



Istituto dei
FRATELLI DELLE SCUOLE CRISTIANE
Superiore Generale



THE 45th GENERAL CHAPTER

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Closing Remarks
7 June 2014

1. Introduction

In an atmosphere of fraternal communion and intense moments of prayer we have accomplished much good during these weeks of our 45th General Chapter. We are deeply indebted to Brother Alvaro and his General Council, the members of the Central Community at the Generalate, the General Chapter Preparatory Commission and the two Rule Revision Commissions that assiduously worked to prepare for what I believe has been one of the most fraternal Chapters that I have been privileged to participate in. We have listened with great attention to the reports from the 2013 International mission assembly, the Young Brothers Assembly, the International Symposium of Young Lasallians, the Signum Fidei presentation and read the notes of our Brothers from around the Institute. All contributed to the richness of our discussions and informed our decisions. On the behalf of the Capitulants I extend my sincere thanks to all.

In this 300th anniversary year of De La Salle's contemplation of the letter he received from the principal Brothers while at Parmenie calling him back to Paris I take as my starting point the opening lines of the draft of a letter our capitulants from the *Brothers in the 21st century* thematic group composed for our consideration. They wrote:

Reflecting on that call of the "principal Brothers" to come down from Parmenie Hill, to take care of governing the society, the Thematic Group was moved to share the following convictions with us.

Gathered together in Chapter in this year of 2014 we are convinced:

- That our consecration to the Trinitarian God energizes and gives meaning to our lives;
- That the Gospel is our "first and principal Rule";
- That our vow of association is the foundation of our life in community;
- That the educational service of the poor, and with the poor, is our priority; and,
- That the Founder's charism is a gift to the Church and to the world.

It was with these convictions and others that we set about the work of this Chapter.

2. Four General Chapters

Brothers, I have attended four General Chapters and occasionally I reflect on the experience of each, their characteristics, their priorities, and their relationship of one to another. What continuity they reveal from one chapter to the next and what trends they may suggest. You'll recall in my report on RELAN in the second week of the Chapter I suggested that the previous three Chapters addressed the constitutive elements of our vocation and identity. The 42nd and 43rd General Chapters focused on our mission while the 44th highlighted our community and interior lives. As a result of the decisions we have taken at this Chapter I am finding similarities between the acts and decisions of the 42nd General Chapter in 1993 with our experience these past seven weeks. Among the decisions of that Chapter were:

- The Mission 100+ initiative to create new apostolates for the poor and to renew and strengthen existing apostolates for the poor.
- To continue organizing formation programs for our Brothers and Partners
- The call for the five colloquia on topic of a global nature, and
- To state once again the centrality of evangelization and catechesis in our life and mission as Brothers.

Among our decision of a similar nature...

At this 45th General Chapter two emphases mentioned throughout our days together have been service to and with the poor and our principal role as catechists. While the integration of the two is fundamental, the overarching concern is that we have not gone far enough with either. Further, our educational service with the poor and our role as catechists is accomplished today in association with our Partners. Hence we have highlighted at this Chapter and at this new moment in the life of the Church Pope Francis' belief in the importance of the laity as the protagonists of evangelization. Since the 1993 Chapter there has been a growing awareness of the identity and mission of the laity in the Church. But this observation is accompanied by a rejoinder from Pope Francis that perhaps involves us as well. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (102) he states: "At the same time, a clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making".¹ Brothers, we have made great strides in the formation of, and association with, our Partners. We know that Lasallian Formation and Association of Partners and Brothers is not an option today. It must remain a priority for the entire Institute if we are to remain a viable and vital presence in the world of education.

Echoing Brother Alvaro's call that we be "Brothers without Borders" we have also spoken, with enthusiasm, for new initiatives for and with the poor and where possible to do so in collaboration with other congregations. However, unlike the 42nd General Chapter we do not have to create them as the Mission 100+ did; for some already exist allowing us to immediately put our words into action.

