

FROM THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL AND THE GENERAL CHAPTER 1966-1967 TO THE PRESENT

PRELUDE

1.40 *The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was such an important event in the life of the Church that it is impossible to exaggerate its influence on the General Chapter of 1966, prolonged into a second session in the autumn of 1967. As already indicated, the international Institute was already moving in a radical revision of its fundamental expression of itself and its mission through its Rules at the time when the Vatican Council was begun. Such a movement received new impetus through the event of the Council itself and its sixteen documents and has continued to do so from the various Pastoral Exhortations that have followed the prolongation of the Council through the sequence of Synods until the present day.*

The changes in language which pointed to new perceptions of the Church's understanding of itself and its role through the Second Vatican Council were reflected as well in the "new language" of the Institute's Renewal Chapter of 1966-1967. The four following major themes help to outline how the Institute's adherence to the principle of "responding to needs" in the field of Christian education found a practical focus.

- *The Declaration: The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today (1967)*
- *The "service of the poor as a principal characteristic" of the Institute's mission*
- *The Rule ad experimentum (1967-1987)*
- *The gradual perception and recognition of "Shared Mission"*

1.41 A new language to express new insights

From the moment Pope John XXIII convoked the Council, one of the major emphases was the change from preserving the tradition - the post-Reformation polemic - to the idea of being "up-to-date," summed up in the Italian word *aggiornamento*. This concept was to be the leading idea of the document *Perfectae Caritatis* on the *Renewal of Religious Life* with its direction to religious congregations to return to the sources of their original inspiration - what was subsequently to be described theologically as the charism (sic) of the Founder or Foundress - and to make themselves more strongly present to the modern world.

A second highly influential set of ideas was that of the *collegiality* of the Council Fathers with its theological emphasis on the sense of *communion (communio)* between the different groups in the Church, an idea that has dominated theological thinking to the present. This greater stress on horizontal relationships signaled a move away from an exclusively hierarchical understanding of authority and obedience. The concept of *People of God* as a description of

the Church and the adoption of the word dialogue to indicate the practical way in which matters could be discussed “collegially,” continued this movement. As these ideas developed, the word *subsidiarity* became an important description of the principle to determine the various levels at which decisions should be made in religious communities and in the Church in general. Later there came the ideas of *co-responsibility*, *solidarity* and *interdependence*. The first major document of the Council, *The Constitution on the Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)* in 1963, not only brought important reforms to the liturgy but effectively moved the Church away from the uniform Latin Mass and forms of liturgy which were sanctioned by many centuries of practice since the Council of Trent. In putting to one side centuries of chant and polyphony and effectively reducing them to the cultural expressions of previous ages, the Church showed how far it was prepared to go to be “up-to-date” and relevant to people of today. A whole new approach was taken to *Religious Freedom (Dignitatis humanae)* and to other religions in the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions (Nostra aetate)*. An emphasis on participation and the possibility of immediate understanding in the vernacular were henceforth considered more important than the carrying out of a ritual. The continuing growth of its self understanding is expressed by the Church in three great documents, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* in 1964, and, in 1965, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today (Gaudium et Spes)*, and the *Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*.

While it is important to see the importance of the Council as an *event*, it is even more important *to see it as movement*, both through its original documentation as well as through the cycle of subsequent *Synods* that have concentrated on particular themes. Some of this more recent documentation has greatly influenced the movement to various forms of “Shared Mission” in other religious congregations.

1.42 A Declaration: The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today (1967)

The emphasis on *today*, the present moment, (the famous *aggiornamento* of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council), led the Chapter delegates of 1966-1967 to a new, up-to-date formulation of the identity of the Brother. The *Declaration*, as its full title suggests, was a statement influenced by the Vatican Council and, along with the *Rule*, was the major document published by the Institute after the 39th General Chapter. There are 39 references to various Council documents, the major ones being to *Gaudium et Spes* and *Perfectas Caritatis*. Above all, the *Declaration* is a statement of identity, for, as Brother Charles Henry, Superior General, remarked in his preface:

“... it became more and more clear that we were in need of a document that would give a synthesis of the Brothers’ life and mission in the world of today.”

This synthesis was formulated in a very important way by defining the constitutive elements of the Brother’s vocation as *Religious consecration*, *Apostolate* or *Mission*, and *Community life*. What was significant about this clarification was the stress that the *Declaration* laid upon the integration of these elements as essential for the Brother’s identity.

