CHRISTIAN  
VOCATION:  
A TREASURE**

The word “vocation” is commonly used in our language and society, but it is not always meant to be the same. In Latin, the word “vocatio” had a profane meaning: *calling action, subpoena, invitation*. In the Christian tradition we use “vocation” and “inspiration” as an analogy. It is used as a term of the life journey of an institution or person (we use expressions such as the vocation of Moses, Israel, the Church, art, etc.) or as a vocation *to* (someone has a vocation *to* religious life, *to marriage*, *to the ordained ministry*). It is also used attached to an adjective: “lay, religious or priestly vocation”.<sup>1</sup>

In many cases “vocation” comes to correspond to “mission”. For example, in ecclesial documents it is said: “the vocation *of* religious life is to bear witness to the Kingdom of God” and thus we refer to the mission that has the way of life that we call “religious life”. Vocation involves the whole life, in its entirety. Therefore, we can study the religious vocation from several points of view: literary (vocation stories...), historical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, theological, pedagogical, pastoral....

One of the most developed fields in the study of vocation is its *anthropology*. The vocation emerges from an interpellation directed to the desire and freedom of the subject. The questions are: what is the rationale of the vocation in the life of the human being, of the Christian? what is the meaning of the life of the person who accepts it? what challenges does it entail? is it indifferent to answer in the affirmative or negative? what is the relationship between vocation and personal fulfilment? A special issue is the possibility of adopting a *definitive compromise*, which is particularly important in our society, with its mobility, instability, doubts and reservations to ultimate decisions.

For this reason, psychology is a great help to comprehend the experiences and processes of the subject in the vocational experience (feeling of a call, surprise, discernment, anxiety, joy...), the motivations of the candidate (legitimate or illegitimate, conscious or unconscious), the reaction to stimuli and pressures that can receive from interested institutions, the family, etc.,

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1 This whole section is further developed, in the theological key of the People of God in the book Sierra, J. *Caminad según la vocación a la que habéis sido llamados. La vocación y su cultura en la Iglesia hoy* (“Walk according to the vocation to which you have been called”. *Vocation and its culture in the Church today*), Madrid: San Pablo, 2021.

as well as the degree of *maturity* required, the *criteria* of genuine vocation or possible pathological phenomena.

Descriptive sociology also provides us with information of great interest. It can describe the *environment* of the candidates (rural or urban; of Christianity or secularized...) and their *social background* (popular, middle classes... type of family...), as well as study the vocational *crisis and its factors*. It would also be interesting to study the relationship between *charism and institution*. The vocation is not hereditary, in the style of certain dignities (monarchy), trades (agriculture and fishing, especially in traditional societies), or a “family business”.

Finally, theology focuses on what vocation is, how important it is for life, the subjects involved in vocation and the theological assumptions of the concept of vocation. For example, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of different subjects of vocation: humanity, Israel (and, in it, of patriarchs, prophets, Mary...), the Church (and, in it, the laity, the religious, the virgins and widows, the ordained ministers...). Both the personal and the community are combined, as well as the common and the specific and the responsibility for one's own vocation and that of others.

If, as we have seen, the vocation affects the integrity of the person, it will also be intimately linked to the pedagogical. Hence, certain titles of publications speak of the “psycho-pedagogy of vocation” to show the way to accompany the person in the acceptance and maturation of his vocation. The pastoral approach seeks a way to create a “culture of vocations” in the Christian community and aims to stimulate the different vocations in the Church, in the service of ecclesial life and in the service of the kingdom of God from it.

Pastoral ministry of vocations, therefore, “is not a collateral scope, but the very soul and purpose of all pastoral ministry”.<sup>2</sup> It focuses on the vocational discernment (search of the will of God by the scrutiny of signs of vocation: sensitivity to the action of the Spirit, correspondence with a way of life, internalized values, qualities that denote vocational aptitude, etc.), it outlines the role of the agents involved (family, catechists, Christian

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2 Cf. MASSERONI, E. *Maestro, ¿dónde vives?* Madrid: Editorial San Pablo, 1993.

community...) and that of the “promoters” more directly involved.<sup>3</sup> These are approaches typical of pastoral agents who deal with people who are in the process of searching for their life orientation or who have taken steps in a direction and need “pastoral guides” with guidelines for discernment and choice, for the art of “choosing” a vocation.

In order to know the transcendence of vocation in human life, we can begin with a few questions: How does vocation affect those who receive it? What gifts and promises does the call bring to personal life? What “profits” does the person get if we handle it in a vocational perspective? On the other hand, what does our vocation demand from us? Israel and the New Testament do not understand vocation as “self-realization” of the called person, if that word refers to rewarding experiences and the attainment of goals that satisfy us (for example, by improving social status). But those who accept the vocation, which is a call to theological love and service, will receive a hundred times more, although they will not lack sufferings and tears, and there will be missions loaded with drama (like the calls of the biblical prophets themselves).<sup>4</sup>

In line with his research, the Jesuit L. M. Rulla (1922-2002) describes the Christian vocation as:

*“God’s call to the human person to be a collaborator in the New Covenant (Jer 31:31, Ez 36:26) which God Himself has sought to establish between Him and man [sic]. Such a call is a free gift from God that makes it possible for man to give an answer thanks to the continuous action of the gift of the Spirit”.<sup>5</sup>*

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- 3 It is usually used to “promote” in the sense of discerning, recognizing and encouraging and stimulating by helping to overcome obstacles.
  - 4 I am following in this section BALTHASAR, H.U. von. *Vocación: origen de la vida consagrada*. Madrid: San Juan, 2015. BARRACA MAIRAL, J. *Vocación y persona: ensayo de una filosofía de la vocación*. Madrid: Unión Editorial, 2003. BRAVO, A. *Seguir a Cristo: de la vocación a las vocaciones*. Salamanca: Sígueme, 2009. CAHALAN, K.A., ed. *Calling all years good: Christian vocation throughout life’s seasons*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017.
  - 5 RULLA, L.M. *Antropología de la vocación Cristiana I*, Salamanca: Atenas, 1994, p. 11.

This call is an undeserved gift; moreover, it can be answered by the very gift of God in His Spirit. Thus, God's call acts upon two fundamental characteristics of human nature. First, human beings have the ability to direct themselves towards God, to transcend and go beyond themselves. This essential ability to focus on God, to self-transcend, is the basis not only of the divine call, but also of a sense of innate duty, which in the Christian tradition has been called "obedience of faith": the direction towards goals beyond one's own self, more generous and altruistic, those called by Rulla "Christ's values". From these premises we can understand the second definition of vocation proposed by the author:

*"Every Christian is called to be a witness of theocentrically self-transcendent love, that is, to make the self-transcendent values revealed and lived by Christ the centre of their life. The essence of the Christian vocation is to allow oneself to be transformed into Christ so that his values are internalized in me until I can say: 'I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me' (Gal 2:20)."*<sup>6</sup>

The vocation, a decisive reality, is extremely personal: it goes from heart to heart.<sup>7</sup> God, the called person, and the Church are the ones involved.

The personal vocation, likewise, also expresses a *will of the Lord*, and Biblical accounts handle that language; but other categories can be employed in this regard. Indeed, if we look at Jesus, it is not the title of "Lord", but that of *Abba*, which marks his experience of God: from there he lives the attitude of full obedience. There are three features that the Gospel highlights in presenting Jesus' relationship with his *Abba*: absolute confidence, *obedience* and imitation. The whole Gospel of John articulates Jesus' relationship with his Father from listening and obedience to the mission received. And in the synoptics the same happens: Jesus is not a "divine man" who advances a path marked by earthly successes; he is rather the obedient Son. The sentence in Gethsemane ends with a "not what I will but what you will" (Mk 14:36 and parallels).<sup>8</sup>

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6 RULLA, L. M. *Antropología de la vocación cristiana II*, Salamanca: Atenas, 1994, p. 7.

7 Following John Henry Newman's famous motto. Cf. KERR, J., *John Henry Newman. Una biografía*. Madrid: Palabra, 2010.

8 The prayer that Charles de Foucauld places on the lips of Jesus himself, "Father, I abandon myself into your hands", masterfully combines unlimited confidence and full obedience.

Jesus, who has summoned the disciples with authority, instils *confidence* in God: He invites them to discard all burdens for food or clothing, for the Father takes care of them (Mt 6:25 ff). He tells them that a father does not hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish or a scorpion when he asks for an egg (Lk 11:11). But *obedience* is another basic disposition: they become Jesus' family by doing the Father's will (Mk 3:31-35 and parallels). The Gospels understand the new righteousness as fulfilment of the divine will.

It is already noted that several analogies can be adopted to express the relationship with God: the relationship "Lord-servant" does not have the same connotations as "Father-son" or that "husband-wife".<sup>9</sup> Scripture also expresses in terms of friendship: Abraham is a friend of God, and God speaks to Moses from friend to friend (Ex 33:11). Jesus will say to the disciples, "I no longer call you servants, but friends" (Jn 15:15). This does not suppress the category "God's will," but it gives another nuance to obedience: it is not the servile of a slave, but the commitment of an ally, a son, a wife, etc.

## 1. The Calling God

Christian theological anthropology needs to further delineate the reality of God and the reality of the human being that come into play in the vocation. The God of deism cannot be considered when speaking of *vocation*. Instead, the God of theism is strongly personal and *relational*. It is the traits of the Christian God that make the idea of vocation intelligible.

First of all, especially in a historical moment where religions intermingle, it is necessary to remember that in Judeo-Christianity, God is a personal reality. He is not an "energy of the cosmos", nor is it a dark, blind power like the Fate of the ancient Greeks. In the words of X. Zubiri (1898-1983),

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9 For example, Teresa of Calcutta's story of the "vocation within the vocation" has strong conjugal tones and presents that vocational experience as a pressing "plea" from Jesus, which is *more compelling than a mandate*. God is not monotonous, he handles many records to express his will: command, interpellation, invitation, supplication. Cf. MAASBURG, L. *La Madre Teresa de Calcuta: Un retrato personal*. Madrid: Palabra, 2012. Likewise, the father-son relationship is magnificently exposed in Henri Nouwen's classic: NOUWEN, H.J.M. *The Return of the Prodigal Son. A Story of Homecoming*. New York, Doubleday 1992.

this is the very nature of the Biblical God: to be “formally only the God of someone. “God” in the abstract does not exist for a Semite”.<sup>10</sup>

He is personal because He can relate: He counts the number of stars and each one *calls* by name. He searches every man and woman (Ps 139). In fact, characters like Moses (Ex 3:4) or Samuel are *called* by their own *name* (1Sm 3:6). In the Old Testament He appears as the God of concrete persons: God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob (Ex 3:6). That “someone” is not a pure individuality, but a patriarch of a tribe or member of the tribe: the God of Abram is the God of the tribe, belonging to a group of North-western Semites. *Only because He knows Abram can He call him.*

The Christian God transcends completely the visible and invisible world, does not depend on it to be and to act. Our faith professes the full sufficiency of God: He exists in Himself and by Himself. The person has the ability for *self-donation*. In God it happens from the beginning: He can give Himself entirely since He fully possess Himself. Such self-giving takes place within God: it is the Trinitarian life. The *saying* of the Father in the *Word* is a *generation* and giving to the *Son*. The Son is given to the Father, and the Spirit is exhaled in this dynamic of Father and Son giving. Trinitarian life is an eternal “flow” of mutual donation. God has created and maintains in the being what exists, by virtue of His freedom and His liberality. Freedom signals the full transcendence of God, the lordship of God in his actions. Liberality, for its part, refers to God’s generous love.

God’s oblation *ad extra* happens in the original creation (*calls to what does not exist*) and in the ongoing creation. The essence and existence of things depend on Him. If God could not *give Himself*, He could not *call us to communion* with Him and to that *identification* with Him. God’s will to call and donate thus reaches its fullness in His design of self-giving by grace. The *radical vocation* of the human being is to embrace this self-donation of God and to enter into friendship with Him (Gn 1:28). We have already called this a *theological vocation*.

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10 GARCÍA PEREGRÍN, E. *La investigación como colaboración con Dios en la creación*. Madrid: Bubok, 2015.

God gives Himself for love: *agape*. Nothing forces him to give Himself, He is not subjected to any fate, like the Greek gods. He does not suffer from any lack that obliges Him to seek remedy in other realities to satisfy it. And He gives Himself fully: He does not give them a substitute for God, but His very life. When accepting it, the believer receives a new “vocation”, a new *call* to be from what they are as creatures: that of mediations of the new life that God grants. And through it, He can make calls to conversion, to a vital mission, symbolically: to be *light*, to pluck, to plant, etc.<sup>11</sup>

God can talk to us; He can reveal to us. He's not a mute idol. *Vocation presupposes the ability, the will and the fact of God's communication to the human being*: He wants to call, He can call, He calls *by one way or another* (reading the Word, prayer, inner attraction, interpellation from the context...). And He reveals Himself and calls because He wants to commit Himself to *live* in a relationship of communion with Him and in a vital praxis. His love for the poor, the orphan, the foreigner and the widow will be made present through the behaviour of the right, merciful and compassionate man and woman (Ps 112:5).

In all the vocational processes of the Bible and the Christian tradition, God is the one taking the first step. It is He who calls, who takes the *initiative* to address another *person*, whom He recognises as such, and therefore in his/her capacity to be approached. As God has made us a gift to ourselves and wanted us to make us a gift of Himself, He has put in us a structure that allows Him to direct His word<sup>12</sup> to us.

## **2. The human being has the ability to respond**

The other focus of the anthropology of the vocation in Christianity is that the human being is a personal being. Human beings have interiority, are intelligent and are open to the knowledge of the reality. Thus, they are not determined: they make vital decisions, have certain control of their

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11 Cf. DE ALMEIDA, A.J. *Nuevos Ministerios: vocación, carisma y servicio en la Comunidad*. Barcelona: Herder, 2015.

12 Cf. RUBIO, L. *Nuevas vocaciones para un mundo nuevo: laicos, religiosos y presbíteros para una nueva evangelización*. Salamanca: Sígueme, 2002.



acts, and “are called” to become increasingly freer. Then, they can become a gif of themselves to other people and to God’s most personal reality: they are able to love.<sup>13</sup> A human being is an end in himself and should not be transformed into a useful means or object.

As a person, the human being enters into relationship with other human beings and with God, who has been made present and has revealed to him. The human being is made up of *interpersonal* dialogue and communication. The human being’s fulfilment<sup>14</sup> takes place in that *inter* of the relationship between “me-you”, “me-you people”.

K. Rahner (1904-1984) described the human being as “*listener of the Word and intermediary of God*”.<sup>15</sup> It is a critical feature for the vocation: God has given him the ability and desire to listen to his word and to recognize it as the word of God himself. Thus, the person is inhabited by an impulse of self-transcendence that nothing material can fill. Such openness and impulse are the conditions for being able to receive a *theological vocation* and embrace the free self-donation of God, which in Christ gained the highest rank and which in us, incorporated into Him by the Spirit, is translated into *grace* or *theological love*.

This love “fulfils the basic impulse of the human spirit towards self-transcendence”, “is the plenitude and fulfilment of our being”, “is the self-transcendence that reaches its summit” and acts to its fullness the dynamic potentiality of our spirit with its unlimited scope; “just as asking without limit is our capacity for self-transcendence, so being in love in an unlimited way [=love of God] is the fulfilment of that capacity”.<sup>16</sup> Within us there is a “space for the divine, a sanctuary for ultimate holiness”<sup>17</sup> and, therefore, we are oriented to the divine. There they enclose our *theological vocation* and

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13 Cf. TORRALBA ROSELLÓ, F. *La lógica del don*. Madrid: Khaf (Edelvives), 2012.

14 Cf. GIORDANI, B. *Respuesta del hombre a la llamada de Dios: estudio psicológico sobre la vocación*. Madrid: Sociedad de Educación Atenas, 1983.

15 Cf. Jam 1: 22 and, of course, RAHNER, K. *Oyente de la palabra: fundamentos para una filosofía de la religión*. Herder, 2009. I follow the author in the next paragraphs.

16 Quotes from LONERGAN, B., *Method in Theology*. London: Darton, Longmann & Todd, 1975, p. 133. 106 ff.

17 ID, page 103.

the first commandment; there they enclose the word of God in history as well as historical vocations and calls.

The *interlocution* implies that God speaks to us and that we speak to him. In the first case, God is like Me; in the second, like You. The first word, that of God, is the one of His revelation, of *His call(s)* and Promise(s). The second word, that one of the human being, is that of the answer and that of the prayer.<sup>18</sup>

Every word that *comes to* us asks for listening or attention (i.e., *go, move towards*). Since life is complex, the word will have many records and each will claim a different answer. Being responsible means, in everyday language, being obliged to answer for something or for someone as much as deciding and doing carefully. A responsible subject can be entrusted with tasks with the assurance that this person will carry them out, even if he or she is in trouble. Well, this is the decisive level of consciousness: the *responsible*, which subsumes the cognitive and is supported or hindered by feelings. There is responsibility *before* and responsibility *of or for*:

- *Responsibility before God.* It is before Him that we must account for our conduct, because He gives us the *theological vocation* and addresses to us the historical word (vocation, promise, mandate, instruction) with its specific demands. In several excerpts of the Scripture, there is some emphasis on the serious responsibility that commits either the people or the *calls* to a mission in the people. For example, in Ez 3:17-19 the prophet asked to be a sentinel of Israel and to admonish on behalf of God (Ez 3:20-21). Paul exclaims: “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16).<sup>19</sup>
- *Responsibility in favour of the other.* In the mission received, the person becomes responsible for its fulfilment and, to some

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18 BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 41.

19 We could also cite the book of Jonah, which shows the responsibility of the envoy: his announcement may *lead* to conversion and, therefore, to an end to the threats that hang over Nineveh. In fact, Jonah is a typical example of fear and resistance to seconding the mission.

extent, for the fate of the persons to whom he or she has been sent. The very announcement of misfortune is ordered to provoke conversion and thus bring about salvation.<sup>20</sup> Certain mediators, like Moses, intercede before God for the people.

