

## THE MISSION IS SHARED IN “RESPONSE TO NEEDS”

### PRELUDE

**3.10** *The historical circumstances in which the Lasallian mission of Christian education originated meant that the members of the young Institute were recognized in 1725 by a Bull of Approbation of the Catholic Church as members of a lay religious congregation with an approved Rule of life. We have already traced how the task of living out this mission in the second half of the twentieth century has involved bringing the Rule up to date, a lengthy but extremely enriching process. Part of this process has been the recognition that the mission of Lasallian education, pioneered and preserved for a long time entirely by generations of Brothers, has now been enlarged and enriched by the gifts brought by others who have already become associated with this mission and wish to share it. But these gifts are not simply at the level of talents but, above all, at the level of identity and vocation. An unsuspected source of enrichment for the Lasallian mission can come from this mutual complementarity.*

*This transformation has not taken place in a vacuum nor in response to any theory: it has come from life. Ideas have certainly come from the Institute’s reflection on its own heritage as we have seen above, especially in 1.42, 1.43, 1.45 and 1.48 and from the new emphases which have marked the Catholic Church’s profound attempt at renewal following the Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965. This movement of the Church and the Institute has continued through Church Synods and four Institute General Chapters so that the new needs of the poor in their search for a good education have become more apparent and more challenging. It is the wish to respond as far as possible to traditional needs in education, as well as to seek solutions to those of a changing world society, which brings Brothers and Lasallian partners together in their common Lasallian mission.*

### 3.11 A gradual process of openness and association with lay persons

If it is true that “ever since the time of their foundation, the Brothers have contributed to the promotion of the Christian laity, especially among those educators who want their professional work to be a form of gospel ministry,” (R 17) it was especially in the 30 years since the General Chapter of 1966-67 (cf. 1.4) that the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools advanced significantly in its understanding of the role and place of lay collaborators within Lasallian educational communities. Let us remind ourselves of what the *Declaration* of 1967 had said:

*“The school will be molded into community only through a staff rich in the diversity and the unity of its members. For this reason the Brothers work closely with lay teachers .... 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)*

Some nine years later, the General Chapter of 1976 introduced the idea of “*different degrees of belonging*” when it spoke of mission in the following way:

*“The Brothers share Lasallian spirituality and the animation of their works with all the members of the educational community. They take care of their ongoing formation and are careful to make them know the different degrees of belonging to what is being called ‘the Lasallian Family.’”* (C 403, p. 77)

It has already been noted that the General Chapter of 1986 approved the new *Rule* which introduced the expression **shared mission** and explicitly stated that “*the Brothers gladly associate lay persons with them in their educational mission. They provide, for those who so desire, the means to learn about the Founder and to live according to his spirit.*” (R 17) Along with other very concrete orientations from this *Rule*, this Chapter gave a strong impetus to **shared mission** (sic) and to the closer integration of lay persons into what is more accurately described as the Lasallian Mission.

In the years which have followed, Brother John Johnston as Superior General, frequently refers to the important role of lay people in the Lasallian mission in the traditional New Year pastoral letters which he addresses to the Brothers. Thus, on January 1, 1988 he states:

*“(Lay people) take their place as full partners’- and we Brothers gladly associate them with us in our mission. We accept that from now on our schools will not be ‘Brothers’ schools, ‘animated by the Brothers’ community with secondary collaboration of lay teachers, parents, students. They will be instead ‘Lasallian schools,’ ‘animated by Lasallian educative communities of faith within which the apostolic activity of the Brothers’ community takes place.”* (R 17) (*The Destiny of the Institute: Our Responsibility*, p. 32)

In 1989, the General Council of the Institute, in response to the demand of the 1986 General Chapter, published the Letter to the Lasallian Family, which gave a new stimulus and attempted to offer clear and concrete directions concerning *Shared Mission* and the *Lasallian Family*.

### **3.12 The 42nd General Chapter and Shared Mission**

The General Chapter of 1993, by inviting some 20 lay consultants to participate in the Chapter’s discussion on Mission and by deciding to make shared mission one of the priorities for the next seven years, showed how essential the development of shared mission was for the continuation of the Institute’s traditional mission of human and Christian education. Some of the leading ideas on this important topic as they are reported in the official document of the Chapter, Circular 435, indicate new insights from the Chapter. Thus, Shared Mission is:

- “*a sign of the times*” (p. 8 & p. 15);
- “*a grace*” (p. 31);
- “*guided by the Spirit*” (p. 42);
- “*a call of the Spirit*” (p. 9);

- “*a new chapter in the history of the Institute*” (p. 8);
- an “*irresistible and irreversible (step) in our history*” (p. 13).