It is from this perspective that I invite you as delegates and Visitors to support and promote our presence and mission in the South Sudan. This project on behalf of people caught up in a very vulnerable and tense situation is an important service that combines some of the criteria we have spoken about – direct service with the poor, an international initiative, one being accomplished in collaboration with other congregations. Brothers, we must not miss the opportunity to continue making an important contribution to the needs of this newest country on our planet. And in your own regions, while I support any new initiatives benefit ting the poor, aren't their existing works with the poor that require strengthening? And

yes, Brothers, this should be done in an atmosphere of serious discernment, particularly with the possibility of networking with other Lasallian ministries in a District, with other Districts or Regions or in collaboration with other groups. From such collaboration may new ventures come to fruition. Brothers, Let's do this!

The increasing role of higher education in the Lasallian mission and the need for a Lasallian pedagogy for the 21st century have also been voiced at this Chapter. Brothers and Partners in higher education were key contributors to the five colloquia of the 1990's. Here too we have made strides from that time. Today there is a network of Lasallian tertiary institutions (IALU) and they offer an annual formation program for their faculties and staffs here at the Generalate. It is essential that this cooperation continues and a significant area for its development would be for our federation of Universities to take up the challenge issued in the Chapter to help articulate an authentic Lasallian pedagogy for the 21st century which can be disseminated throughout the Institute.

And one last example of similarities between these two Chapters - Brothers I am delighted we have re-affirmed the primacy of evangelization; announcing the Gospel to the poor. We have taken up the call from Circular 466 which reminded us that "for centuries, teaching catechism was a priority in the Institute and it produced many experts whose influence spread well beyond the boundaries of the Institute and contributed in a significant way to the evangelizing mission of the Church". In the same spirit evident in the Chapter, Circular 466, and then goes on to challenge us by asserting that "it is ... up to us Brothers [and Partners] to play our part in this new impetus in evangelization...."²

3. Brother Alvaro, Pope Francis and Jesus

I do not think it insignificant that one can glean a convergence in thinking between Brother Alvaro's Pastoral Letters and Pope Francis' call for Religious to move from the center to the periphery, the desert, the borders and all that the Pope has shared in his first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. I think the prophetic words of both leaders reveal their insight to God's plan of salvation for us all. They remind us that God, through his human servants, is often at work on the fringes of society. In EG Pope Francis reminds us that: "The entire history of our redemption is marked by the presence of the poor. Salvation came to us from the 'yes' uttered by a lowly maiden from a small town on the fringes of a great empire"³ (197). In our own Circular 466, *They Will Call themselves Brothers*, we read: "The Brother's consecration to God calls him to proclaim the gospel in those places where it has the least chance of being known and heard: in the desert, on the fringes, and at the boundaries"⁴. It is always the example of Jesus whom we have consecrated ourselves to follow.

In the words of a theologian:

Jesus deliberately "emptied himself" on behalf of others, and sought out the lowliest people and places. He located himself away from the comfortable center because that is where the marginalized and dispossessed were to be found. Having encountered them, he put himself at their service....

To move from the center to the edge, to exchange a position of authority and control for one of low-status and service, is to contribute to a rearranging of the world and a restructuring of relationships. In this world the first becomes the last, the master becomes the servant, and the teacher becomes the learner. And in that moment, that movement, the person who was overlooked and disenfranchised is raised up and dignified and the realm of God breaks through.⁵

Is this not the model and lived experience of our Founder?

4. The Fragile Hope of a Witness

I deem it fortunate that at this Chapter we received the book The Fragile Hope of a Witness, that dialogue between Brothers Miguel Campos and Michel Sauvage on Michel's personal journey in a time of rapid change in our Institute and Church. The three key words in the title – fragile, hope and witness - strike me as especially significant for us Brothers individually and collectively as an Institute. Each word has been voiced at different times during these days. And all speak to the **strength** of our Christian faith.