The call does not unfold in the pure eternity of God, at an infinite distance from the human subject or flying over his or her consciousness. In that case, everything would be a divine monologue, something that God displays in itself, apart from all otherness, even the smallest. The call involves a *listener*, a subject who perceives it. The person will perceive it clearly or darkly, explicitly or implicitly; but the call is perceived. There is, therefore, a “voice” or a “word” that is heard. The moment of dialogue emerges. The person is raised to the status of interlocutor of God and will have to answer. We are facing a real drama, in which God is the creator of the human being and, at the same time, makes him a listener of his eventual word and puts him in the imperious position of taking charge of the call and reacting to it. Our will did not intervene with its consent when we were created, but in justification there must be consent and the conscience of the vocation comes into play. Such is the function of vocation in that economy of events or divine acts. Saint Augustine said:

*While he made you without you, he doesn't justify you without you. So he made you without your knowing it, he justifies you with your willing to consent it*.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. The role of the Church

In the theological language, the vocation is always *ecclesial*, so there is always a triangle of subjects involved: God, the called person and the Church (community subject). Leaving aside now that the Church itself is a community *called* (*ekklesia*), here we consider it as it intervenes in the personal vocation or in the collective vocation of an ecclesial group.

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20 Cf. Ez. 3:17-21 and the apologue of Jonah clearly formulated it.

21 AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Sermon* 169.

First, the Church has a role in the vocation to *theological life*. It aims to announce the living and true God and calls for faith and conversion. But the Church is not only an “interpreter” of God’s word, but a call to conversion to God and to become part of the Church. The baptism involves the gift of divine filiation and the incorporation into the Church: *theological vocation* and *ecclesial vocation* are bound in the “economy of salvation”. As St. Cyprian stated “No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his mother”.<sup>22</sup> He is therefore one of the vocational subjects.

Second, the Church is particularly involved in relation to two life states that belong, one to its structure (the ordained ministry) and the other to “its life and holiness” (the religious life).<sup>23</sup> The Church intervenes, through the bodies concerned, in the recognition of the vocation of the candidate who knocks at the doors of ordained ministry and religious life. It is therefore sensible for the Church and, more specifically, the institution concerned to try to ensure that they can welcome the applicant. In fact, at first, it is clarifying the mediation of a companion for the personal discernment of a person who experiences surprise, confusion and doubt.<sup>24</sup>

*Lumen Gentium* exposes the competence of the hierarchy in relation to life according to the evangelical counsels.<sup>25</sup> He concludes by pointing out the multiple implications of the ecclesial subject:

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22 St CYPRIAN, *De Ecclesiae catholicae unitate*, 6: PL 4, 503a.

23 According to LG 44. With regard to religious life, the hierarchy examines and endorses the validity of the new institutes and ensures their fidelity and that of the old to the charism (including sending apostolic visitors), regulates legally the various aspects of religious life (vows, common life, charismatic service), approves the *Rules* or *Constitutions*, promotes vocations to the various institutions and prays for them. For potential candidates, this ecclesial intervention is a guarantee of the evangelical inspiration of the corresponding institute (Cf. FERNÁNDEZ CASTAÑO, J.J. *La vida religiosa: exposición teológico-jurídica*. Salamanca: Editorial San Esteban, 1998.

24 QUINZÁ, X., *La cultura del deseo y la seducción de Dios* (Cuadernos FyS, 24). Santander: Sal Terrae, 1993

25 This is also stated by SCHILLEBEECKX, E., *La misión de la Iglesia*. Salamanca: Sígueme, 1978, pp. 268-272 and CARRASCAL AGUILAR, *Teología de la vocación*, UPSA, 1997, pp. 542 et seq.

*“The Church not only raises the religious profession to the dignity of a canonical state by her approval, but even manifests that this profession is a state consecrated to God by the liturgical setting of that profession. The Church itself, by the authority given to it by God, accepts the vows of the newly professed. It begs aid and grace from God for them by its public prayer. It commends them to God, imparts a spiritual blessing on them and accompanies their self-offering by the Eucharistic sacrifice”.<sup>26</sup>*

All this can be applied to the Lasallian Family, as part of the Church. We can encapsulate what the vocation brings to the person with the following list:

- The vocation *opens a wide horizon to the human being*, considering the “horizon” as the “set of possibilities or perspectives offered in a subject, situation or matter”. Not having a horizon is equivalent to not having possibilities, being in a totally constricted space, with no margin to move; this is not the case with vocation. Those who live *from* faith adjust their listening to perceive what the call to love and service<sup>27</sup> should be like *in their own situation*.
- The vocation *affects the whole of life and its duration*. It has a history and is not a call for an act, mandate or *one-off* assignment. The mandate, once accomplished, *is left behind*. Instead, the vocation is always *ahead*: just as the imaginary line of the horizon moves on as we advance, the sought God is always ahead and the charismatic mission will always be with us and before us. The Christian vocation is to be experienced

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26 LG 45. Cf. *Acta Synodalia*, II-IV, 63s; III-VIII, 135.

27 For example, what horizon do those called to consecrated life have before them? Their vocation to love places them before a horizon both twofold and single: that of the search for God and that of a service in the Church and society. Double and single, because they seek the God of the Kingdom (not another) and serve the Kingdom of God (not another) and because the first and greatest commandment (to love God) is inseparable from the second (to love one’s neighbour). They thus have an ultimate theological goal or place: God and his Kingdom; and we have here and now a social place that God calls us to exercise a mission: non-believers, poor, children, helpless elders, etc.

*totis velis, omnibus remis* (“at full sail, with all the oars”), in the words of St. Augustine.<sup>28</sup>

- The vocation *marks a direction to personal life*, by answering the questions “who am I?, where do I come from?, where do I go?”, which deal with the identity, origin and goal of the person asking. Thus, the vocation involves life as a movement between two terms. We understand the final question (“where am I going?”) as the final goal that one sets for oneself and could accomplish (“where do *I want* and try to go?”). When life is understood as a vocation, the person has a *vital goal* that he intentionally pursues. That life is focused, it has clear objectives, a precise direction.
- It is a *theological vocation*, which *is given* to the person and which the person accepts. Theological vocation is a vocation to holiness: if we believe in this vocation and feel any particular touch or invitation from the Spirit to live it, we can embrace it as our vital objective. Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916) wrote,

*“As soon as I thought there was a God, I understood that I could do nothing but live for Him: my religious vocation dates from the same hour as my faith. God is so great. There is so much difference between God and what is not Him...”*

- The vocation, besides providing some focus, *drives* life. It is a “thrust” that helps us move forward. It is a claim, a “grace”: it enriches, strengthens and provokes some tension. Having a “what for” stirs and “galvanizes” the energies. In different forms of human vocation, we find that the concrete task in which the vocation takes shape requires a lot of time and energy. Such dedication is intensified, for example, in the maternal vocation: a mother never ceases to be a mother and makes her a dedicated, selfless, courageous creature.

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28 AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Confessions*, 7.9.13.

Once the horizon is clear, it becomes hazy before discovering the vocation; once received the *vital orientation*, those who have consented to this call let the Spirit lead them. When Teresa of Jesus speaks of “a determined determination”, she points out the radicality of the decision.<sup>29</sup>

- The vocation even demands a willingness to take risks: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24). Paul’s testimony about his missionary adventure and the dangers he faced confirms this.<sup>30</sup> Faced with such a challenge, it is normal to feel fear and resistance, but those who accept the vocation hope to receive the necessary strength to endure the difficulties and face the opposition: “If you have your *why* for life, you can get by with almost any *how*” (Nietzsche).<sup>31</sup> The attitude of basic trust is essential: the God who calls and trusts the mission will be able to respond to the call and support it, without detracting from the demands or drama of life.
- Thanks to vocation, *life gains weight, relevance, meaning, value*. It acquires consistency, thickness, “seriousness” and “prominence”. It is not an empty or meaningless life; however, it cannot be necessary obviated the feeling of failure of the servant of Yahweh: “In vain have I wearied, in wind, and in nothing have I spent my strength” (Is 49:4a). Vocation is different from a hobby: it refers to a person’s identity and fundamental project, not secondary interests, even if they are healthy and beneficial to the person. These are not enough to give meaning and weight to living.

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29 TERESA OF AVILA, *The Way of Perfection*, 21.2.

30 Charles de Foucauld asked three things of those who entered his Fraternity: “To be ready to have one’s head cut off, to be ready to die of hunger, to obey him in spite of his indignity.” Cf. BAEZA, A.L. *Carlos de Foucauld. La fragancia del evangelio*. Madrid: PPC, 2016.

31 NIETZSCHE, F., *The Twilight of the Idols*, 12.

- Through vocation, *life gains unity* and intelligibility to those who faithfully embrace the call.<sup>32</sup> Life, thus, does not consist of little pieces of events and actions, in unfinished business. The persistent search for truth, good and beauty are combined with dedication to the cause of the gospel according to the charism itself and according to the life plan drawn up for the personal and community *Kairos*,<sup>33</sup> with frequency to the tasks entrusted, with the execution of the most varied activities for the glory of God: all this gives unity to life.<sup>34</sup> In our current culture, marked by the guidelines and stimuli of the consumer society, there is the risk of *having experiences*, without *letting the experiences transform us*, of accumulating information rather than knowledge, of obtaining knowledge without achieving wisdom. When life is experienced as a vocation, people mature and *get transformed* through experiences: they achieve their theological truth, their configuration with Christ.
- With vocation, *life is flexible*. The changes that each situation calls for are assumed. Life includes moments of activity and passivity, and it is necessary to integrate both of them. The mission of the person and the community will go through processes of revision, change and innovation: it is “law of life” to pay attention to the demands that with low or powerful voice present the human and ecclesial contexts. Thus, a religious may be given appointments that change his life circumstances, the type of activity he is engaged in, the position he is called to exercise. “Versatility” or the ability to easily adapt to different functions matters. The current restructuring of entities and the

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32 Regarding fidelity in our time, Cf. USG, *Para una vida consagrada fiel. Desafíos antropológicos a la formación*. Roma: Litos, 2005.

33 Regarding human time, cf. MARÍAS, J., *Antropología filosófica*. Madrid: Alianza, 1987, pp. 179-186; BYUNG-CHUL HAN, *El aroma del tiempo. Un ensayo filosófico sobre el arte de demorarse*. Barcelona, Herder, 2015; ID., *La sociedad del cansancio*, Barcelona, Herder, 2012

34 We insist on perseverance, in the face of J.G. Ballard’s cynical maxim: “I only believe in the next five minutes.” Cf. ESTANDARTE.COM, *El ideario de J. G. Ballard*, website, 2013. Available at [https://www.estandarte.com/noticias/autores/ideario-de-j-g-ballard-en-qu-creo\\_2202.html](https://www.estandarte.com/noticias/autores/ideario-de-j-g-ballard-en-qu-creo_2202.html). Accessed on 17 January 2020.



updating of individuals and institutions belong to the same order of things.<sup>35</sup>

It is the open nature of the vocation. People move in a relationship of alliance that does not suppress all subsequent listening at once, which leads to obey the new call, perhaps with some pain. Without breaking a major or minor continuity, there is a *novelty* or discontinuity. It is the peculiar note of human time as a *historical* time, open to new possibilities and, from the point of view of faith, open to new *calls* that mark new paths of follow-up. The person's life, from a religious perspective, appears as a microhistory of salvation. And a good biography will show the unity of that story in the difference of its phases, the continuity in the novelty of each stage, although without neglecting the breakdowns that have occurred; in particular, a decisive breakdown will be the one of conversion; and major breakdown will be the one of the "second conversion". It is illustrated by conversions such as Paul, Augustine, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila....<sup>36</sup>

Some authors, such as J. Sastre,<sup>37</sup> rightly claim that behind the vocational crisis there is a poor understanding of the anthropology and theology of the Christian vocation and of particular vocations, since, as we have seen, Christian life is constitutively vocational. In our contemporary society, an anthropological model of "person without vocation" predominates, as if it could renounce the meaning of life as a vocation, in the sense of call and response. Therefore, it is necessary that there are trained people who, living their own vocation, give answers to expectations and guide searches, promoting a new "culture of vocations": openness to life, gratuity, trust, availability, etc....

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35 There are many examples of "vocation within the vocation" in the Church's tradition: John Baptist de La Salle, Carmen Sallés, Charles de Foucauld, Teresa of Calcutta.... Cf. CHITTISTER, J., *Llamados a la plenitud: vocación y vocaciones*. Santander: Sal Terrae, 2013.

36 Each case of conversion is different; we can therefore speak of an "analogy of conversion". Paul does not use that term for his case, although the Damascus experience brought a sharp change in his journey.

37 SASTRE, J. *Acompañar: Por los caminos del Espíritu*. Monte Carmelo, Burgos, 2002 y *El discernimiento vocacional. Apuntes para una pastoral juvenil*. Madrid: San Pablo, 1996.

These are the key principles of the anthropology of the Christian vocation, following J. M. Cabiedas, who presents an interesting and up-to-date synthesis:<sup>38</sup>

- *Revelation is about God himself*, and the human being is the recipient of this revelation and salvation. In fact, the knowledge of God and of salvation in Christ reveals to us the definitive vocation of the person: “Christ fully manifests man to man himself and discovers to him the sublimity of his vocation”.<sup>39</sup> It is from this revelation that Christianity claims a proper concept of the human being: that is why we speak of Christian anthropology.
- The core of Christian anthropology is that *the human being is created in the “image and likeness of God”* and called to be the son of God in Christ. It appears both in the Old Testament, where the human being appears as the centre of creation and receives the life of the divine breath (Gen 2-3), and in the New Testament, where it is stated that the image of God is Christ (2Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; Heb 1:2; Phil 2:6). The human being, man and woman, has been called to become the image of Jesus. Conformity with Christ constitutes the deepest part of his being.
- *The human being is a personal being open to transcendence*, not just another object in the world: he is an unrepeatable subject. The concept of “person” develops this character of the human being. It has dignity and value in itself, not in terms of what it does or the usefulness it brings to others.
- *God creates calling*. In fact, it is God’s call that constitutes the reality of things, naming them and establishing an alliance. In the Semitic mentality of the Old Testament it is clear: by giving a name of a thing, by notifying identity, it is given functional capacity, it is the self of the thing. Therefore, the vocational call is accompanied by a new name. God’s free call and choice of Israel to establish an alliance

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38 CABIEDAS TEJERO, J.M. *Antropología de la vocación cristiana: de persona a persona*. Lux mundi 101. Salamanca: Sígueme, 2019.

39 GS 22.

with Him is a decisive factor of identity and of self-existence as a people. Biblical anthropology understands the person from what the person is called to be: to reproduce the image of the Son.<sup>40</sup>

- *Recognizing God as Creator and Lord reverts to the human person* and opens it to a relationship of obedience to God as proper. The answer to God is the metaphysical foundation of human freedom. Obediential anthropology becomes vocational anthropology. The concrete and personal vocational project, embodied in a concrete way of life, is the most authentic and true realization of oneself, the deepest personal achievement. These elements are fully visible in the image of Jesus of Nazareth: he lives the relationship of filiation with God whom he calls Abba and responds with all his life to the will of the Father: “He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8).
- *The vocational way is the way of Jesus.* Christ is the conventional image according to which creation is realized (Col 1:15-20). The self of the human person is to become truly the image of Christ (Rom 5:12-19; 1Cor 11:7; 15:49; 2Cor 3:18; 4:4.6; Phil 3:21; Col 3:10). The most successful formulation is that of Rom 8:29-30.
- *Christian life consists of availability and openness to God’s plan.* Human life appears as a responsible response, sustained and assisted by grace to God’s call, that is, as a vocation. In this journey different routes are possible.<sup>41</sup>
- *God continues to act, call and choose.* The free vocational response is not only on the plane of the intersection between human and divine freedom, but also forms the backbone of God’s saving plan.

It is necessary, therefore, to establish processes that help this “culture”, so that people can find their way: the one in which their passion and their

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40 Cf. AZEVEDO, MARCELLO de C. *Vidas consagradas: caminos y encrucijadas*. Estella: Verbo Divino, 1995, p. 24.

41 Cf. FIDALGO ALAÍZ, J. M., LÁZARO CANTERO, R. y CABALLERO, J. L. *Son tus huellas el camino: reflexiones sobre vocación y libertad*. Madrid: Ediciones Cristianidad, 2018.

dedication may be combined in order to live a profession that turns into mission. The sum of the four dimensions will be personal vocation. In order for it to happen, it is required a “culture” of discernment and accompaniment, inviting different experiences, according to the following scheme:

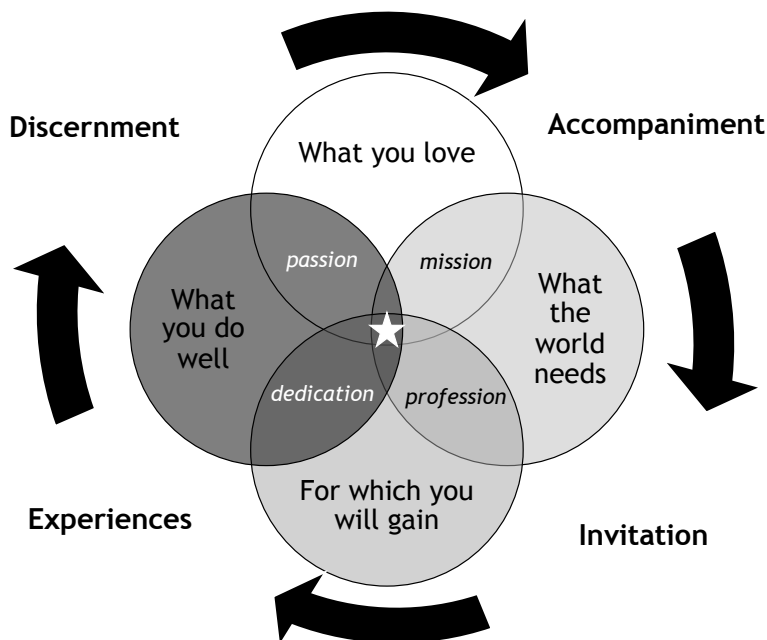


Figure 1: The human and Christian vocation (in the centre), supported by an appropriate culture.<sup>42</sup>

In short: “vocation” is a key word to be able to write and interpret life from Christian anthropology, a word that generates life in the Lasallian Family. To feel and embrace a call is not to walk in the dark, clubbing blind, wandering around.<sup>43</sup>

42 Similar schemes are commonly used in Anglo-Saxon vocational literature. This figure is based on three recommended readings: HAHNENBERG, E. P. *Awakening vocation: a theology of Christian call*. Collegeville, Minneapolis: Liturgical Press, 2010; JAMISON, C. *The Disciples' Call: Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day*, 2014 y PALMER, P. J. *Let your life speak: listening for the voice of vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

43 Cf. CAMPOS, M. y SAUVAGE, M. *Encontrando a Dios en las profundidades de la mente y el corazón*. Roma: Instituto de los Hermanos de las Escuelas Cristianas, 2014, n. 25.