The challenge issued under the heading Renewal and Adaptation has a lasting relevance:

“The renewal of the religious life implies that certain practices be given new vitality and that certain institutions be transformed. More importantly, renewal demands a return to the sources found in the Gospel and in the origins of the Institute. In this way new vigor will be derived from the creative principles that gave the Institute existence and the Brothers will be able to go beyond mere externals to live effectively the charism of the Founder in the world today.” (2)

The same preface invited the Brothers to read all the documents of the 39th General Chapter *“in the light of the Declaration.”* The fidelity of the document to the heritage of the Institute is well brought out in the following words:

“The spirit of the Declaration, the spirit that is basic to an understanding of all the capitular texts, is at once a spirit of spiritual renewal, a personal, responsible engagement in the service of Christ; a missionary spirit of dedication to the needs of youth and to the educational service of the poor; a spirit of community which daily nourishes itself on the word of God, heard and served together; the spirit of renewal of our apostolic works, and especially renewal of the school.” (ibid)

A perusal of the titles of the eight chapters which make up the *Declaration* show just how much it is a document of its time. The sequence begins with *Fidelity to the Founder*, is followed by directly quoting from *Gaudium et Spes*, *The Signs of the Times*, and continues with two chapters which look at *The Constitutive Elements of the Brother’s Vocation* and the *Personal Synthesis* which each member is called to make. The 5th chapter takes up *The Religious Life of the Brother* while the 6th concentrates on *The Service of the Poor through Education*. There is a separate chapter on *Education and the Teaching of Religion* and the work concludes by an overall view of *The Educational Work of the Brothers*.

1.43 The “service of the poor” as a principal characteristic of the Institute’s mission

The common theme addressed by the Vatican Council and successive Church documents as the *“preferential option for the poor”* has marked the Institute in its renewed attention to its educational mission as that of the *“service of the poor through education.”* The strong coherence between the *Declaration* and the *Rule* is most evident in this regard, although the classic tension between established works and new needs is always present.

“The Institute is devoted to the poor in a special way; although it offers its apostolic and educational services to all young people who are able to profit from it.”
(RC 1g, 1967)

“Another element that can be drawn from the notes (sent to the Chapter) is the expressed will for greater flexibility in the commitment of personnel to institutions so that when more urgent educational needs present themselves the Brothers

will be readily available. In particular, there is a widespread insistence that the service of the poor become once again a principal characteristic of the Institute.”
(D 9,3)

The *Declaration* devotes its entire chapter 6 to a lengthy consideration of the service of the poor through education by considering such questions as *Who are the Poor?*, *War Against Poverty*, *Teaching the Poor*, *Training other Social Classes*, *Help for Those Most in Need*, and terminates by considering the necessary *Preparation and Practical Orientation* for this work.

Chapter 6 concludes with the following words that indicate the challenge posed to all:

“Every level of authority; then, every dialogue and decision in the Institute, must be in harmony with the orientation, so that all our plans and work will show in deed and in truth our ‘return to the poor.’” (D 34, 4)

1.44 The *Rule ad experimentum* 1967-1987

Through a period of nearly ten years of study and discussion with four separate drafts of the *Rule*, the Institute followed the practice of the founding Brothers nearly 300 years previously by judging the suitability of this reform against the background of the life and experience of the Institute for 20 years before presenting a new *Rule* to the 41st General Chapter in 1986. In its approval of this *Rule* in 1987, the Church notes that the *“Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes has recognized in these texts the faithful expression of the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and of the tradition of the Institute … according to the ministry which the Church has entrusted to them.”* (R, Decree)

The *Rule* of 1987 is formulated on principles drawn from the *Declaration* and the *Rule ad experimentum* of 1967 and in the light of that lived experience.

1.45 The gradual recognition of the role of “lay teachers”

If the 37th General Chapter in 1946 appeared to be dismissive in relation to the “emergency role” played by lay-teachers in many schools during the Second World War, it was probably because so many other immediate major issues had to be faced by that Chapter. There was also a hope, perhaps even an expectation, that the Brothers would continue to maintain or even increase their numbers. Both the *Rule* of 1967 and the *Declaration* make only slight reference to the role of “lay-teachers” in expressions which are similar. The *Rule* specified that *“they (the Brothers) co-operate closely with the lay teachers and others responsible for the education of the young, joining their labors with all those who promote the cause of justice and unity among them.”* (RC 9, k). The *Declaration* offers a broader vision:

“The school will be molded into community only through a staff rich in diversity and the unity of its members. For this reason, the Brothers work closely with lay teachers, who make a unique contribution through their knowledge of the world,

of family life, and of civic affairs. Lay teachers should be completely involved with the whole life of the school: with catechesis, apostolic organizations, extra-curricular activities, and administrative positions.” (D 46, 3)

Both these documents draw attention to what can now be recognized with more clarity as the increasing involvement of the laity in many aspects of Christian life, especially through their work in schools. Many were increasingly inspired by the educational vision of John Baptist de La Salle. The late Brother Patrice Marey, in a text of June 7, 1990, entitled *The Relationship between Brothers and Lay Lasallians*, expressed this in the following words:

“We need to try to understand the times in which we are living and agree to judge it in terms of duration. The growing role of the laity is written in terms of duration. It began well before the Council, it is generalized in the Church and has never presented itself as opposed to priests or religious. If the laity fear clericalism, it is to affirm their own identity without arguing with other apostolic workers ... Another lesson to be drawn from this “time-duration” bond is that there will be no return to yesterday’s models ... The coming of many lay Lasallians ... is going to allow our works to continue in a way which we had never imagined. It is up to us to grasp this passing grace ... We are living in a favorable time, a day of salvation.” (p. 7)

1.46 “Degrees of belonging”

By the Chapter of 1976, however, there was such a clear recognition of the dedication of many lay-teachers that the matter was addressed in terms of their “*degree of belonging to the Institute*” through sharing in its mission:

“The Brothers share Lasallian spirituality and the animation of their works with all the members of the educational community. They are concerned with their continuing formation and careful to make them know the different degrees of belonging to what is being called the ‘Lasallian family.’” (C 403,6)

This matter of “*Degrees of belonging to the Institute*” was addressed in two formal Chapter resolutions.

- N. 44 Besides the postulants, a young man or one of mature age can be associated with the apostolic activity and the life of the community without having made religious profession. (The particular status and contract will be determined by the local community in agreement with the District).**
- N. 45 An individual or a group of persons can be associated in the apostolic activity of the Brothers and the spiritual life which animates them without sharing their community life completely.**

This text may now strike us as patronizing and limiting. But it is important not to overlook the advance in thinking which the Chapter delegates made by their reflection on experience and their openness to something completely new and different. Perhaps, too, in the general perception that not all those who shared in Lasallian works necessarily had the same commitment to them as a mission, there was a certain intuition that remains valid (cf. 3.26). That this growth in understanding continued to develop becomes even more marked in the next decade so that the group of Brothers constituted to prepare the draft of the Rule for the 1986 Chapter summed up this relationship between the Institute and those who work with it in the Christian education of young people, in the shorthand expression *A Shared Mission*. (R 17)

1.47 Lights and shadows

The following of the directions of the Second Vatican Council and those of the renewal Chapter of 1966-1967 provided a strong challenge to an international Institute. If the Chapter delegates had a broad view of what had been achieved through the two sessions of the Chapter, it was not easy to communicate this uniformly and have it understood in the same way throughout the Institute. The inspiring tone of the *Declaration* was not always uniformly heard or understood despite the efforts to pass on the results of the Chapter. Much was achieved but the fruits tended to be seen somewhat later. That is why the twenty years between the General Chapters of 1966 and 1986 were a period of great challenge for the Institute. After 1966, when the Institute knew its greatest number at any period of its history, there followed a period of rapid decline when a significant number of its members for various reasons decided to leave it. At the same time, there was a marked diminution of younger members entering so that the overall numbers of 1986 were about half of those of twenty years before. Yet, paradoxically, the apostolic works for which the Institute was responsible in 1986 were more numerous because of the growth of the Lasallian Family.

1.48 Lasallian Family

In 1946, the Sisters known as *Hermanas Guadalupanas De La Salle*, founded in Mexico, received canonical approbation and have continued to develop their apostolic works in close association with the Institute. In 1948, the *Union of Catechists of Jesus Crucified and Mary Immaculate*, begun by Brother Teoderetto in Torino in 1917, received formal approval as a Secular Institute. In 1973, a small group of *Lasallian Sisters* in Vietnam and Thailand, received diocesan recognition. These three foundations, along with other groups and movements, were formally recognized by the General Chapter of 1986 as forming part of what was called the *Lasallian Family*. But there was clear recognition in the *Letter to the Lasallian Family*, issued in response to the Chapter on February 2nd, 1989, that many other persons, especially teachers and those closely associated with the Lasallian educational mission, belonged to the Lasallian Family even without formal links to any particular group or movement. The years since then have shown the richness and vastness of this gift of the Spirit.