Fragile

We acknowledge fragility in our lives, in our Districts and in our Institute today. But we all know the truism, as Saint Paul tells us that it is in our weakness that God reveals his strength for us and for humanity. It is easy to be Christian when the Church is triumphant. But it is gospel, to serve and believe when the Church is humbled and weak.

Hope

We are people of hope because God is faithful to his creation and to his people. Is there a person among us who cannot recall example after example of how God has pulled us out of moments of despair, times of loneliness, periods of disenchantment? The lives of everyone in this room is a narrative of God's fidelity, and it is that fidelity that is "the reason for our hope" (1 Peter 3.15).

In his apostolic exhortation Pope Francis wrote: "It is my hope...that whenever we attempt to read the signs of the times it is helpful to listen to young people and the elderly".⁶ Our institute is rich in Senior Brothers, young people and Lasallian Partners. It is our wealth. We are truly blest as an Institute at this time in our history. In this very Chapter hall we have heard the wisdom of the more senior among us. The fidelity and perseverance of our elderly Brothers witness to us that one's consecrated life can be lived to the full in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. In addition to the reports from the Young Brothers' Assembly and the Young Lasallian Symposium we have frequently heard the voice of our young Brothers during these past weeks.

In their statement to us the young Brothers expressed their conviction that "despite many challenges and difficulties we [the young Brothers] continue to look to the future with hope. Therefore we have committed ourselves to both announce hope and transmit it by assuming a conviction at all levels that is creative, takes risks and responds to the challenges that arise from present day realities"⁷.

Witness

"We evangelize first and foremost by being who we are supposed to be. As public followers of Jesus Christ, we witness to his loving presence in the world of education.... What is of fundamental importance", Brother John Johnston once wrote, "is the quality of our lives. What kind of people are we? Are we earnestly striving to be the men we profess to be? We can be sure that – as individuals, as communities, and as Institute – we communicate a message..."⁸ What message do we want to communicate now and going forward? In the revisions we've made to our Rule we said that our responsibility and our contribution to the Lasallian mission today "is the witness of a ministerial community which lives its religious life in fraternal charity and in solidarity with the poor through educational service" (Chapter 2. 2.3).

5. Rule Revision

The work of the Rule Revision Commissions provided us with an excellent draft for the revisions of the

1987 Rule. When the revisions are approved by the Holy See copies of the Rule will be distributed to all the Brothers of the Institute. The revisions call us back to reading with fresh eyes the fundamentals of our identity and vocation as Brothers.

Among the revisions we approved is a three-fold description of our Role today in the Lasallian Mission we share with our Partners: that of service, witness and communion. In recent years “among the themes central to the ministry of Jesus biblical scholars identify foot-washing, boundary breaking and table fellowship”.⁹ I believe these correspond well to this three-fold role called for in the Rule revision and to the notion in Circular 466 that disciples are both called and sent.

Regarding the chapter on consecration and the centrality we now give to our vow of association I believe with one capitulant that article 3.16, in whatever final form it is written and translated may very well speak to the heart or core of our vocation and identity as lived in its foundational moments, as well as in the complexity of today’s world. In the words of one capitulant:

It was in the day-to-day reality of community life among one another and in the practical demands and challenges of teaching the children of the artisans and the poor, that those whom the Lord confided to their care, that John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers manifested their total consecration to the Most Holy Trinity.

Like the Founder and the early Brothers, the Brothers offer themselves entirely to the Triune God – who “wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of Truth” – and to the mission He has entrusted to the Institute. The Brothers live their consecration for mission in community “as far as they are able” and in the spirit of “together and by association.”