The calling, the vocation, provides horizon, direction, impetus, meaning and relevance, unity and flexibility to human life. At the same time, it demands: choice against indecision, rupture against longing, energy against passivity, renunciation and patience against immediate enjoyment (Heb. 12:2), resistance and resilience, fidelity against instability, versatility against rigidity, creativity against routine. It demands total and unconditional surrender, passion and zeal, renouncement and sacrifice, fidelity to the call. Claim all personal being.

It seems clear that it can frighten, because it has its rather big portion of *challenge*: it attracts, and will even captivate, and at the same time it can become a shocking experience. But in the face of such a magnificent gift and such a demanding challenge *the only gesture that saves us is to say yes*, the proper response is to consent from within. Thus, in the midst of our fragility, poverty and sin, we are becoming in everything we do. It is important to keep in mind the three levels of relationship with a value that indicates L. M. Rulla: *complacency* (I accept value, but I do not allow myself to change for it), *identification* (I live in value in function of myself), *internalization* (I accept value for what it means in itself and because it takes me out of myself and I try to overcome dissonant needs). The protagonist of *Gilead*, Marilyn Robinson's wonderful novel, says:

*"A great benefit of religious vocation is that it helps you focus. It provides you with basic idea of what you're being asked to do and also what you might ignore".<sup>44</sup>*

## Questions for discussion

- Considering vocation as a "treasure" reminds us of the parable of talents (Mt 25: 14-30 and parallels) and the different attitudes towards received wealth: hiding it, inverting it, putting it in motion.... What is our most frequent attitude when considering our own vocation?

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44 ROBINSON, M. *Gilead*. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2011.

- The vocation, as presented here, starts from a purely Christian perspective and from the anthropology of the Catholic tradition. However, it is not incompatible with various forms of engagement in other religious or merely human and altruistic traditions. What experience do we have on this?
- Circular 475 offers us several “best practices” to foster and accompany vocations. Which of them are especially necessary in our environment to help us to have a more faithful understanding of the vocation?

## II. THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION: COMMUNION AND MISSION

**T**he word “Church” (“*ekklesia*”, from the Greek “to call out”) means “convocation”, as a way of designating the assemblies of the people of Israel (Acts 19:39), generally of a religious character. The members of the Church, Christians, are also designated as “the chosen” (Rom 8:33; Col 3:12; 2 Tim 2:10; Tit 1:1; 1 Pe 2:9) and as “the called” (Rom 1:6; 8:28; 1 Cor 1:2.9.24; Jud 1).

The vocation-mission of the Church and, therefore, of the Lasallian Family as a whole, is, likewise, to convene individuals and peoples to enter into the alliance sealed by God, that is, to “evangelize”: “Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize”.<sup>45</sup> The Church must make known, invite to welcome and teach to live the theological vocation inscribed by God in each person and definitively revealed in Christ.

There is no Church without mission, just as there is no Church without communion. Communion and mission refer to the very mystery of the Church and her vocation in the world, of her participation in *Missio Dei*. Since the day of Pentecost, the Church has considered herself as a people of “brothers” who share faith and goods and as a people of “witnesses” sent to young people to preach the Gospel. In fact, we could affirm that the witness, that “look at how they love each other” is the first and foremost task of the Christian (Acts 4:32-37). Thus, each faithful Christian receives his vocation and his charism, oriented towards mission, with its concrete mediations, which are condensed in the various forms of Christian life. Remembering this is especially important for those ways of life that at some points in history have been considered the sole custodians of the one mission, such as ordained ministry or religious life.

By nature, the response and call to the motions of the Holy Spirit involve diversity and multiformity, but always in a single mission. This pluralism is not contrary to unity, just as unity does not imply uniformity. Within the Church, at least in theory, there is a legitimate diversity of accents and priorities or initiatives, in line with the diverse needs and circumstances of each time and place, in a centripetal movement that allows to enjoy

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45 EN 14.



harmony where each particularity is integrated into the participation of the mission of all the baptized. As then-Bishop Jorge Bergoglio explained in 1994, “It is good to place religious life in that *multifaceted dimension* that constitutes the Church and through which it manifests itself its profound mystery. The charism of a religious family is not a closed heritage to be cared for, it is rather an “integrated facet” in the body of the Church attracted to that centre, which is Christ”.<sup>46</sup> In this same movement it is good to situate the configuration of “charismatic families” and the efforts in pursuit of a true shared mission in the Church.

The multiformity and complementarity of vocations and ministries are not a break in the unity of the Church, but a manifestation of the freedom of the calling Spirit and of the responding human being. Thus, the vital constants of consecrated life are a charismatic gift for the whole Church. In this way we read in *Lumen Gentium*:

*“The evangelical counsels [...] are a divine gift, which the Church received from its Lord and which it always safeguards with the help of His grace. Church authority has the duty, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of interpreting these evangelical counsels, of regulating their practice and finally to build on them stable forms of living. Thus, it has come about, that, as if on a tree which has grown in the field of the Lord, various forms of solidarity and community life, as well as various religious families have branched out in a marvellous and multiple way from this divinely given seed. Such a multiple and miraculous growth augments both the progress of the members of these various religious families themselves and the welfare of the entire Body of Christ”.*<sup>47</sup>

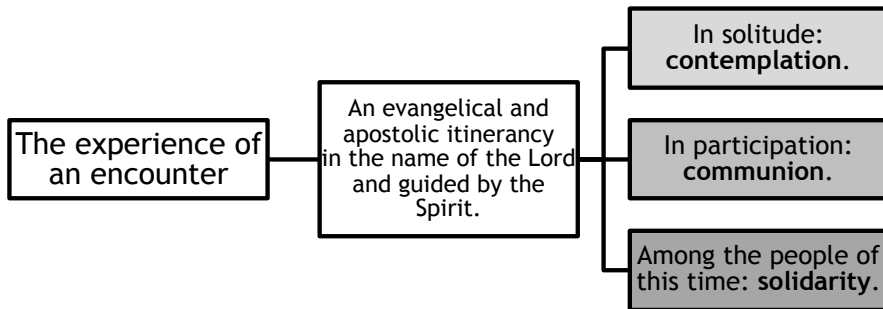
The consecration of the Christian is baptism and thus can acquire meaning. Any form of Christian life is a concretion of the baptismal consecration and a mediation to live it to the full. As a divine initiative, it is a gift that becomes our task to the extent that it requires us to put all our capabilities and potentialities freely into play. It has the character of totality

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46 Cf. IX ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World*, 2-9 October 1994.

47 LG 43.

in a double sense. On the one hand, it includes the whole person in all its dimensions and facets. On the other hand, it includes all life and all aspects of existence. Religious consecration is expressed in evangelical counsels and requires nothing more than baptismal consecration (which already, in itself, demands everything).<sup>48</sup>



*Figure 2: Outline of the Christian vocation from the encounter with Jesus Christ.*<sup>49</sup>

## 1. The Universal Call to Holiness

Vatican II, in the *Lumen Gentium* Constitution, offers a fundamental chapter, the fifth, on the *universal vocation to holiness*. It states that the call to holiness is *universal*. Holiness is not the patrimony of a class of selected people, but a gift and call to all members of the Church. A vision that established two categories is left behind: the upper one would be bishops, clergy and religious and the lower one would be the rest of the faithful. Some sought holiness, others salvation, some practiced the precepts and counsels, others the precepts, some would devote themselves to the things of the spirit, others to the business of the world, some would follow the

48 Cf. GUTIÉRREZ VEGA, L., *Teología sistemática de la vida religiosa*. Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 1979, pp. 214-222.

49 From LÉCRIVAIN, P. *Una manera de vivir. Proponer la vida religiosa*, Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 2010, p. 163.

Lord “more closely” — a formula also of Vatican II and later documents, such as *Vita Consecrata* — the others at some distance.<sup>50</sup>

The recognition of the universal call to holiness can have an unexpected effect: a precious good, when it ceases to be privative of a cenacle of select countries and is generalized or democratized, seems at risk of devaluation. Has the same thing happened in our case, has there been a loss of tension, for example, in religious life? However, in order to expose the Christian vision of vocation, all forms of life must take away any elitist sense of their calling. In all cases each vocation is a memory and impulse of the universal call.

Everyone can live his vocation to holiness *in* his own way of life: lay, official ministerial or religious. Each state is limited — it does not contain the whole of ecclesial life — and therefore they are complementary: in the Church we are given to live the “circularity of communion”, overcoming the temptations of confrontation and the disqualification of states other than one’s own. Von Balthasar will say that:

*“All forms of the state of life acquire their ultimate meaning only in the pure reference to one another and in a kind of mutual inhabitation (circumincessio) by which love becomes the ultimate form of ecclesial life”.*<sup>51</sup>

This complementarity does not prevent some of the forms of life from seeking the maximum. Some believers, since the first centuries of the Church, have felt the charismatic call to embody fully, in the dynamics of the “most”, these essential aspects. They have done so by rediscovering the value of consecration and vocation, through public commitment and witness in fraternity, service and prayer. Throughout the history of the Church, we can see how every time one of the cardinal points of the

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50 On the use of comparatives in Vatican II, cf. CABIELLES DE COS, L., «Vocación universal a la santidad y superioridad de la vida religiosa en los capítulos V y VI de la Const. «Lumen Gentium», en *Claretianum* 19 (1979), pp. 5-96. The author records different comparisons, not all of them related to religious life, used in the Council. He also points out that the conciliar text “remains in *clear ambiguity* when it seeks to point out the relationship between holiness and evangelical counsels” (*art. cit.*, 89).

51 BALTHASAR, H.U. von. *Estados de vida del cristiano. Ensayo*. Madrid: Encuentro, 1994, p. 288.

Church's mission and presence has been weakened, calls have arisen, for example, to religious life, which have set out to "exaggerate" this area, to put it in the spotlight, within the primordial union of every Christian mission. Whether it is the selfless, humble service on the margins of the society of so many consecrated, such as the witness of a living and questioning faith that leads to the proclamation of the gospel "to the ends of the world" or the experience of a fraternity of true brothers and sisters, children of the same God, religious try to restore the deteriorating face of the Church by making "evangelical memory", in the expression of Jean Claude Guy,<sup>52</sup> underlining the double aspect of communion and mission.

Often, in speaking of this "closer", although Jesus can never be followed "from afar",<sup>53</sup> one has tried to see a state of "greater perfection" or testimony to the detriment of others. It happens with the ordained ministry in front of all other forms of life and with the religious life in front of the laity. However, if we start from the theological reflection on consecrated life, we see that, in a harmonious system of Christian life forms, each one has its specific peculiarities, not defined from what is done (which, in short, is common), but from what is, in response to a charism received freely. From each way of life one can reason the others.

On the other hand, the Church of communion is the Church of mission, they are two aspects of the same reality, since the whole Church is sent, announcer and servant of the Kingdom and all believers are subjects of the mission,<sup>54</sup> each spreading the faith "according to his own condition of life".<sup>55</sup> Internal communion makes credible the Church of Jesus, which is to appear, first and foremost, as a community built through "mutual dependence", as the Body of Christ.<sup>56</sup>

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52 Cf. GUY, Jean-Claude. *La Vie religieuse mémoire évangélique de l'Église*. Paris: Centurion, 1987. Quoted by LÉCRIVAIN, P. *Una manera de vivir. Proponer la vida religiosa hoy*. Madrid: Publicaciones claretianas, 2010.

53 Cfr. all reasoning with biblical and magisterial bases on the "closer" follow-up of APARICIO RODRÍGUEZ, Á. *Inspiración bíblica de la vida consagrada*. Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 2011. Chapter 9 (pp. 327-366).

54 *Ad Gentes*, 2.

55 LG, 17.

56 Cf. MR. 4.

The mission is carried out in making Christ present in the world through personal witness and that this is the challenge of all forms of Christian life. It is a call to all baptized to let themselves be conformed by Christ, to make him present and operative in the world for the salvation of many. Then will come the concrete tasks, such as bringing Jesus to young people through education, social action or humble daily dedication.<sup>57</sup>

We therefore recover the intuition that *communion* and *mission* together form the vital environment that combines all the faithful in the Church.<sup>58</sup> They are the two axes of the Christian faith, which allow us to understand, or rather, to introduce ourselves into the identity or mystery of the Church:

*“Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion”.*<sup>59</sup>

According to *Lumen Gentium*, each member of the Church is *called* to attain holiness through their specific vocation (way of life) and the performance of the missions in which it is embodied, not in spite of them or apart from them. Let us look now at some of the details of these life forms.

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57 It is valid for every Christian, but it is worth remembering that the religious is “on mission” by virtue of his own consecration, manifested according to the plan of the Institute itself. The charism of the founder and the Institute, which is discerned and verified by the Church, will contemplate concrete means and a certain “nature”, all of them directed to the same mission: the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the fully consecrated.

58 I follow throughout the section the reflection of Botana, A., *Compartir Carisma y misión con los laicos*. Vitoria: Frontera Hegian, 2008.

59 ChL 32.4.

## 2. Baptism and Forms of Life in the Church

After all, it seems clear that the “vocation to holiness”, common to all Christians, is concretized in different forms of life and part of baptism, which is the true consecration. With these keys we can read two texts of Saint Paul that enlighten us in the understanding of this call.

For example, Paul’s Hymn in his Letter to the Ephesians makes this reality very explicit (Eph 1:3-14). In it he speaks of choice *from the beginning of time*, to be consecrated, but it is through Jesus Christ, the Consecrated, that we become adopted children, sealing a new covenant with the seal of the Holy Spirit. It is, therefore, a universal call and at the same time a personal one, which is made completely free of charge by the saving will of God, without any merit on our part. And this call is at the same time a gift and a task, because it invites us to continue the work of preaching the Good News initiated by Jesus configuring us according to him. Although it is not explicitly named, we can see both the Eucharistic and the Baptismal dynamics, which is the sacrament that opens us to the faith and incorporates us into the community. By Baptism, as the Second Vatican Council reminds us, “all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity”.<sup>60</sup>

It is also thought-provoking the idea that consecration is total, but its experience is not “once and for all”, but that it is progressive, has its own pedagogy and process. This statement reveals several interesting truths of faith. On the one hand, it reminds us that by our own will we cannot reach the holiness that God calls us, that is, it is not a matter of “effort”, since as creatures we barely reflect God’s glory as a mirror (and that in the best case). It is the Trinitarian God himself, through his Spirit, who is gradually consecrating us, transforming us little by little into his image, which we could translate by being procedurally configured in the way of Christ, “from below and from within”, from the incarnation to the hour of the cross.<sup>61</sup>

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60 LG 40.

61 Cf. CORDOVILLA PÉREZ A., *Gramática de la encarnación: la creación en Cristo en la teología de K. Rahner y Hans Urs von Balthasar*. Madrid : Universidad Pontificia Comillas, 2004, p. 342.

Christian consecration radiates from the scheme of sanctification as a configuration in the way of God, not from “sacralization” or objective separation. It is, therefore, a matter of choice and grace and a path always directed towards plenitude. No one can give himself the Christian and charismatic identity. It is always received as a call, gift and task, always respecting personal freedom.<sup>62</sup>

Any consecration has a strong communal character. That is why it is important to experience it, to celebrate it and to make it visible in the Church, as a community of people called to sanctification. Insertion into the charisms of the Church can only occur if it is inspired by the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit. They are community charisms that are given to everyone.<sup>63</sup>

### **a) The lay vocation**

The lay vocation in the Church is regularly exposed in contrast to others, which may reduce it to negative terms: “they are those who are not...”. The Second Vatican Council also does so, but when it does so in positive terms, they expose important keys:

*“The term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world”.*<sup>64</sup>

This vocation is developed much more in later documents, such as the *Catechism* or, above all, *Christifideles Laici* (ChL, 1988). In them, the description of the lay vocation focuses on the transformation of the

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62 Hereafter I follow GARCÍA PAREDES, J.C.R. *Teología de las formas de vida cristiana III*. Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 1996.

63 Cf. BERZOSA MARTÍNEZ, R. *El camino de la vocación cristiana: de la vocación humana a la cristiana-bautismal y a la específica-ecclesial*. Estella: Verbo Divino, 1991.

64 LG 31a.

structures of the world: marriage, politics on the front line, the economy, the environment, culture, sport, etc. Their *call* is to humanize these structures in their daily reality and illuminate them in the light of the gospel: promote appropriate legislation and ensure its fulfilment, elaborate a precise critique of ideologies, denounce with their word and way of life “idolatries” (of money, political power, race, the State, pleasure) and discrimination.

We already know that there can be a “vocation within the vocation” and this is even clearer in the laity. Just as Christian marriage embraces a marriage project of life, which has its “natural” consistency, so the theological vocation of the Christian can assume and promote the project or “vocation” political, medical, philosophical, etc. A Christian married and dedicated to medicine could live the marital and medical “vocations” by integrating them into theological, analogous to how a consecrated person who is dedicated to healing, research, teaching, etc. — does it. These “vocations within the vocation” connect with the mission of Jesus.

Herein lies the need to deepen the vocation of the Associates in La Salle: a lay person who, from his or her family choice, his or her work and his or her concrete life, publicly chooses to share the way of following Jesus from the concrete ways of the Lasallian tradition, joining the Brothers and becoming co-responsible for the mission entrusted to the Lasallian Family.

## **b) The vocation to ordained ministry**

After the Second Vatican Council, the theology of the presbyterate was renewed, especially through the document *Presbyterium Ordinis* (PO, 1965). It recalls that the whole Church is ministerial, within and toward the human community of which it is part and to which it is sent. But not all members have the same role (Rom 12:4). Certain members are *called* by God, in and through the Church, to special service of the community. They are the ordained ministers: bishops, priests, deacons.<sup>65</sup>

By history and tradition, ordained ministers form the “hierarchy” of the Church, so there is an inevitable distinction between *charism* and

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65 CCC 1142.



*institution*.<sup>66</sup> The Church is God's people and forms a community of God's children, made brethren in Christ and guided by the Spirit.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, it also has a hierarchical structure, *ordered for the good of the community*.

In accordance with this structure, some in the Church receive, through apostolic succession, the mission of "pastors" to nourish and govern the community.<sup>68</sup> They do this by performing a triple role: *teaching, sanctifying, ruling*.

The Church as a whole, by vocation, is a prophetic, priestly and kingly people. And every believer, by baptism, enters into it and participates in the aforementioned (he is a prophet, a priest, a king). In fact, every member of the Church has received the anointing of the *Spirit*. The ordained minister is, by *vocation*, a servant of Christ and administrator of the mysteries of God, minister of the New Covenant. The source of charisms is not the hierarchy, but the Spirit. It is up to the bishops to discern them, but not to raise them all, much less to stifle them. From their service to unity, they will see to it that

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66 Studies of God's people in the Old Testament already speak of the contrast between prophetic charism and certain institutions, that is, the opposition between religion (typical of the priesthood) and faith (embodied by the prophets). The antithesis of the institutional (the hierarchical) and the charismatic has been used to assign ordained ministers (especially the hierarchy) to the sphere of the institutional and to exclude them from the sphere of the charismatic and to assign the charismatic to the religious. Is it fair such allocation of roles? Power and dominance (*sacra potestas*), law (law, sanctions), organizational or structures, preservation of what exists and distancing from the people are easily associated with the institutional; freedom, spontaneity, creativity and novelty, dynamic, authority of the witness's word, protest against the institutional and overweight structures, closeness and empathy with the people are associated with the charismatic. Root of the charismatic and its notes (freedom, etc.) would be the *Spirit*. Note that St. Paul presents charisms, ministries and operations in a coordinated manner (cf. 1 Cor 12:4-6): he also lists among the charisms (if 1 Cor 12:4-11 is combined with 12:27-30) that of government (12:28), to which it must be added that the bishops are successors of the Twelve, regardless of whether in the enumeration of 12:28 we must identify the reference of "apostles" with the Twelve (exclusively or even exclusively).

67 "From their rebirth in Christ, there exists among all the Christian faithful a true equality regarding dignity and action" (*Code of Canon Law*: can. 208).

68 The ordained minister is a shepherd (Acts 20:28; 1 Pe 5:2) and therefore he must be set up with the *good shepherd* (Jn 10), that is, with Jesus, who came to serve and gave his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45).

they contribute to the vitality of the Church. With the rest of the believers, ministers are *called* to holiness in order to witness, preach and teach the gospel, preside over the celebration and administration of the sacraments, lead the Christian community entrusted to them and foster communion.<sup>69</sup> Through these four functions, they contribute to the growth of the community in its essential dimensions of *martyrdom* — *kérygma* (announcement), *leitourgy* (liturgy), *diakonía* (service), and *koinonía* (communion).

In the past the ministry of priests was concentrated on the celebration of *sacraments*<sup>70</sup> but they also have the mission of *announcing*, teaching and catechesis. By *service* they promote community ministries and are close to the weakest. In the performance of their vocation-mission they represent Christ, live their configuration with Him, and walk towards holiness in Him, the only Holy One (1 Tim 3:4-5).

### **c) The vocation to consecrated life**

In the early Christian communities, the ideal to be attained was “to be in everything like Christ” and, therefore, to aspire to live the Christian vocation to the full. Martyrdom can be placed in this same context, since faithfulness included sharing the destiny of Jesus, dead on the cross, and of the apostles.

At the same time, some Christians men and women renounce marriage in order to consecrate themselves entirely to God, imitating the ascetic, exposed, audacious style of Jesus, chaste, poor, listener of the Word, prayerful.... Sometimes in solitude and sometimes together with others, in groups, they tried to remember the radicality of the Christian vocation and from there arises the order of virgins, itinerant ascetics, anchorites and the martyrs. This tradition also embodies the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, with its own nuances.

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. LG 28b, PO 4-6.

<sup>70</sup> It is significant that in the ritual of ordination the bishop gives to the priest the paten and the chalice, “the offering of the holy people” which he is called to present to God (CCC 1574).

Different ways of following Jesus are being shaped, with unique features, recognized by the Church and by society with different names.<sup>71</sup> The desert becomes a place of calling and commitment, especially after the time of the deadly persecutions; forms of consecration are created either individually or with community organization, which over the years are crystallized in the many religious families of today.

In this origin are situated the different contemporary options of religious life, various ways of accomplishing the Christian life and following one's own personal journey with some unique characteristics, which demonstrate a great variety. The *Catechism* presents several differentiations of consecrated life: the hermitages, who find "in the desert, in spiritual battle, the glory of the Crucified", the virgins, the *religious life*, which we will focus on, being that of the Brothers and Sisters in the Lasallian Family, the *secular institutes* and *the societies of apostolic life*.

In the first two centuries, a specific theology of religious life was not needed because they were simply considered Christians who rigorously lived their vocation. Little by little they were seen as models of life and signs with a special degree of realization of the common Christian vocation. With regards to this, S. Blanco states the charismatic aspects of early Christianity to which we can present as a link between Jesus and religious life:

*"The widespread tendency [in early Christianity, after the death of Jesus] to reinterpret the concept of following does not exclude that, in certain cases, some Christians try to prolong as literally as possible the way of life of the historical Jesus with his followers. The persistence in the ecclesial tradition of a series of radical sayings (Lk 14:26), or concerning itinerancy, with the corresponding need for food (Mk 9:41) and accommodation (Mt 10:40) in the homes of others, are clear indications of the existence in the Church of these people or groups; "it is unlikely that ethical traditions will be*

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71 We do not value the influence of other movements close to the monasticism on the origin of Consecrated Life, coming from paganism, Judaism or other schools, such as the Essenes and therapists.

*transmitted [...] if there is no one who takes them seriously, if there is no one who, at least initially, implements them”.<sup>72</sup>*

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, with the emergence of monasticism, with renunciation of goods, *fuga mundi*, obedience to the Word, devotion to prayer, common or eremitic life and celibacy, these groups of consecrated are institutionalized and recognized and, existing the fact, the theological explanation was developed, with various nuances.

The Second Vatican Council represents a turning point of huge importance for consecrated life, presenting it as a charismatic gift from God to his Church. However, it neither closes the reflection nor concludes it. For example, it does not insist on the pneumatic dimension of religious life, although places it in the order of the History of Salvation and of a God acting through his Spirit.<sup>73</sup>

Once this “bonus sprint” has been reached, it is time for new ways of reflection, such as deepening the charismatic dimension of the whole Church, from different areas (biblical, historical, theological...) and in the same concept of charism, both as a gift of God and the understanding of the foundational dynamism of different families and religious congregations. The post conciliar theological reflection until the present moment has focused on these points and the new possibilities arising.

Just as the movement of liturgical, biblical, catechetical renewal and others paved the way for the Council, many authors provided their inputs

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72 S. BLANCO PACHECO, voz «*Seguimiento*», en *Diccionario Teológico de la Vida Consagrada*. Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 1989, p. 1623. The above text belongs to G. Theissen. Next, he alludes to the existence of itinerant, poor prophets as witnessed by Acts, the synoptics, the Pauline letters, the very gospel of John, the Didajé. And he concludes: “The early church had two ways of recognizing and living the lordship of the Risen One, more generalized, of appropriation and imitation of the attitudes and feelings that were preached of it, and another, less common, of literal prolongation of their earthly lifestyle” (pp. 1623-1624).

73 It is still pending to study how this charismatic dynamism develops in the new forms of consecrated life: GROSSO GARCÍA, L. *Corazón trinitario: actualidad, consagración y formación en las nuevas formas de vida consagrada*, 2019 y *Odres nuevos: actualidad, comunión y gobierno en las nuevas formas de vida consagrada*. Madrid: Edice, 2017.

and contributed decisively to the renewal of religious life that happened in the Council represented as a starting point.<sup>74</sup>

For the first time, in the Second Vatican Council it was presented a theology of consecrated life which favoured the materialization of previous reflection. There was little innovation in this field, but by taking stock of the previous reflection and delving into the reality of the Church, *Lumen Gentium* provided a more harmonious conception of the community of believers that helped to relocate the consecrated men and women.

The Council does not place religious life as one of the “state of perfection” of its hierarchical dimension, but as a reality with its own identity, which makes a *particular following* of Christ according to a *charism* received.<sup>75</sup> Starting from a perspective of the History of Salvation that is nourished by the same mystery of the Trinity, the universal call to holiness is lived according to the charisms that the Holy Spirit distributes for the building up of the Church.<sup>76</sup> Religious life is not in itself a charism, but a way of life, with particular consecration, which has its *raison d’être* according to the *grace* received.

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74 I follow GARCÍA PAREDES, J.C.R., *Teología de Las Formas de Vida Cristiana I*. Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 1996. Cf. Chapter 11, «Estados de vida según los autores modernos», pp. 555-622. For example, based on the Thomist tradition, A. Royo Martín and Fernando Sebastián recall the total consecration of the religious and the centrality of evangelical councils. Karl Rahner helps differentiate between forms of Christian existence and states, helping to found the laity and recovering the eschatological dimension of religious life. Hans Urs von Balthasar offers a reflection complementary to Rahner’s in which the medieval notion of state is overcome and the centrality of the love of God is remembered. Thadée Matura, for his part, does not define different forms by their function, but by their way of existence. Edward Schillebeeckx points out that the basis of the different particular vocations is the universal Christian vocation, defining celibacy as a possibility of human existence, based on religious motives, such as marriage, both of which can be lived in the perspective of the Kingdom of God. For his part, Lucas Gutiérrez places the different projects of Christian life not on the theological plane, but on the Christian existential. Finally, J. M. Lozano speaks of the community of disciples of Jesus, where follow-up is the determining factor and the common vocation of every believer. Thus, the various forms of follow-up are charisms for the common building of the Church.

75 Cf. LG 44c.

76 LG 12b.

Therefore, consecrated life is placed in the charismatic dimension of the Church, along with other forms of Christian life. Using generic language, J. B. Metz wrote:

*“The following is not the “privilege” of the Orders. Every Christian is called to it. But the current ecclesial situation requires a push, a sort of shock in the direction of the following. And where does this radical push come from, if not from the Orders? Here is, in my opinion, their decisive ecclesial mission today, this will be in the future the evidence that proves them. At this point, the radicality of his life of the following should not consist so much — if I am right — in expressing ecclesial life in exclusive forms that are no longer worthy of signs, but in becoming initiators of a more determined promptness for follow-up, within the Church.”*<sup>77</sup>

Religious life participates in God’s mission with another characteristic element: fraternal life in community for the mission. Community, consecration and mission, therefore, lived with intensity and passion, will contribute to the advancement of the Kingdom of God. Religious life is a witness as a sign of communion and the fruit of the “ecclesiology of communion” that refers essentially to the Trinity and the Eucharist, together with the theology of the “body of Christ”, and implies a reordering of each Christian community, as well as about the relationship between local Churches and the universal Church, the ordained ministry and the hierarchical constitution of the Church.<sup>78</sup>

Lived in authenticity, religious life is a true prophecy in the sense that it is a clear and blunt response to many of the prevailing counter-values in our society. In the face of the almost invincible triumvirate of power-sex-money, a poor, celibate, and obedient community in dialogue with the world can put “evangelical culture” first: the vow of poverty as resistance to the ideologies of consumption and self-interest. Celibacy as resistance to narcissistic hedonism, moving from distorted love to agape love. Obedience

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77 METZ, J. B., *Las Órdenes Religiosas*. Barcelona: Herder, 1979, p. 43.

78 Cf. Chapter II of LG.

as listening in the face of domination, the decentring of the ego in search of the Kingdom of God in the face of selfishness.<sup>79</sup>

These realities lived in community must be a historical narrative and anticipation of a new society, made of participation, authority as a service, rejection of aggressive competitiveness and systematic conflict as a way to resolve differences. Thus, religious life can be an advertisement of what humanity, according to God, is called to be.

Every religious once has professed in a certain Institute. *In* this one and *in* the community to which the religious belongs, each person is urged: to live their vocation in the daily activities, in the different stages, from the novitiate until they received the last call. The vocation comprises all life, unlike the profession or the job.

It is up to the religious life to place itself with passion on the “front lines” of the world, building the Kingdom of God also in the “existential peripheries”, leveraging the advantages and prophecy of our lifestyle (availability, formation, fraternal life...) to lead the way with audacity and fidelity. Religious men and women should ask themselves what their passion is, who they are passionate about, whether their life is inspired by the passion for Christ and the passion for humanity. Ultimately, religious men and women must ask themselves which their true love is.<sup>80</sup>

The vocation to religious life is a concrete mediation for the following of Jesus, which implies a consecration coming from baptism. It has the character of totality in a double sense: on the one hand, it encompasses the entire person in all its dimensions and facets; on the other hand, it includes all life and all aspects of existence. Religious consecration is expressed in evangelical counsels and requires nothing more than baptismal consecration (which already demands everything).<sup>81</sup>

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79 Here I am referring to: TILLARD, J.M.R. *Vocación religiosa. Vocación de Iglesia*. Bilbao: DDB, 1970.

80 MARTÍNEZ, F., *¿A dónde va la vida religiosa? Espiritualidad, votos y misión*. Madrid: San Pablo, 2008, pág. 309: «La Vida Religiosa y sus pasiones».

81 Cf. Garrido, J. *Identidad carismática de la vida religiosa*. Vitoria: Frontera Hegian, 2003.

The Brothers and Sisters and, therefore, their way of life as a concrete expression of the received vocation, intend to be *the response to a call from God*, who takes the initiative, challenges the person and encourages them to a total surrender. Thus, the Lasallian religious vocation, a consequence of faith, arises and develops in the personal relationship with God, beyond the concrete configuration of the charism: apostolic, contemplative.... Consecration is God's response to our own limitation as creatures. Thus, true consecration is the communion with the Spirit that sanctifies us and the putting into operation at the service of the Kingdom and the community of the spiritual gifts and charisms received.

### **3. Towards a new “ecosystem”**

The understanding of a Church, all of it in a “state of vocation”,<sup>82</sup> all of it “vocational” and, therefore, vocation promoter,<sup>83</sup> paves the way for the growth of the culture of vocations. The latter's demands, if one wants to build with deep roots, are not simple. However, they are fully doable, since they emanate from the Gospel, build community and help each believer and the very Church in their pilgrimage. In the face of none of them can we inhibit ourselves: each one, in their circumstances and vital moment, is called to live with radicality and passion their own vocation and thus, to collaborate in the expansion of a culture that places the vocation at the centre of life and reflection.

The growth of a culture of vocations in communion implies a reappraisal of baptism, which ceases to be a simple sociological rite of entry into the Church and condition of salvation, to recover its original sense of participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ and commitment to participation in the construction of the Kingdom of God in history and, with it, the entry into the new People of God. But this entry is not so much like a membership card related to a group, but rather it is a vital dynamism that introduces, increasingly, in the Body of Christ, in his Mystery.<sup>84</sup>

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82 *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV) 34.

83 PDV 41.

84 Cf. KEHL, M, *La Iglesia. Ecclesiología católica*, Salamanca: Sígueme, 1996.



It is necessary to become aware that all of us are called to live a personal relationship with God, a vocational dynamism that exceeds us and that is not the privilege of a few chosen, but something common and attainable for all baptized, as indicated by *Mutuae Relationes*:

*“All members, — pastors, laymen and religious — each in his own manner participate in the sacramental nature of the Church. Likewise, each one, according to his proper role, must be a sign and instrument both of union with God and of the salvation of the world [...]. Therefore, before considering the diversity of gifts, offices and duties, we must recognize as fundamental the common vocation of all to union with God for the salvation of the world. This vocation requires in all, as a criterion for participating in ecclesial communion, the primacy of life in the Spirit; this is the basis for the privilege of hearing the Word, of interior prayer, of the realization of living as a member of the entire Body and of concern for its unity, of the faithful fulfilment of one’s own mission, of the gift of self in service and of the humility of repentance”.*<sup>85</sup>

There will not be a well-rooted culture of vocations if we do not move forward, at the same time, in shared mission and communion. We cannot be naive: the task left to the whole Church by the Second Vatican Council, that of replacing a pyramidal and outdated system with that of the People of God configured as the Body of Christ, is proving more arduous than it could have been initially foreseen. There are many resistances and attempts to restore the old pyramidal model, something that translates in vocational animation. But the change of era in which we are immersed is unstoppable. We continue to advance in the challenge that John Paul II posed at the beginning of the third millennium:

*“To make the Church the home and the school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God’s plan and respond to the world’s deepest yearnings”.*<sup>86</sup>

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85 MR. 4.

86 *Novo millennio ineunte*, 43.