In “The Fragile Hope of a Witness”, a recurring observation of Br. Michel Sauvage is: “The simple discovery is that the religious life of the Brother is apostolic and that everything is organized around that fact. But I understood apostolic as a total reality, not only external activities but also the idea of mission: called by God the Father, consecrated in the Son, sent by the Spirit in the Church, in communion with the Church, and engaged in the world for the purpose of making these young people succeed in the world.”¹⁰

John Baptist de La Salle and his early companions didn’t make some sort of “theoretical” consecration that was ‘anthropological’ or ‘sociological’ or even idealistic. No. It was one aristocratic yet altruistic cleric and a bunch of moderately educated men at best who rolled up their sleeves, developed the virtues of generosity of spirit and patient forbearance and got down to the not-so-romantic, nitty-gritty business of teaching and caring for unruly children who weren’t their own. Motivated by the belief that a quality education can lead a child to “know, love and serve God in this world so to be happy with Him forever in heaven,” a gradual understanding of consecration and association developed among this band of Brothers and their subsequent followers based on the ups and downs, joys and sorrows of their daily living.

Similarly today throughout the world, Brothers and Partners in all shapes and sizes, of all varieties of personalities and temperaments, with a mixture of gifts and shortcomings still are willing to live day-to-day “as far as they are able and as God will require of them” with others they choose to call Brother and Lasallian Partner to offer direct and indirect educational service to the young and not so young, but particularly children who are poor and far from achieving their potential. Children who are not their own but have been entrusted to them by the Lord. It’s not theoretical or anthropological. It’s not romantic piety but it is incarnational spirituality in the best sense. This consecration is a practical and faithful acceptance by men (in the case of we Brothers) with clay feet of an invitation from the God of the living to commit totally to a compelling charism and live it to its fullest.

Long before Pope Francis coined the idea of “the smell of the sheep”, John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers modeled a Good Shepherd lifestyle of “together and by association” and over the centuries, the Brothers have continued the commitment; a commitment that give meaning to the vocation of teaching to many of our Partners today as well.

Regarding these revisions we have made to our Rule the remarks Br. John Johnston made in his 1991 Pastoral Letter in reference to the still new 1987 Rule are as valid today as they were then:

... it is not enough to have a theoretical expression of our identity and specificity in the Church. The important thing is that we know, understand, and interiorize what we express in the Rule – whether or not we are in total agreement with every article – and together make the practical applications required in the life and mission of our district and community.¹¹

I am confident Brothers that these revisions will contribute to our growth as interior men, men of the Spirit so necessary to accomplish this great work God has entrusted to us. For that to happen our Rule, Circulars 461 and 466, and all they contain, must be fully integrated into the novitiate program of studies and the object of the annual plan of communities and ongoing formation programs but, more particularly, they have to be integrated into our lives as authentic Religious, living our consecrated Lasallian life as we are called to live it and as we have vowed to do.

6. Other Matters

Following up on the 300 anniversary of the letter from the principal brothers to De La Salle while he was at Parmenie, the Institute will mark other significant anniversaries in the next 7 years. In 1717 Brother Barthelemy becomes the first Brother as Superior General. The Common Rules of the Brothers of the Christian Schools are produced in 1718; Saint La Salle dies in 1719 and the Conduct of Christian Schools are released in 1720. Brother Bernard writes the first biography of John Baptist de La Salle in 1721. Each of these events can serve as an impetus in an Institute-wide dialogue contributing to a Lasallian mission in the 21st century that is vibrant, innovative and transformative.

In addition Pope Francis has declared 2015 the year of Consecrated Life. This occasion and the soon to be released Vatican document on the Brother's life present us with the opportunity to make this gift to the Church more widely understood and appreciated. In this connection I am pleased to note that the Chapter's Vocation Thematic Group has offered us a number of concrete actions to promote the vocation of the Brother.

7. Conclusion

Brothers, Lasallian Partners, and all those listening, there are other things I could say. But this is enough for now. I conclude with a word to my Brothers about our essential mission as my predecessors have often stated: we have the mission to make Christ's loving and saving presence a visible and effective reality among the poor, the young and the adults (cf. JJ PL 1991, p. 2). To do this we must *start afresh from Christ*. As that Instruction from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life stated:

Starting afresh from Christ means once again finding one's first love, the inspiring spark which first gave rise to the following. The primacy of love is his. The following is only a response in love to the love of God. If "we love" it is "because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:10,19). This means recognizing his personal love with that heartfelt awareness which made the apostle Paul say: "Christ loved *me* and gave up his life for *me*. (Gal. 2:20).