As we move forward in a common culture of vocations, the right conditions are created for a “vital context” that, in the words of Br. Antonio Botana is an “ecosystem”,<sup>87</sup> by similarity with what this term means in biology. The “Church-Communion” ecosystem is the group of believers who make up the Church today and develop among themselves a type of relationship that we know as “communion for the mission”. The Lasallian Family, by the journey already travelled and by its own characteristics (among which the Brothers are just that, *brothers*) is in a privileged place to make this ecosystem possible.

## Questions for discussion

- At the risk of wanting to assume everything, “thinking about vocation” inevitably leads us to re-think community, consecration and mission...throughout the Church. What particular contribution can all Lasallians make to this reflection in the Church?
- The consecrated life of the Brothers of the Christian Schools has a number of particular characteristics even in the history of Christianity: lay religious, teachers of children, “ministers and ambassadors of Jesus Christ”.... Inspired by St. John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers, do we find in our “first intuition” the strength to respond to today’s challenges? How does it materialize?
- The author states that “in the first two centuries there was no need for a specific theology of religious life because they were simply considered Christians who lived their vocation with exigency”. Now we do have complex theological systems to explain each vocation, but what can we do to regain the really essential, that “simply”? What do we need to part with?

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87 BOTANA, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 11-23.

**III. THE LASALLIAN  
VOCATION: INHERITANCE  
WITHOUT PROPERTY**

As we have noticed, there is only one Christian vocation: the following of Jesus of Nazareth. And a common consecration: baptism. This process, which lasts a lifetime and can never be ended, is lived from different ways of life (grouped into three large families: laity, consecrated life and ministerial priesthood), which are mediation for follow-up and not ends in themselves. Historically, these forms of life have often clustered around a “specific charism”, inherited from the faith itinerary of a person or group of believers. This charism does not contribute or take anything away from the radicality of the follow-up of Jesus, but it does have some specific underscores or “colours” that shape the concrete experience of the baptismal consecration in a certain charismatic family.

Beyond historical contingencies, each authentic charism has embodied in a totally special way certain “Words of Life”, since at the origin of each foundation there is always the acute perception by the founder or foundress of a certain value (education, health, preaching...) that the Church and society need to highlight more, but without other evangelical values being left in the shadow. Diversity and unity are fully compatible, since the supreme norm of every charismatic family is that of “the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels”,<sup>88</sup> of the whole Gospel, in its fullness. Not because, for example, Francis of Assisi chose to “marry Lady Poverty” he stopped living and teaching to live the whole life of Jesus and the whole Paschal Mystery.

We can call precisely this process of incarnation of the Gospel “Lasallian vocation” as a radical following of Jesus inspired by the spiritual and vital itinerary of Saint John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719) and the first Brothers, enriched and rediscovered throughout the three centuries of Lasallian history. In the Lasallian tradition, as we will see below, some values are especially emphasized, while different forms of life are contemplated in view to facilitate people to live them in depth. Therefore, the “Lasallian vocation”, as a whole, is one of the great treasures inherited by today’s Lasallian men and women, a gift that is not owned by anyone, but is given to continue to be shared and, above all, to be lived in and from

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88 *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2a.

the community. This is also what the current *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission* reminds us:

*“The cornerstone that sustains the construction of this mission has been and always will be community. It was undoubtedly one of the great intuitions of the Founder and the first Brothers. Several other projects similar to that of John Baptist de La Salle failed because they were not community based. The community educates, strengthens its members, cares for the weak and nurtures their spirit. It is the best guarantee to respond to the greatest imaginable challenges. To be Lasallian, by definition, is to belong to a community and to commit oneself within that same community to a common task”.<sup>89</sup>*

The founding moment is of great importance for the concrete shaping of the charism of the charismatic family, since in it the founders deliver to the initial community the essential contents of the fundamental inspiration and introduces their companions in their *own way of following Christ and living the mission*. That is, they transfer to them a spirituality of their own and embodied in a way of following and in a mission that contributes to the *Missio Dei* and the mission of the entire Church.

This initial community is already an interpreter of the gift received, which is indispensable and inalienable, but adaptable in its concrete elements without changing its primary content. It is of relevant importance, since the Second Vatican Council asked religious Institutes to renew themselves according to a series of criteria framed in the following intuition:

*“The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time. This renewal, under the inspiration of the*

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89 BROTHERS OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS, *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission. Challenges, convictions and hopes*, Generalate-Rome, p. 65.

*Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church, must be advanced according to the following principles*".<sup>90</sup>

Around all the founders there emerges a community or founding group that has a certain "foundation charism" during the period in which they outline the key features of the Institute's charism. It is not in vain that in many religious families the immediate successor of the founder or foundress is considered co-founder or has been recognized as a saint or blessed. We can affirm that the charism of the founder is enriched, already in life, of the charism and vocation of the first followers, until the peculiar form of life, its nature, purpose, spirit and nature are defined for its later development and rereading.

For example, in 2014 in the Lasallian Family we have remembered a pivotal moment in the foundation, the third centenary of the letter that the "first and principal Brothers" wrote to St. John Baptist de La Salle at a time of profound crisis and "dark night" urging him to retake the reins of the emerging Institute. It is very stimulating for the present time since, as now to some degree, the Society of Christian Schools is at that time under a series of strong tensions: trials that precede to unfavourable sentences, ecclesiastic with a remarkable — not always beneficial — ascendancy over some Brothers, internal division, criticism against the Superior...

De La Salle considers himself directly guilty of all this; he thinks that his person is influencing very negatively the events that threaten the Institute, and perhaps even comes to consider that, after more than thirty years of hard efforts, sacrifices, renunciations, choices, convinced that God himself was the one who requested them, everything he has undertaken and helped to develop was wrong and would have been more profitable to dedicate himself to other needs. The fact is that, surely as a way of solving the difficulties, he decides to get out of the way: he leaves Paris and goes to the south of France — other lands, other Brothers —, leaving in fact abandoned in the hands of the Brothers his responsibilities as Superior,

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90 PC 2.

especially in the north of the country, which is where most of the Brothers' communities were located and, of course, all the oldest.<sup>91</sup>

It is indeed an impressive personal and spiritual crisis. Biographers say that it was the encounter with a holy woman, whom he met almost by chance in a sanctuary in south-eastern France, when she was recovering from a health problem, that began to clear the darkness that populated the inner self of the Founder. But, in reality, the decisive turning point was provoked by a letter addressed to De La Salle by some Brother directors of the Parisian region, concerned about the turn of events and the increasingly prolonged absence of their Major Superior.

In the letter, dated April 1, 1714,<sup>92</sup> the "principal Brothers" reminded De La Salle of his vow of obedience and made themselves available to him to resume the consequences of his state. And the Founder, despite the crisis, that even despite the boldness of the letter, acted in a great spirit of obedience.

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91 Description, details and analysis of all these issues in BÉDEL H., *Orígenes: 1651-1726*, Hermanos de las Escuelas Cristianas, Roma 1998, pp. 149-155; GALLEGO S., *San Juan Bautista De La Salle I. Biografía*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Madrid 1986, pp. 471-514; VILLALABEITIA J., ¿Qué pasó en Parmenia?, en *Unánimes* 158 (2002) 5-16. An excellent commentary of the letter, by H. Michel Sauvage, can be found at BURKHARD L.- SAUVAGE M., *Parménie. La crise de Jean-Baptiste De La Salle et de son Institut (1712-1714) (Cahiers Lasalliens 57)*, Rome 1994.

92 The original of the letter has not reached us, although we do have three identical texts of it, collected by the first biographers of the Founder, who mistakenly date it in 1715. It says the following: "Monsieur, our very dear Father: We, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, having in view the greater glory of God as well as the good of the Church and of our Society, consider that it is of the greatest importance that you return to the care and general direction of God's holy work, which is also your own, because it has pleased the Lord to make use of you to establish it and to guide it for so many years. We are all convinced that God himself has called you to this work and that he has given you the grace and talents necessary for the good government of this new Society so beneficial to the Church. We acknowledge in all justice that you have always guided it with considerable success and edification. That is why, Monsieur, we very humbly beseech you, and we command you in the name and on the part of the body of the Society to which you have vowed obedience, to take up at once the general government of the Society. In witness whereof, we have signed. Done at Paris, on this first day of April 1714, and we, with very profound respect, our most dear Father, your very humble and very obedient subjects. Cf. BÉDEL H., *Op. Cit.*, pp. 149-159.

To me they seem remarkable, since they have in some way shaped the Lasallian charism, details such as, for example, the audacity shown by the Brothers in daring to “command” De La Salle to return with them. In fact, the early biographers insist that the Founder got surprised when receiving the letter: he would never have thought of such a possibility, let alone with its content. Those “poor Brothers, forgotten and little appreciated by the people of the world,” whom “only the poor come looking for us”,<sup>93</sup> dared to give orders to a nobleman, who was also a priest and doctor of Theology. The letter was therefore a real recognition by the Brothers of the importance that the presence of De La Salle at the head of the Institute had for the proper functioning of the Institute, but also that “he had become poor with the poor”.

Undoubtedly, the three-century leap has blurred the strong contrast that must have existed, but it is also the first indication that in the nascent Institute of the Brothers some key principles - which De La Salle had always promoted and could be summarized in the formula of vows — were penetrating strongly, at least among some Brothers, such as the “together and by association” of the Brothers, which was working since the Institute showed itself as a responsible body, alive, aware of its past, present and future history.<sup>94</sup>

This moment is one of “re-founding” and one of the keys (small, because the only and central is the action and will of God) for the durability in the time of the Institute. In this way, the Institute’s charism expresses the spiritual identity of the disciples according to the founding intentions of the original group (including naturally the founder). This identity or nature, which gives an air of characteristic family, is the result of a shared vocation and analogous to that of the founder or foundress, who will no longer be able to create a new way of life, but rather to live it embodied in every *moment and place*. This permanence is the fruit of the Spirit and the dynamic fidelity of its members, as our *Rule* says:

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93 In the definition of the Brothers that the Founder himself does in the meditation for Christmas Day (86,II), although including him in it.

94 Cf. For all this section and, in fact, for the entire work, the reference work on the Lasallian heritage by Brother Pedro Gil: GIL, P., *Tres siglos de identidad lasaliana. La relación misión-espiritualidad a lo largo de la historia FSC*, Roma: Hermanos de las Escuelas Cristianas, 1994.



*“The life and development of the Institute depend above all on the mystery and the power of grace. But by the gift of freedom, the Lord wanted to put the destiny of the Institute into the hands of the Brothers. At the heart of the Lasallian Family, the Brothers are a source of inspiration for all Lasallians who increasingly share the mission and the charism of the Institute”.<sup>95</sup>*

## **1. The vocation within the vocation in De La Salle**

Saint John Baptist de La Salle was admired by many for his piety, dignity and “posture”. He was aiming very high: Doctor of Theology, student at Saint Sulpice College, “factory of bishops”, Canon at 16 years of age nothing less than in Reims, with important benefits... He had a whole career ahead, in which the little schools for “the children of the artisans and the poor” were one more work of charity.

But everything changed when he became personally involved, joined the group of rough teachers he had collected practically from the streets, *took them home* and took care of their training. At first, I dare say that he continued to lead from the outside, taking advantage of his own magnetism, his charisma and the admiration that he provoked, but he soon realized that this *mission* was a true *ministry* that demanded “the entire person”, starting with himself. De La Salle states in the *Memory of the Beginnings*, with great emotion:

*“God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. God did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning”.<sup>96</sup>*

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95 *Rule of the Brothers of Christian Schools*, No. 154.

96 DE LA SALLE, THE MEMOIR ON THE BEGINNINGS. <https://lasallianonline.org/assets/memoir-on-the-beginnings.pdf> (assessed in October 2023).

So much was the commitment that in 1682 he lived a “second conversion” that made his bonds with the teachers, soon the first Brothers, not of “teacher-disciples”, but of group-community listening to the Word of God. At the end of October, De La Salle had a meeting with teachers about their school work and the future of their mission as teachers. Brother Saturnino Gallego describes it this way:

*“We are looking to the future; our contract hangs on every incident. In these challenging times, we can become jobless anytime. And, if we grow old in the position, how can we afford an acceptable pension? His answer was to exhort them to trust in Providence. But the teachers had not felt De La Salle’s personal experience. And they said to him that, with a fortune and the canonry on his shoulders, he could not convince them”.<sup>97</sup>*

Blain, the early biographer who most sought to approach -with his particular style- the psychology of De La Salle, puts on the mouth of the Founder the following reflection, which tells us much about his charisma and his faith:

- I. *“I have been reduced to silence. As long as I am not poor myself, I have no right to speak the language of perfection, as I once did on the subject of poverty. I cannot speak of abandonment to Providence, so long as I am comfortably insured against penury; nor about perfect confidence in God, if my sound investments leave me no reason for worry.*
- II. *If I remain what I am and the schoolmasters remain what they are, their temptation will persist, because its source will continue to be there. I will not be able to remedy it, because they will always find in my wealth an obvious and even plausible argument to justify their doubts about the present and their concerns for the future.*
- III. *Sooner or later, such a temptation, so justifiable in appearance, will not fail to produce the effect that the devil hopes it will achieve. The teachers, whether in a group or one by one, will forsake me, leaving my house*

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97 GALLEGO, S., *San Juan Bautista de La Salle, Biografía*, BAC, 1981. T. I, p. 161.

*empty for the second time and the schools without anyone capable of conducting them.*

- IV. *This desertion will make a good deal of noise in the city. It will frighten off any who might have entertained the idea of becoming schoolmasters. Their vocation will wither; even before they enter, they will be seized by the same misgivings as those who have just left*".<sup>98</sup>

He therefore left his canonry in July 1683, left his palace and joined the Community of his teachers the following year. He distributed his goods to the poor during the famine of 1684-85 and committed with vows in 1691. Already detached from "any human sustenance", he is a charismatic leader who conveys to the Brothers his confidence in Providence and a vocation that is a true ministry: to associate in community to procure the salvation of poor children through human and Christian education.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle is the founder of a particular itinerary of following Jesus not only because his life inspires others to commit to the Gospel, but above all because it can embody, in specific people and communities, the response that society and those most in need of his time needed to hear. Charism, as a free gift of the Holy Spirit for the construction of the Kingdom of God, is not a disembodied reality. Quite the contrary: true gift and task is made when it is experienced in incarnation and is placed within the broad context of the project of salvation and construction of the Church wanted by God.<sup>99</sup>

It is, therefore, from the beginning a treasure and common heritage for all believers, who are enriched by the call of God. The "founder's charism" includes the following items:

- The *ability to found*, to initiate a charismatic way of life, a non-communicable gift that manifests itself in the ability to

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98 DE LA SALLE, THE MEMOIR ON THE BEGINNINGS. <https://lasallianonline.org/assets/memoir-on-the-beginnings.pdf> (assessed in October 2023)

99 We avoid talking, even if they may exist, of individual and private gifts, such as favours made by God to the person, rather rare and certainly not transmissible to his disciples, very frequent in hagiographies, also in those of Saint John the Baptist de La Salle.

concretely realize a foundation, that of the “Society of the Christian Schools” or, rather, of communities at the service of human and Christian education of children without resources.

- More importantly, the ability to *shape the identity* of an institute of consecrated life. It is not an abstract concept, but a concrete grace that manifests itself in a concrete spiritual experience, that is, it is a manifestation of the incarnate Spirit that simultaneously shapes the diversity and the inherent unity of consecrated life:

*“There are many Religious Institutes in the Church, each differing one from the other according to its proper character. Each, however, contributes its own vocation as a gift raised up by the Spirit through the work of outstanding men and women, and authentically approved by the sacred hierarchy. The very charism of the Founders appears as an ‘experience of the Spirit’, transmitted to the disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth”.<sup>100</sup>*

- This charism can be called “spiritual parenthood” (in the words of Fabio Ciardi), because it appears as an experience of faith that shapes the physiognomy and identity of the institute, with the following characteristics:
  - A vocation or special call to construct life according to characteristic features that shape their spirituality.
  - A spirituality consisting in a peculiar experience of the mystery of Christ, including the profession of evangelical counsels and community life (in the case of religious life), being sensitive to a particular Christological incarnation.

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100 MR. 11a. Also, Cfr. PC 7, 8, 9, 10; LG 45; PC 1, 2 and *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 11.

- A prophetic vision as a new response to concrete historical circumstances, in order to achieve a singular mission, that is, a participation in the mission of God, *Missio Dei*, according to a concrete orientation, an apostolic commitment that may or may not be visualized in concrete apostolic works but that far surpasses them.
- A particular lifestyle that, with its characteristics and features, generates disciples, ceasing to be a merely individual experience to become a shared charism.

As we have expressed earlier, every genuine gift must be included in the charismatic dynamism of the Church as a manifestation of the presence of the Spirit in her, in the various times and places. In this way, the “*experience of the Spirit*” of which MR. 11 speaks is included in a much broader dynamism, since in the whole history of the Church the Spirit has given rise to “prophets” in the light of one or another aspect of the evangelical message, as a response to the social and ecclesial reality of his time and above all as an embodiment of a particular vocation. This Spirit, which is not linked to the hierarchical and sacramental order of the Church, “*blows where it wills*”.<sup>101</sup> It distributes its charisms where they are most necessary or useful to the growth of the Church. “*He gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip to holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*”.<sup>102</sup>

Therefore, the succession and diversity of the charisms of consecrated life can be read as “the unfolding of Christ in the centuries, as a living Gospel that is updated in new ways”.<sup>103</sup> Consequently, each charism of

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101 Jn 3:8.

102 Eph 4:11-12.

103 I follow CIARDI, P., “The charism of the Founders and Foundresses, as “Word of Life”, is always uncontaminated, prophetic and current” (Associazione Membri Curie Generalizie, OMI, 2007), which cites in this case Chiara Lubich, who in *Christ dispiiegato nei secoli* (Città Nuova, Rome, 1994) , his book on the founders and foundresses, where she states “The consecrated life, in the continuum to develop and affirm itself in ever new forms, is already an eloquent expression of this their presence, as a kind of gospel unfolded over the centuries”.

consecrated life, that is, each charism of the founder is a concrete way of incarnating the following of Jesus as a gradual conformation with Christ, as indicated already before the Second Vatican Council by Pope Pius XII:

*“When she embraces the evangelical counsels, she reflects the Redeemer’s poverty, obedience and virginal purity. Adorned with institutes of many different kinds as with so many precious jewels, she represents Christ deep in prayer on the mountain, or preaching to the people, or healing the sick and wounded and bringing sinners back to the path of virtue — in a word, doing good to all”.<sup>104</sup>*

The Council continues with this reflection, explaining that the Church, through the charisms of consecrated life, is actively concerned with Christ being better presented to the faithful and infidels:

*“The Church thus portrays Christ in contemplation on the mountain, in His proclamation of the kingdom of God to the multitudes, in His healing of the sick and maimed, in His work of converting sinners to a better life, in His solicitude for youth and His goodness to all men, always obedient to the will of the Father who sent Him”.<sup>105</sup>*

The clarification and experience of the mystery of Christ is explained in an effective and sober way in *Vita Consecrata*:

*“The Synod recalled this unceasing work of the Holy Spirit, who in every age shows forth the richness of the practice of the evangelical counsels through a multiplicity of charisms. In this way too, he makes ever present in the Church and in the world, in time and space, the mystery of Christ”.<sup>106</sup>*

It is therefore appropriate to place the various forms of consecrated life within the Trinitarian and salvific dynamism of the project of the Kingdom of God: A Father who calls, a Spirit who encourages to be configured with

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104 Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, No. 47 (1943).

105 LG 46.

106 VC 5 and cf. 32.

a Son. The charism, in its very origin, is a “reflection of the mystery of Christ, a word of his, refracts the light that emanates from the face of Christ, radiance of the Father”.<sup>107</sup>

*“In the unity of the Christian life, the various vocations are like so many rays of the one light of Christ, whose radiance “brightens the countenance of the Church”.<sup>108</sup>*

Then, the concrete incarnation will depend on the historical circumstances and the own experience of faith of the founder and his first companions, since every charism is born in a certain historical period and in its cultural context and, therefore, is debtor of its time and reflects the human traits of the personalities who have initiated and incarnated it.

The reading and study of this charism of the Founder may remind us of the *Rule of the Brothers of Christian Schools* itself that in its introductory articles it collects all these characteristics:

1. *Deeply moved by the human and spiritual distress “of the children of artisans and of the poor”, and in response to the call of God, John Baptist de La Salle and his first Brothers made a lifelong commitment to God to provide these children with a human and Christian education, and so extend the glory of God on earth. They reformed the kind of schooling available at the time to make it accessible to the poor, and to offer it to all as a sign of the Reign of God and as a means of salvation.*
2. *In their following of Jesus Christ, and in their faithful response to the calls of the Spirit and to the charism of their Founder, the Brothers consecrate themselves to God to procure his glory by fulfilling “together and by association” their apostolic ministry of education.*

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107 CIARDI, *Op. Cit*, p.3.

108 VC 16.

3. *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. (...).*<sup>109</sup>

This makes explicit the Lasallian charism, which is to support the educational mission from a fraternal community that lives in the spirit of faith and recognises as an instrument in God's Work. Therefore, community is our strength. We are *brothers* among ourselves and to those whom we educate through a lay religious consecration that associates us in a shared ministry, to which we contribute from different tasks and functions, but also from various life situations.

Our mission inherits the charism received by Saint John Baptist de La Salle and transmitted to the first Brothers: to provide human and Christian education to children and young people, especially the poor. We carry out this mission through all kinds of educational works: each one of them focuses on the individual recipients, tries to respond to their needs and seeks their integral formation.

The experience of God of Saint John the Baptist de La Salle — a profound spiritual experience translated into his vital commitment and trust in Providence — led him to the creation of communities for the education “of the children of artisans and of the poor”<sup>110</sup> but, above all, to a path of evangelical following at the same time innovative and classic, which was configured as a form of religious and lay life, according to the principles of Faith, Service and Community:

- Faith: “*The spirit of this Institute is first, a spirit of Faith that should induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but*

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109 The *Rule of the Brothers of Christian Schools*, n. 1-3.

110 Fortunate and customary expression in Lasallian circles, Cf. LAURAIRE, L., *The Conduct of the Schools, Contextual approach. Cahiers Lasalliens*, 61. In chapter I, he makes a clarification of the sense of “artisans and poor” in the 17 and 18 French centuries that is very interesting, together with the description of the child by De La Salle in the chapter. I of the *Common Rules* of the Brothers. Personally, I was very enlightened by the “translation” of the expression by Br. Bruno ALPAGO at *The Institute in the Educational Service of the poor*, Lasallian Studies No 7, Rome, 2000.



*with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, and to attribute all to God...*".<sup>111</sup>

- Service: "*The purpose of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children; and it is for this purpose that the Brothers conduct schools, that having the children under their guidance from morning until evening, these teachers may be able to teach them to live a good life by instructing them in the mysteries of our religion and inspiring them with Christian maxims, and so give them a suitable education*".<sup>112</sup>
- Community: "*A true spirit of community will always be shown and maintained in this Institute. All the exercises will be performed in common from morning to evening...*".<sup>113</sup>

This heritage, like that of each religious institute, constituted in the origin by the charism of the founder and enriched later by a whole tradition lived, means a spiritual treasure that benefits the members of the Institute and the whole Church.<sup>114</sup>

The spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, framed in the so-called "French school of spirituality", is prominently Christological. In his *Meditations, Letters* and writings for the Brothers, it is clear this option of imitating and following Jesus at all times, "without making any distinction between the duties of your state and your sanctification". This intuition of the Founder has permeated the Lasallian tradition, as seen in the *Rule* and in all the writings of the Institute.

Firstly, we can point out that the experience of *following Christ* that De La Salle conveys to us and that, before, he has experienced, is "bipolar": "*to be a disciple and to be a witness*" is a single coin with two sides. *Listening to and preaching the Word* are two times of the same reality that demand each other

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111 SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE, *Common Rules of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, chap. II, 2.

112 *Id*, chap. I, 1.

113 *Id*, chap. III.

114 Cf. LG 43.

and follow each other uninterruptedly. To follow Christ, as De La Salle experiences, means to identify with Him and His work of salvation. This is presented in article 92 of the *Rule*: “*the fundamental spiritual attitude of a disciple of Saint John Baptist de La Salle: abandonment to God in the footsteps of Christ, for a community service of evangelization and education accessible to everyone, but giving preference to the poor and young people*”.

The Lasallian tradition also includes the tension between “*being with Him*” and “*being commissioned to preach*” (cf. Mk 3:14). This is what De La Salle often says, as something he has lived intensely:

*“You have been called, just as the holy Apostles were, to make God known, and you need great zeal for this. Ask God for a share in the zeal of Saint Andrew. Regard him as your model, and proclaim Jesus Christ and his holy maxims without growing weary.*

*For this purpose, you need to have learned these truths from Jesus Christ by often being in his company through your diligence in prayer. This is where, after you have studied your responsibility to instruct others, you must not spare anything in you to procure the glory of God in every kind of way.”*<sup>115</sup>

One of Jesus’ words which are more significant in the Lasallian tradition is the image of his *detachment* according to Mt 8: 20 and Lk 9: 58, which we have already described as “vocation within the vocation”. Doubting whether or not to renounce all his assets and canonry, or whether to do so in favour of the primitive community of teachers or not, De La Salle carries out a discernment that has its peak moment in the consultation with Blessed Nicholas Barré, his spiritual director. He responds on the basis of an evangelical text that he will comment on below, according to the biographers:

*“The birds of the sky have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head. This is how Barré commented on those*

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115 *Meditation for the feast of St. Andrew* (MF 78.2). Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC, and Augustine Loes, FSC. Edited by Augustine Loes, FSC, and Francis Huether, FSC, 1994.

*words: "Who are these foxes mentioned in the sacred text? They are the children of the world, who attach themselves to the goods of this earth. Who are the birds of the sky? The religious, who find refuge in their cells. But for schoolmasters and mistresses, whose vocation is to instruct the poor after the example of Jesus Christ, there is no other portion on this earth than that which fell to the Son of Man. Divine Providence must be the only foundation on which the Christian Schools are established. Any other does not suit them. This one is solid, and the schools themselves will remain stable so long as they have nothing else on which to rely".<sup>116</sup>*

In the *Rule*, this detachment is set as an example to the Brothers the itinerary of the Founder, when referring to the vow of poverty: *"The spiritual journey of John Baptist de La Salle, their Father, as well as their solidarity with people today and the calls of the Church, motivate the Brothers to cultivate within themselves the disposition of a poor person. By such a conversion, they witness to the fact that God is their only wealth"* (No. 32 R. 2008).

Without intending to be exhaustive, since all aspects of the mystery of Jesus are outlined in the Lasallian spirituality and the *Rule*, highlighting as significant, together with the above, the attention to the *incarnation* of God, which De La Salle explains stressing that Jesus is born poor and humble, from Mary's womb to fulfil the Father's will on our regard: to work our salvation.<sup>117</sup> And this incarnation is lived from the *tenderness* of the teacher who says "let the children come to me" (Mk 10: 14 and Mt 19: 14) and also, we, the Brothers, have to let the children approach to *"to enable baptised persons to live as Christians and become disciples of Jesus Christ, the Brothers accompany them as they seek to grow in faith, fraternity and service. They help them develop a personal relationship with God; to make their contact with his Word, the liturgy and the sacraments a life-giving one; and to prepare themselves for social commitment"* (R. 17.2).

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116 BLAIN, *John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, A biography in Three Books*. Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC and edited by Luke Salm, FSC. Christian Brothers Conference, 2000. Book One, Chapter XII, p. 124.

117 Chapters 8 and 9 of his *Explanation of the Method of Prayer* are devoted to this point.

It is clearly demonstrated that the Lasallian journey provides some accents and depicts particularly some aspects of the only Christian vocation, without forgetting the others. It is thus shaped as a “school of vocational spirituality” that is not exhausted in the historical study, but helps men and women of all times to live fully the received call, without it being “property” of anyone, not even of the groups with an explicit commitment to the Lasallian mission: it is a treasure that can only be shared.

## 2. The ways of life in the Lasallian tradition

Saint John the Baptist de La Salle founded a lay religious institute dedicated to education. The way of life that he started and that he himself lived — without ceasing to be and exercise his ministerial priesthood — is that of consecrated life: vows, community life, structure, rule... It is a mediation that allows a full experience of the Christian vocation and that approaches the historical ideal of religious life, as Brother Michel Sauvage demonstrated widely in his writings<sup>118</sup> and other recent authors.<sup>119</sup>

But this is not to say that the Lasallian charism can be reduced to a single way of life. In fact, perhaps because of the difficult hierarchical fit of lay religious life (which, at times, as with laity, is defined by what is not that what is) as by the very history of the Institute, which did not receive canonical recognition until six years after the death of the Founder, in the years following Vatican II many essential features have been rediscovered that overflow a single way of life.

Perhaps the example most clearly expressed in this series of discoveries is the order and importance of religious vows in the Institute’s documents. In the *Rule*, vows are dealt with in the third chapter, entitled “The Consecrated

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118 SAUVAGE, M., *Vida religiosa laica y vocación de Hermano. Colección de artículos*, Roma: Hermanos de las Escuelas Cristianas, 2003. The whole work deserves a careful reading, but for this part it may be especially interesting pages 234-246: “Can it be said that the lay religious life is religious life in its pure form?”.

119 Cf. SIERRA, J.A., «San Juan Bautista de La Salle. Renovador de la vida religiosa» en BURRIEZA, J. (ed), *Los trabajos y los días de san Juan Bautista de La Salle. Reflexiones acerca del tiempo y la escuela del fundador de los Hermanos de las Escuelas Cristianas*, Madrid: Dykinson, 2019.

Life”. It presents the vows as an expression of the full consecration to God Trinity, as stated in the formula of vows (R. 25). The order of the vows was until 2007 the same that *Lumen Gentium* proposes: chastity, poverty and obedience, to which are added the two distinctive vows of the Brothers: association for the educational service of the poor and stability in the Institute.

This is not the case, however, in the current *Rule*, which attempts in its third chapter to insert consecration within the charismatic dynamism of the Church. The modification of the formula of vows was decided by the 44<sup>th</sup> General Chapter (2007)<sup>120</sup> and was already reflected in the *Rule* since 2015: the first vow mentioned is the vow of association, which is the original vow of the Brothers and which, in our tradition, includes the rest (although, naturally, five vows are still pronounced).

To understand this change, which goes beyond the order of wording, it is worth recalling a little bit of the history of the Institute: when the first twelve Brothers consecrate themselves with Saint John Baptist de La Salle, in 1694, the evangelical councils on which the three classical vows of religious consecration are based are not mentioned, but these are implicit in the radical availability that the Brothers live and demonstrate.<sup>121</sup> They constitute what we would now call a “ministerial fraternity”, in which the central core of his consecrated life was *communion for mission*. Already in the early days the emphasis was not on the search for “evangelical perfection”, but on consecration as a covenant with three parties: God, their Brothers, the poor children and young people to whom the work is intended. They were convinced that they contributed to the pursuit of God’s glory as they dedicated themselves to building this type of fraternity, which they had no qualms about identifying as God’s work. That was the existential sign that

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120 According to *Circular 455*, Document 3, “Association for the Educational Service of the Poor”, Line of Action 1.3.2. The Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, in its communication of January 9, 2008 to Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, then Superior General, gave its accord and “approves the new wording of the formula of vows, in accordance with the tradition of the Institute”.

121 SCHNEIDER, J.L., *El Voto de Asociación: el voto que se había perdido y que ha sido hallado*. Revista ARLEP, diciembre de 1999.

they were living with intensity, and that is what they turn into an official sign in their formula of consecration.<sup>122</sup>

With the *Bull of approval* of the Institute, in 1725,<sup>123</sup> the explicit enunciation of the vow of association for the educational service of the poor is lost in favour of the exposure of the *traditional vows of religious life around the termed “evangelical councils”*. The vow of association is recovered from 1967 and, finally, in the *Rule* of 1987.<sup>124</sup>

It is important to note that the approval of the new wording of the formula of vows and, subsequently, of the new *Rule*, is accompanied by a dynamism of rediscovery and experience of our Brothers identity, as proposed in the Chapter documents. Our consecration is enriched from the perspective of the vow of association for the educational service of the poor and for this reason we are invited in particular to “*take care during initial and continuing formation that the vow of association for the educational service of the poor be the central axis for understanding the identity of the Brother and the perspective by which the other vows are viewed*”.<sup>125</sup>

In the light of the vow of association, an attempt is made to understand the meaning that the other vows have in the identity of the Brother. And likewise, each of the other vows highlights or makes explicit an aspect that is implicit in the vow of association.<sup>126</sup> Therefore, we no longer speak of “evangelical counsels” or use that expression; however, we consider the vows from the full consecration of the person, as an intimate communion of the Brothers with Jesus Christ (R. 24). Consecrated to God as lay religious, we, Brothers are called to provide human and Christian education to young people, especially the poor, according to the ministry entrusted to us by the Church. We try to “consider everything with the eyes of faith”,

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122 Cf. SAUVAGE, M., *Lasalliana*, No. 49, Art. 15.

123 *In Apostolicae Dignitatis Solio*, of Pope Benedict XIII (January 26, 1725).

124 Cf. JOHNSTON, J., *Lasallian Mission Association: 1679-2007. A personal reflection on a story that continues*, Rome, 2004.

125 *Circular 455*, Document 3, “Association for the Educational Service of the Poor”, Line of Action 1.3.1.

126 Cf. Botana, A., *El Voto de Asociación, corazón de la identidad del Hermano*. Documentos para reflexionar en comunidad, 2009.

share in community the experience of God and perform “together and by association” a service of evangelization, mainly in schools.

This framework, which avoids any temptation of “spiritual elitism” and fits with the charismatic understanding of the different forms of Christian life, seems more accurate, for the following reasons:

1. In presenting the keys of Christian life, it has been common to speak of “two paths”: that of ordinary Christians, characterized by the observance of the commandments; and the path of monasticism and subsequent forms of community life, distinguished by the profession of evangelical counsels. It is argued that the Lord Jesus himself in his life and teachings would have proposed some things as necessary precepts for salvation or sanctification and others as counsels. These would be options left to the freedom of the person. Over time, the many evangelical counsels will be synthesized into three to express the commitment of the whole person and the experience of the whole Gospel. In this sense, an institutional foundation of the classical triad is perceived, above all, in Mt 19:16-22.
2. However, this “theology of states” is limited and cannot be sustained when the Church is understood in its charismatic dynamism. There can be no “first and second level Christians,” since the call to holiness is universal. Each form of Christian life implies a particular or special following of Christ,<sup>127</sup> without “states of perfection”. The consecrated life, in this way, within a mystery of communion, animated by the strength of the Spirit and by the charisms it distributes for its construction, has its reason to be as one of the charisms that integrate the charismatic dynamism of the Church to bring it to the fullness of the holiness that all of it is called to live.
3. From this pneumatological perspective, the vocation of the Brothers and Sisters seeks to fulfil the main commandment (Dt 6:4-6) and the commandment of love to the neighbour

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127 LG 44c; PC 1b, 2ae, 5, 8b.

as followers of Jesus *more closely* called to live a particular vocation, neither better nor worse than others, with specific particularities, which are expressed in the profession of three vows that condense the “evangelical charisms” and that are source of fullness and mediation for the personal relationship with God.

4. Since the common vocation of every Christian is the following of Jesus, the true consecrated, evangelical counsels are proposed to all members of the People of God, but they are lived within the intrinsic diversity of the Church, in different ways. This difference does not cause division, but communion that allows the personalization of faith, participation in the mission and expression of the Covenant with God in the different particular vocations, which by free initiative of God constitute the different forms of Christian life in the Church.
5. The vows are therefore ways of responding, freely and voluntarily, to the call of the God of Jesus. They contain all the dimensions of Christian life: Trinitarian, anthropological, Christological, ecclesial, missionary, eschatological.... They are a concrete way of expressing faith, love and hope in the God of life, making the religious profession a true confession of faith that recognizes God as Lord of life.