Only the awareness of being infinitely loved can help us overcome every personal and institutional difficulty. Consecrated persons cannot be creative, capable of renewing the Institute and opening new pastoral paths if they do not feel loved with this love. It is this love which makes them strong and courageous which instills fire and enables them to dare all.¹²

And this leads me back to the letter of the principal Brothers to De La Salle at Parmenie. De La Salle – who dared all – came down Parmenie's hill and returned to Paris to once again take up the government of the society. When he arrived in August, he said, "Okay, I am here. What do you want me to do?" In the

spirit of fraternity and with our Partners it is a question for us now to answer. What are we going to do for the Lasallian mission in the 21st century? To help us, let us hear De La Salle speak to us – utilizing a collection of quotes paraphrasing the language of our Founder as arranged by Br. Michel Sauvage:

Since it is the work of God you are doing, do it with enthusiasm and bring to it all the resources of your talents, your gifts, and your inspirations. Show as much creativity and inventiveness as you can, never losing sight of the true character of the teaching function that is your ministry. Since you are all ministers of Jesus Christ, be resolved to live in imitation of Christ by reason of your incorporation into Christ, into the mystery of his incarnation and nearness to us, the mystery of his role as servant and prophet, the mystery of his struggle for justice. Only in that way can you bring young people to assume their share in the full reality of what it means to be a son [or daughter] of God. This will help you to understand that all the difficulties you experience – the difficulties in maintaining the gratuity of the schools, the difficulties in changing the character of the school, the difficulties in overcoming inertia and traditional patterns of thought, the difficulties that often turn into outright persecution – all of these are expressions of the paschal mystery, of a life that grows out of your suffering and a certain kind of death. You are agents of the Holy Spirit, who in this way renews the face of the earth. Redouble, therefore, your pedagogical creativity while at the same time you enter into dialogue among yourselves, with your students, with their families, and their world, as well as with all others who want to serve the Church in this way”¹³ .

Brothers and Lasallian Partners, in this spirit and under the guidance of St. Joseph, Patron Saint of the Institute, our Blessed Mother, Queen and Mother of Christian Schools, and along with all our Lasallian saints and beati, we will accomplish much good for those entrusted to our care.

Thank You.

Notes:

1. Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 102, p.70.
2. *They Will Call Themselves Brothers*, Circular 466, Brothers of the Christian Schools, General Council, p. 37.
3. Ibid. 197, p. 135
4. *They Will Call Themselves Brothers*, Circular 466, Brothers of the Christian Schools, General Council, p. 32.
5. Gittins, Anthony J. A Presence that Disturbs: A Call to Radical Discipleship, Liguori/Triumph, Missouri, 2002, p. 162.
6. Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 108, p.75.
7. Statement of Young Brothers, Philippines, August, 2013.
8. Johnston, John, FSC. "*Irrevocably Committed*" to Follow Christ Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. Pastoral Letter, 1 January 1991, p. 27.
9. Gittins, Anthony J. Called to Be Sent: Co-Missioned as Disciples Today, Liguori/Triumph, Missouri, 2008, p.7.
10. Campos, Miguel, et.al., The Fragile Hope of a Witness: The Itinerary of Brother Michel Sauvage (1923-2001), Lasallian Studies, No. 18, Rome, 2014, p. 274.
11. Johnston, John, FSC. "*Irrevocably Committed*" to Follow Christ Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. Pastoral Letter, 1 January 1991, p. 28-29.
12. Congregation for Institute of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*. Instruction, Vatican City, 2002, p. 30.
13. Berger, Robert C. (ed.). Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle, Lasallian Publications, Christian Brothers Conference, Landover, Maryland, 1999, p.226.