There are, therefore, other forms of life capable of fully embodying the Lasallian charism as their own journey of following Jesus. The commitment of Association that more and more lay people share from their family life, their commitment as teachers and their concrete experience is one of these paths. Nor can the possibilities be closed — the charismatic, as the fruit of the Spirit, is hardly “enclosed” to new forms of life that can be inspired by the Lasallian charism and united in our charismatic family.

There are therefore many new developments in the Lasallian Family and we are sure that in the future there will be many others that we do not even imagine. It is enough to want to live more deeply the ideal of poverty, of community, of following Jesus to be “in reform mode”. The efforts being made in the area of the “shared mission” — an expression that may fall



short, since there are men and women, non-religious, but Lasallian, with whom all the charisma is shared, not only the mission — are indispensable.

The mission, which is common to all, calls for communion. From this decisive perspective marked by the common mission, the differences that come from each personal vocation or the gifts that each one possesses, or from the types of service to the mission, or from belonging to diverse institutions, are no longer grounds for separation, but are valued as wealth for the whole in the *shared mission*. The three dimensions that seemed to be reserved for shaping the “consecrated life”: *consecration, communion and mission*, have also been recovered for Christian life in general. This does not mean that the consecrated life has lost them. Consecrated life is asked to live them in a “meaningful” way as a memory for everyone. Consequently, all forms of life must be inserted into ecclesial life:

- As a community of consecrated in a People of consecrated, and whose consecration “*seeks to serve the consecration of the lives of all the faithful, clergy and laity alike*”.<sup>128</sup>
- As a ministerial group in a Church which is fully ministerial; it participates in the mission of the Church and shares it, side by side, with the other believers.
- Living a charism that is in relationship and continuity with the other ecclesial charisms.
- Being a sign of the Kingdom and the new values that are linked with the Passover of Christ, and offering it in a complementary way with the sign that lay believers offer of the Kingdom lived in human realities, the sign of the incarnation of God among the values of this world.
- With the task of being *experts in communion* that promote the spirituality of communion.<sup>129</sup>

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128 Cf. VC 33.

129 Cf. VC 46 and 51.

The new type of relationship between lay and religious people is giving rise to other kinds of groupings, different from those that have occurred in earlier times. The new ecclesial ecosystem is characterized, as we have already indicated by the grouping of “charismatic families”, that is, the groups formed by institutions and groups of believers united by the same foundational charism, or the same “charismatic root”, but with different forms of life and with different nuances of the same charism:

- Within each family, the same evangelical face materializes in various *existential projects* in the corresponding ecclesial communities that constitute the charismatic-evangelical family. Each existential project, with its ecclesial and social dimensions, gives channel to the diverse personal charisms and tries to become incarnate in forms of religious, lay and / or priestly life the foundational charism.
- The evangelical family is not constituted as an agglomeration of individuals but as a communion of communities, in the image of the Church. Some communities are institutionalized (with official recognition and canonical status...), and therefore membership in them is regularized and marked with external signs. This is the case for religious congregations, communities recognized as public associations of the faithful, and other private associations. But within the family, there may also be more freely constituted groups or communities with few formal ties, although a strong sense of belonging and an attitude of cohesion within the community and the family must always be nurtured.
- The difference between some groups comes from the ecclesial and social project they develop. But the evangelical family communicates to all the institutions and groups within it some flexibility and permeability from the common evangelical face and the common mission of the family, so that the members of the various groups that form it can become involved, not only in common projects for the mission, but in communities of life.

- Differentiation, which is always a richness, no longer comes by the separation of spaces and functions, since the evangelical family takes charge of all of them, but by the contribution that each one makes from his way of being a disciple.

Certainly, the evangelical family brings with it a profound change in the way of understanding relationships in the Church and the distribution of functions among the faithful. This experience of *communion for mission* lived in the evangelical family makes it an icon of the Church-Communion.

Evidently, no one can escape that much remains to be done with regards to all these issues. We cannot be naïve: the task left to the entire Church by the Second Vatican Council, that of replacing the pyramid system with that of the People of God configured as the Body of Christ, is proving more arduous than it could have been anticipated in principle. There are many resistances and attempts to restore the old pyramidal model are evident even in many members of the hierarchy. But the new era in which we are immersed is unstoppable. We continue to advance in the challenge that John Paul II formulated at the beginning of the third millennium:

*“To make the Church the home and the school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God’s plan and respond to the world’s deepest yearnings”.*<sup>130</sup>

### 3. The Construction of a Lasallian Culture of Vocations

The construction of an appropriate culture of vocations in the Church is an effort both outward and inward, which necessarily implies an examination of what we are and what we live. The quality of one’s life of faith, both in the personal and institutional level, is an essential element in the pastoral ministry of vocations, since it is difficult for someone to transmit excitement and enthusiasm for a way of life if they do not live it. Therefore, the different forms of life that embody the Lasallian-style vocation are at the core of the reflection about the culture of vocations.

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130 *Novo millennio ineunte*, 43.

Perhaps religious life still has a greater necessity, both because of its charismatic identity in the Church and because it is the form of Christian life that suffers most from the shortage of vocations and, above all, because the vocational dynamism is at the origin of its identity and nature.

The culture of vocations must therefore be an opportunity to revitalize our vital commitments. Every Lasallian, Associate, Brother, Teacher, Young person or Family has a great responsibility in the growth of the culture of vocations. In the words of J. Chittister:

*"It is now our chance [...] to be willing to be strangers in our own land, to remain where we do not fit well, to commit ourselves to say what people do not wish to hear, so that creation does not continue to be created in vain. Now is our chance to say a prophetic word in favour of those who have no voice but our own. Now is our chance to risk our lives so others can live".<sup>131</sup>*

In all this reflection we cannot lose sight of the rest of the keys presented above: ecclesiology of communion, shared mission, the vocation of each and every one, etc. Also, the institution itself as a whole, which will have to gain in "liminality" and seek to have its pastoral works inserted in environments of special priority, such as the young people or those most in need, with an intentional prophetic nature, which can be essential to be audacious in the means and suggest actions with the purpose of growing the culture of vocations.

In this way, understanding that the experience of vocation in the Church is essentially to bear witness, not for doing anything special (in the sense that only religious, or ministers, or the laity can do it), but in living "making Christ the whole of their existence", devoting themselves wholly to the mission,<sup>132</sup> a full and healthy experience of baptismal consecration, which has its source in the personal and theological relationship with Jesus, can be a prophetic denunciation of the challenge of an "anti-vocational" culture.

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131 CHITTISTER, J., "Religious Life: Prophetic Dimension" in *Religious Life Review*, 33 (1994), pp. 102-111.

132 VC 72.

Let us focus our reflection in the following premises:

- 1) Every vocation is the fruit of God's initiative and is therefore a gift. God continues to call for having a personal relationship with Him. He also encourages to materialize the life of faith into some of the Christian forms of life within the Church.<sup>133</sup>
- 2) Each form of life remains necessary and fully meaningful. Avoiding any thought of uselessness, from one's own personal and institutional weakness, an appropriate culture of vocations will also entail a revitalization of the experience of the charism received, always as a gift and task.<sup>134</sup> As we have already stated, no member of the Church is exempt from responsibility in the growth of the culture of vocations. It is essential, in addition to prayer, to strive to inspire, discover, accompany the vocation and to create constructive conditions for it to emerge.
- 3) In the Church, we cannot be seized by despair and "renounce to have successors". We cannot collaborate with a thought that leads us to conclude that our path is not useful, or that it can no longer interest anyone. As X. Quinzá states, "the ecclesial and religious life is renewed by aggregation", from the encounter that is mediation for the action of the Spirit.<sup>135</sup> The witness, the service, the option

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133 Cf. KASPER, W. *Iglesia Católica. Esencia-realidad-misión*. Salamanca: Sígueme, 2013.

134 According to *Vita Consecrata*, religious life is not just another charismatic fruit within the Church, but because it encompasses the essential elements of its constitution, it represents it in its most nuclear form (cf. VC 3), since, due to its "universal presence" and the "evangelical nature of its witness", it is not "something isolated and marginal, but a reality with affects the whole Church". "The consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church", continues the same number, "since it manifests the inner nature of the Christian calling and the striving of the whole Church as Bride towards union with her one Spouse" (cf. VC 7 and 19).

135 Cf. QUINZÁ, X. *El horizonte de una nueva cultura vocacional*. Suplemento Con Él, n. 4 (2012), Vida Nueva n. 140.359.

for the poor and the consistency are essential, but always keeping in mind that the objective is not to maintain houses, projects or structures, but to spread the Gospel:

*“We easily come to think that new vocations must spring from ourselves, from our own vitality, from our germinative energy; but such an affirmation is a mistake, both for the bad and for the good. For the bad, because they are not the fruits of our branches, for we are called to spread the kingdom of God and not to perpetuate ourselves. But also, for the good, because if we do not have the strength to awaken the passion for God and for humanity in the hearts of young people, we will have to trust much less in ourselves and much more in the only Lord who can do it”.<sup>136</sup>*

The renewal of vocational animation with the keys of the culture of vocations opens the possibility of new fields of pastoral ministry for consecrated life, especially in terms of presence, opening of communities, models of identification and spaces for listening and compassion. And at the same time, it contributes to the renewal and revitalization of one's consecrated life, which remains of “very great necessity”,<sup>137</sup> even if it is no longer — and will not be again — a structure of power and spiritual elite.

### **a) The Importance of the Weak**

If the concern for vocations is focused on survival, not on dying, the current fragility will be an insurmountable obstacle. If motivation arises rather from trying to respond to the growing needs of the men and women of our time, especially those most in need, a culture of vocations can be developed with fidelity to the call of God. As in all times of the Church, it is God's initiative and the construction of the Kingdom that should drive us, it is love for the man and woman in need that should encourage us to become active witnesses. Thus, all Christians will be promoters of vocations from their own life and limitations, with their prayer, their work, their

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<sup>136</sup> *Id.*, p. 11. 8.

<sup>137</sup> SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE, *Common Rules of the Brothers of Christian Schools*, 1704, chapter 1.

identity and their passionate conviction that discovering one's vocation is necessary for every person.

The crisis and the displacement of the preferential position of the Church and of the consecrated life today can be understood as an opportunity. The experience of faith can no longer be by social or cultural heritage, but by choice, or, even better, by vocation. The tasks that the mission takes us to perform will no longer seek prestige or efficiency, but meaning. The success of evangelization cannot be evaluated by numbers, but by the experience of faith that it has provoked and accompanied.<sup>138</sup>

Consequently, the pastoral ministry of vocations will be fundamentally mystagogical and anthropological:

- 1) The mystagogical is the natural space where the vocational emerges:<sup>139</sup> "Either the Pastoral Ministry of Vocations is

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138 K. Rahner wondered, "Where do you speak with tongues of fire of God and his love? Where, above all rational inculcation of God's existence, is there a mystagogy in the face of God's living experience that departs from the core of one's existence? In which seminars are the ancient classics of spiritual life still read with the conviction that they also have something to tell us today? Where do the "spiritual fathers", the Christian *gurus*, who possess the charisma of starting in meditation, even in mysticism, where the last of man, his union with God, is accepted with holy courage, still occur? Where are men with the courage to be disciples of such spiritual fathers? Is it so obvious that this teacher-disciple relationship is only given, in a secularized way, in deep psychology?" (RAHNER, K. *Cambio estructural de la Iglesia*, PPC: Madrid: 1974, pp. 105-106).

139 The "mistagogue" is the believer who initiates, through catechesis and accompaniment, the neophyte in the faith. He is, therefore, a mediator "who leads Jesus." In the process of initiating the faith from the Holy Fathers, the mystagogical stage immediately follows the celebration of the sacraments of Initiation, of the three or some of them. Its duration varies depending on the circumstances. Its purpose is to insert the candidates into the life of God, through listening to the Word, participation in the Eucharist, ordinary life, fraternal charity, prayer and apostolate. That is, it is the consequence of becoming part of the Christian community. At this time, a catechesis was given on the sacraments received at the previous Easter Vigil, with a very strong imprint of biblical, liturgical and spiritual character. The mystagogical stage concludes the Christian Initiation as an itinerary of faith. However, the Christian life of the initiate continues and will truly develop if the now initiated assiduously listens to the Word of God, celebrates the sacraments, habitually practices prayer, cultivates the apostolate in the environment, performs with competence and spirit of service his profession, lives in a special way the attention to the poor, seriously engages in the political life of

mystagogical, and therefore emanates again and again from the Mystery (of God) to lead to the mystery (of the human being), or is not such pastoral ministry”.<sup>140</sup> Benedict XVI reminds us that “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”.<sup>141</sup> The Christian vocation begins with an encounter and the task of the evangelist is to facilitate and accompany him. As E. Schillebeeckx recalls:

*“It all started with an encounter. Some men – Aramaic-speaking Jews and perhaps also Greek – came into contact with Jesus of Nazareth and stayed with him. That encounter and everything that happened in the life and around the death of Jesus, made his life acquire new meaning. They felt renewed and understood, and this new personal identity translated into an equivalent solidarity with the others and with their neighbour. The change of direction in their lives took place as a result of their encounter with Jesus. It was not a result of their personal initiative, but something that emerged from outside”.*<sup>142</sup>

In consequence, anything that stimulates closeness, transparency, walking together, will bring about the development of the culture of vocations. It should be an incentive to assess the presence and options of the whole ecclesial community, particularly from consecrated life.

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his country and community and continues his human and Christian formation. It is, therefore, a fundamental stage that must be expressly taken care of. At all times, the mystagogical catechesis, that is, a very experiential catechesis on the three sacraments celebrated or renewed, but discovering the meaning of the sacramental experience from symbolic rites of each sacrament (mystagogy or conduction to mystery). Cf. SARTORE, D., «Catequesis y Liturgia», en *Nuevo Diccionario de Liturgia*, Paulinas, Madrid 1987, 321-324; DOMÍNGUEZ BALAGUER, R., *Catequesis y liturgia en los Padres. Interpelación a la catequesis de nuestros días*, Sígueme, Salamanca, 1988. Saint Ambrose has bequeathed us one of the best descriptions of this stage in AMBROSIO DE MILÁN, *Explicación del símbolo; Los sacramentos; Los misterios*, Madrid: Ciudad Nueva, 2005.

140 NVNE, 8-11.

141 BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.

142 SCHILLEBEECKX, E. *Cristo y los cristianos. Gracia y liberación*, Madrid: Cristiandad, 1982, p. 13.



- 2) The Christian vocation is a response to the false anthropology of success without seeking the transcendent purpose. Moreover, it overcomes any temptation to remain in mere “personal development” in favour of a complete fulfilment, the meaning of life that is precisely found in putting oneself entirely at God’s disposal. Our predominant culture does not opt, as we have noticed, for the pursuit of ultimate meaning, but Christianity understands life radically as a vocation. Belonging to the Church arises from the response to the call (Eph 1:4). This is the first and radical value for the Christian, as it was for Christ: to make himself available to God for his saving plan. For these reasons the meaning of life cannot lie in hedonism. In the same way, for the Christian, freedom is achieved precisely when a person voluntarily binds himself to God’s plan.

Religious life aims to live this anthropology to the full and should show it. The importance of witness is vital, since it allows the person to see that it is possible to live in another way... being fully happy. Not from power or great buildings, but from simplicity, coherence and weakness, we can ask ourselves the same question that Paul VI put to all evangelizers:

*“Either tacitly or aloud — but always forcefully — we are being asked: Do you really believe what you are proclaiming? Do you live what you believe? Do you really preach what you live? The witness of life has become more than ever an essential condition for real effectiveness in preaching. Precisely because of this we are, to a certain extent, responsible for the progress of the Gospel that we proclaim”.*<sup>143</sup>

Living our minority and our fragility should not prevent us from looking towards a special horizon. Living vocation today has a lot to do with “reaching out to where we fix our gaze”, the title of a work by J. Maureder.<sup>144</sup>

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143 EN 76.

144 MAUREDER, J. *Llegamos allá donde fijamos la mirada: vivir hoy la vocación*. Santander: Sal Terrae, 2007.

The internal culture of vocations of religious life grows when it is lived passionately from the depths, when it becomes an attractive alternative, when it dares to develop its mission showing the true profile of its charism and when it lives the “beyond” of its choice of life, with all the paradoxical strength of its fragility.<sup>145</sup>

### **b) A treasure to share: cultivating what we are**

The first condition for constructing an authentic culture of vocations is to have faith in ourselves, that is, to believe in the value that our Christian ways of life still have today and to be certain that it is a necessary treasure.<sup>146</sup> And it is when “beyond all superficial assessments of its usefulness, the consecrated life is important precisely in its being unbounded generosity and love, and this all the more so in a world which risks being suffocated in the whirlpool of the ephemeral”.<sup>147</sup>

This treasure is sustained on faith, an unshakable faith in God who calls and a certain faith that He keeps calling to live the vocation, not to keep the old, but to create something new. Without a deep faith in who we are, we will not be able to encourage others to follow us, especially in a world where there are many who doubt the very meaning of, for example, consecrated life: “Many people today are puzzled and ask: What is the point of the consecrated life? Why embrace this kind of life, when there are so many urgent needs in the areas of charity and of evangelization itself, to which one can respond even without assuming the particular commitments of the consecrated life?”<sup>148</sup>

The answer to such questions cannot be of a functional nature. What gives meaning to Christian life is the relationship with God, the following of Jesus. If we potentiate the most radical of their vocations, they will be developing a culture of vocations for the whole Church. This treasure, which we cannot appropriate, results several keys:

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145 Cf. *Íd.*, pp. 111-118.

146 Cf. PROVINCIA JESUITA DE ESPAÑA, *Un tesoro que desenterrar. Algunas sugerencias para la Pastoral Vocacional*. Madrid, 2005.

147 VC 105.

148 VC 104.

- 1) The heart of the culture of vocations is the *personal relationship with God*, especially with the essential mediation of prayer,<sup>149</sup> for it is always required “a renewed faith in God, a faith that brings forth from the stones children of Abraham and make fruitful the barren breasts if invoked with confidence”.<sup>150</sup> That is, it is about cultivating one’s vocation, the first task of any culture of vocations.

Christian prayer, as the listening to the Word of God, creates the ideal space for each person to discover the truth of his being and the identity of the personal and unrepeatable life project that the Father entrusts to him. Only in silence and listening can the person perceive the call of the Lord and follow it promptly and generously.<sup>151</sup> And “if prayer is the natural path of the vocational search, today as yesterday, or better, as always, are necessary vocational educators who pray, teach prayer, educate invocation”.<sup>152</sup>

- 2) There can be no vocational question if the different forms of Christian life are not valued and made visible in the Church, all of them with equal dignity and particular accents. Faced with a cultural environment in which there is a huge lack of knowledge of what the Church and consecrated life are, it is necessary to make an effort for visibility and transparency and this involves discerning which should be the priority presences of religious men and women. Are they there where life is encouraged and promoted?<sup>153</sup> What quality do they have? Do they present themselves with

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149 “The evangelical image of the ‘Owner of the harvest’ leads to the heart of the pastoral ministry of vocations: prayer. Prayer that knows how to look with evangelical wisdom to the world and to each person in the reality of his or her needs of life and of salvation. Prayer that manifests Christ’s charity and compassion for humanity, which also today appears as a flock without a shepherd. Prayer that manifests the trust in the powerful voice of the Father, the only one who can call and send to work in his vineyard. Prayer that manifests the living hope in God that will never allow the Church to lack the workers needed to carry out its mission” (NVNE 27a).

150 CIVCSA, *Caminar desde Cristo* (19 de mayo de 2002), n. 16.

151 Cf. PDV 38.

152 NVNE 35.

153 Cf. SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR INSTITUTES, *Religious and Human Promotion* (12 August 1980), No. 24. Published in *L’Osservatore Romano*, ed., in Spanish, 14 December 1980, p. 1. 16.

simplicity and welcoming attitude? We cannot leave things as they are,<sup>154</sup> based on the comfortable criterion of “we have always done it this way”.<sup>155</sup>

As Christians, we are also inheritors of a mission, which remains that of God, so our “entrusted task”, the proclamation of salvation coming from Jesus, involves leaving our own communities and going to the “peripheries”, not only geographical, but also existential as Pope Francis often reminds us: pain, injustice, ignorance, sin, despair, all misery...<sup>156</sup>

Particularly important is personal and community poverty, where credibility of Christianity is at stake, in the face of a predominant culture that values people according to what they have. The prophetic existence of the follower of Jesus demands trust, simplicity of life, gratuitousness and attitude of welcome and availability to all and, especially, to those who have fewer opportunities:

*“No one can face life in isolation.... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together.... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together”.*<sup>157</sup>

The *visibility* will not depend so much on external signs as on the quality of the witness of life: “the fraternal life and fervour of the community can awaken in the young a desire to consecrate themselves completely to God and to the preaching of the Gospel”.<sup>158</sup>

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154 Cf. EG 25.

155 EG 33.

156 Cf. GAITÁN, J. «Las Periferias de Francisco: ¿Dónde es eso?» *Catholic.net*. [online] Accessed on 4 July 2015. Accesible en <http://es.catholic.net/op/articulos/32459/las-periferias-de-francisco-donde-es-eso.html>

157 POPE FRANCIS, *Fratelli tutti*, 8.

158 EG 107.

If a community of faith is truly fraternal, its openness and visibility will decisively contribute to creating a culture of vocations.<sup>159</sup> If it is always enclosed, if it is not present in the social and ecclesial life of its surroundings, if it does not reflect its fraternity with simplicity, it is a wealth that remains untapped and that does not provoke any question:

*“Despite the individualism so deeply rooted in our society, the longing for a fraternal life is one of the elements most desired by young people who are interested in consecrated life and it is precisely community attitudes such as welcome, fraternity, simplicity, hospitality, forgiveness, mercy... that attract and transmit, which when they exist provoke the desire to share them”.<sup>160</sup>*

Sometimes there seems to be a certain shyness or an excess of discretion, even among the religious men and women, when talking about their vocation, to share the joy and beauty of their own vocation. It’s a mistake. It is essential to recover the strength of the *story of one’s own experience*, of one’s own testimony. M. Ramos, a lay theologian, asks the religious:

*“What “mirrors” are offered by the language in which religious life is spoken? What feelings do they let out? [...] Only from open-heart testimony, and not with beautiful theories or ideas, can these kids be explained to the extent to which they are unaware of the charm of religious life. [...] You could show the theme of religious life by sharing your feelings with images and parables, and narrating the testimony of a shared life...”<sup>161</sup>*

In this regard, some pastoral agents ask to use the elements of the “narrative identity”, that is, of an apprehension of life in the form of a story,

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159 EG 99 and VC 45.

160 ROYÓN, E. «Animación vocacional «por contagio» ¿Qué visibilidad para una vida consagrada capaz de suscitar vocaciones?», conferencia para CONFER, 2014.

161 RAMOS, M. «Hablar de Dios en forma de pan y mantequilla», en *Todos uno*, 146 (2001), pp. 26-30.

following the school of the French philosopher P. Ricoeur,<sup>162</sup> in order to respond to a predominant culture that leads to a fragmented identity.<sup>163</sup>

Finally, *proximity* and *accompaniment* are essential. It is very difficult to create a culture of vocations if there are no quality relations, which lead to a deep and close dialogue. In this area religious men and women, called to be “experts in communion”,<sup>164</sup> have the way open. Growing up in an attitude of listening, as encounters, in the fabric of relationships, helps people, especially young people, to discover their own interiority, by feeling heard and understood in all its dimensions, and in it and from it, find the light that guides them in life.

The discovery of one’s vocation is not a single closed revelation, but a process that is forged day after day.<sup>165</sup> Discernment is only authentic if it is contrasted in both an informal accompaniment and a formal and prepared one. The vocation, at any time, but above all in its awakening, must be accompanied:

*“After the enthusiasm of the first meeting with Christ, there comes the constant struggle of everyday life, a struggle which turns a vocation into a tale of friendship with the Lord”.*<sup>166</sup>

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162 About narrative identity, cf. CASAROTTI, E. «Paul Ricoeur, la constitución narrativa de la identidad personal» en *Prisma*, n. 12 (1999), pp. 118-131 y CASTRO, C. «La constitución narrativa de la identidad y la experiencia del tiempo» en *Nómadas. Revista Crítica de Ciencias Sociales y Jurídicas*, n. 30 (2011).

163 Cf. BOLTON, G. DI GREGORIO, J. y RODRÍGUEZ, M. *Pastoral Juvenil escolar urbana. Cartografía de una experiencia*. Editorial Stella. Buenos Aires, 1998 y MARTÍNEZ, I. *Cosechando semillas: algunas experiencias del Centro de Asesoría Psicológica en la Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana*, 1999.

164 Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, 21 November 2014, Nos. 2 and 3.

165 Cf. GARRIDO, J. *Evangelización y espiritualidad*, Santander: Sal Terrae, 2009, Cap. 17: «Vocación y formas de vida».

166 VC 64.

### c) An itinerary of vocational construction

To conclude these reflections, a brief series of stages are suggested in an open itinerary of construction of a rich culture of vocations in and from the Lasallian vocation:<sup>167</sup>

- 1) *Start from the conviction that it is God's initiative.* It is the central point of our vocation: we are called by God and our lives are touched by Him in a mysterious and radical way. From his merciful love, he chooses us, sinners and limited, for a beautiful task: to help all grow as children of God, with all their dignity, and willing to collaborate also with Him in his project of salvation. Nothing we call "La Salle" would exist without this initiative.
- 2) *Avoid any temptation of just functionality,* for we do not need vocations to solve works or ministries, but are for the transformation of the world. They are God's work and belong to him, they will not serve to save the Institute, nor to make us feel more powerful, younger, or more meaningful. If we had more novices, it would be a danger not to ask ourselves what God wants of us: to keep what we have or to do something new. The mission is always to be discovered.
- 3) *Recognize and value that every vocation (religious, lay, ministerial...) is a wealth for the Church* and, in this sense, our culture of vocations includes all possible vocations in the Lasallian Family, with the special responsibility to inspire, detect and accompany the vocations to the life of Brothers and Sisters, not because this calling is better, but because it is ours. This means making a personal, community and institutional commitment to this task.
- 4) *Trust in the generous heart of people,* with the certainty that every human heart can embrace the Word of God and, although with characteristics different from those of some years ago, contemporary men and women also have a number of sensibilities, ways of living,

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167 PROVINCIA JESUITA DE ESPAÑA, *Op. Cit.* y VERTRAND, C. "What does it take to attract and sustain new members to religious communities?" in *Horizon* (November, 2001).

concerns and values that can embrace that message and, indeed, embrace it in new ways. Affirming this trust and asking for the light to see these new ways of welcoming the Word is central to the vocational culture, even more so in a Family dedicated to the education of young people.

- 5) *Trust in our own fragility and that this whole process is possible.* On the one hand, it is essential not to lose hope. On the other hand, it is urgent to change the image that has sometimes been given of the Brothers or Associates: the perfect, those who renounce, the unreachable, the outstanding, the sacrificed, the serious... as if no mistakes were made, no search was also continued, etc. There is no need to fear the power to be judged for being flesh and bone, like everyone, but touched by God. Our strength is not our abilities but the God of Jesus. He helps us to get up and continue the journey.
- 6) *Make ourselves known in a personal way, to enhance the personal encounter with the other.* Opt for testimony and personal accompaniment. May we be perceived as close, concerned, open to dialogue, willing to commit ourselves, concerned to make this world a more just one, giving reasons for what we do or fail to do... This will sometimes mean having “wasted” many hours, a long time, having accompanied silences, encounters and places that may not say anything beforehand. Vocational animation is usually face-to-face. It takes time for the encounter and quiet listening. One must imagine how to free up times and people who can offer this kind of quality reception and listening that will make it easier for others to seek and find God’s will in their lives.
- 7) *Consider a new visibility from the most ordinary and usual of our life.* This will make it possible to confront the bad image of Christianity and religious life. It is important that we are known as people, as communities and as institutions with a defined identity, which may not be as before, too limited to directing or sustaining a work, but can be highly significant for those who can and want to see it. Choosing to be present where the State does not reach, where there is no dialogue, where it seems impossible to make something fruitful, where it is necessary more than ever to listen to it...



It involves a dialogue and community discernment to which we are not very accustomed, perhaps because it also requires each of us to live in process and listen to what are the calls God makes us to reupdate our charism.

- 8) *Have the doors open*, showing an intentional community of men and women who celebrate together the God of life, to whom they have given their existence, free in their hearts and brimming with the joy of life. In it we are united in the same project of existence and saving action in favour of young people, with ties deeper and more satisfying than those simply affective or familiar, with a simple and grateful heart, open to history and people, sharing with them distress and difficulties and helping to bear the burden of existence to all.
- 9) *Offer a path of plenitude*, moved by the immense joy of having found something very valuable that, to be reached, requires total generosity. The vocation of the Lasallian Associates and the vowed Brothers and Sisters can only be understood and accepted in this dynamic of fullness of life. We should always propose our limited life as a joyful path to life in abundance.
- 10) In a society of the comfortable and the quick, *offer experiences of rupture* (volunteering, Third World, various serious and accompanied commitments) to be able to experience in one's flesh that another lifestyle is possible, to assume that this calls for a decision, an exit from one's own "comfort zone", a risk worth taking. It is key to consider life as a vocation for the excluded, who are not far from us.
- 11) *Recover the "apostolic breadth"*, since our vocation is not only a work that has us overflowing and constantly on the edge. Isn't that the image we sometimes give, even in order to do many good things? This "slack" is not easy in these times of decline, nor does it depend only on good intentions. In this sense, only with imagination and risk can we create comfortable spaces in which teamwork and shared mission is possible. It is urgent to seek or create these spaces where our vocation can be lived spontaneously, freshly and free.

12) *Opt for a new presence in social media and especially on the Internet*, like any other collective that aims to offer something meaningful to society. The Internet and social networks are fantastic means of communication, of relationship and of presentation of our identity, to which we cannot turn our backs. That requires a commitment and an effort — also economic — to provide our online presence with quality that not only shows our work, but also who we are: happy Lasallians who share their lives from the Gospel.

We live, in our Church and in our society, a very favourable time to recover the vitality of God's gift. Starting from this vital premise, we should live with hope and enthusiasm our daily reality, with the keys of the culture of vocations. Today, Lasallian men and women are asked to be creative and courageous in order to update our charism and live by giving out the gift that has been entrusted to us. To do this, we must be willing to change, to let go some structures, to give up certain goals and to place ourselves where we truly believe we can give life. That is, to embody creative fidelity. We are not only inheritors of a charism, but responsible for its transmission and updating. The Lasallian vocation is not dead, it exists to give life, like the grain of wheat in the parable of the Master (Jn 12:24), perhaps in ways that we are not able to imagine today.

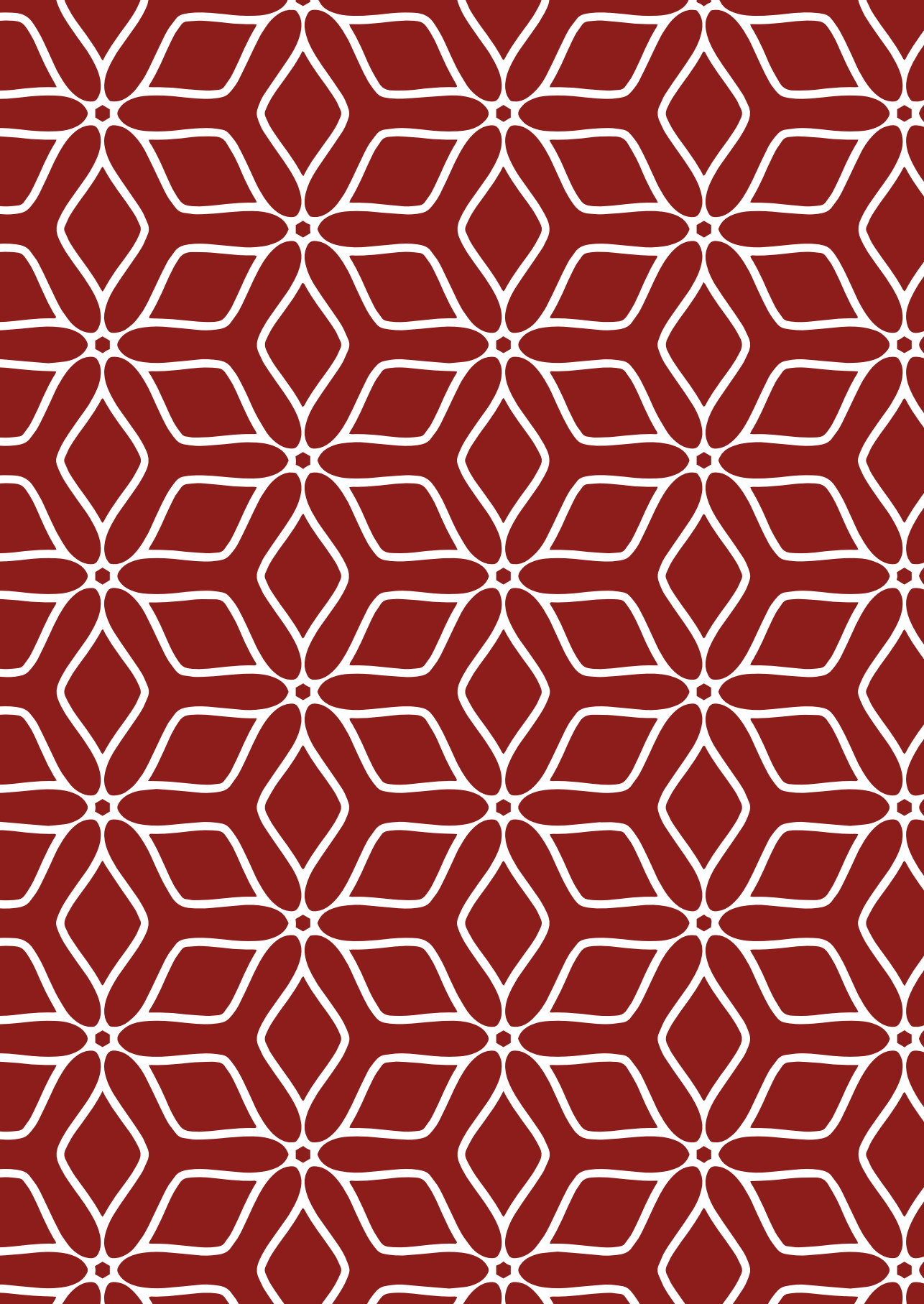
## Questions for discussion

- The title of this chapter “Inheritance without property” reminds us that we cannot enclose the charism, as the fruit of the Spirit, in any enclosed and structured system. It does not belong to us, but rather it is we who belong to Him. What are the most common resistances in our communities and schools to the action of this Spirit?
- Read again the “importance of the weak” section from the positive key of vulnerability. Read 2 Cor 12:9: “My grace is sufficient for you (χάρις, from which *charism* comes), for power is made perfect in weakness.” How do we cope with weakness, personal and institutional, in our day-to-day lives?
- Recall the documents of the 46<sup>th</sup> General Chapter, where we reflected on vulnerability, vocation and their culture from the keys of commitment and “prophetic audacity”. In this booklet the author states that “the discovery of one’s vocation is not a single and closed revelation, but a process that is forged day after day”. Hence the importance of vocational tales, also in the first person. Could you identify some areas in your environment so that you can simply share your vocational journey?

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