The Chapter saw the Institute as being at a new moment of its history:

*“In this new perspective we see our shared mission as a sign of the times. Far from being a regrettable situation, it constitutes an integral part of our vocation as religious lay persons. The Spirit invites us to a deeper and richer understanding of who we are and what we are called to do.”* (C 435, 3.61. p. 43)

Such an understanding of this new reality demands a change of mentality quite as much among lay people as among the Brothers so that *shared mission* can be accepted as a gift of God which commits all engaged in it to develop it for the good of the common mission, the Christian education of the poor.

**For the Brothers:** this change of mentality implies that they will no longer consider themselves as the only trustees or proprietors of the Lasallian charism in education. It is their duty to believe in the vocation of lay people, to support it and to encourage it. What is even more important is that the Brothers draw the practical consequences at the personal and community level for the specific responsibility which they carry in the *shared mission* as “*the heart, the memory, the guarantors of the Lasallian charism.*” (C 435, p. 17)

**For lay people:** the change of mentality allows them to consider the Lasallian task in which they work as something which is proper to them and not something for which the Brothers alone are responsible. It means that they should completely accept their place and their responsibilities in the Lasallian educational plan and to feel that they are co-responsible in the common mission.

For both groups, this change of mentality means accepting differences, respecting them and working at the common mission together in a complementary way, according to their respective and specific vocations.

*“God is calling each one according to his or her own vocation, to accomplish together the mission confided to St. John Baptist de La Salle and to the Institute he founded.”* (C 435, p. 13)

It can be seen, therefore, that this General Chapter opened up vast horizons with regard to the theme of shared mission. This is expressed succinctly in the following sentence:

*“The modest sub-title -A Shared Mission - in article 17 of the Rule is now seen as the bold title of a new chapter in the history of the Institute.”* (c 435, p. g)

### 3.13 How did the expression shared mission come to be used with regard to Lasallian mission?

The expression **shared mission** was used by the framers of the 1987 *Rule* as a shorthand expression to describe the evolution of thinking about mission in the light of the practical experience of the Institute during the 20 years of the *Rule ad experimentum* which followed the revised *Rule* of 1967. It is significant that the expression is not found at all in the 1967 *Rule*. If, at one level, it is possibly true that the expression would not have been necessary if the Institute had continued to develop as it had in the post World War II period to the mid-1960s, it is also important to note that the Catholic Church's own understanding of the role and the mission of the laity has developed most strongly in the years following the Second Vatican Council. This new thinking recognizes the indispensable role of lay persons in the ministry of Christian education. The combination, therefore, of the declining numbers of the Institute since 1966 and the new attitude to lay involvement in the Church is what has led the General Chapter to the statement already cited above that "*God is calling each one according to his or her own vocation, to accomplish together the mission confided to St. John Baptist de La Salle and to the Institute he founded.*" (C 435, p. 13)

### 3.14 Shades of meaning in the expression “shared mission”

The expression “*shared mission*,” as used by the Brothers’ *Rule*, is naturally a viewpoint from *within* the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. As a new term, it expresses a new perception, a recognition of a major change in self-understanding. At its face value, it means that the mission of Christian education which was carried out almost exclusively by the Brothers of the Institute since 1679 is now being shared with persons who, without formal links which bind them to the Institute, have become involved in helping to carry out the Lasallian mission. In many of the more than 80 countries where the Institute is located, the expression “mission” is easily and naturally understood as referring to the way in which the particular mission of the Catholic Church in education is being extended to Christian educators who are not members of the Institute. This retains the sense of mission from the Latin root **mittere** with its basic meaning of “*being sent*” by some authority to do something in the name of that authority.

Mission is not just a personal choice in the way that someone chooses personally to follow a particular career, to be doctor or teacher or factory worker. The grammatical passive “*being sent by*” is central to the idea of mission. In Christian theology, therefore, mission in this sense is always linked to the one mission of Jesus Christ, whom Christians believe was sent by God the Father as Savior and Redeemer, and who, in his turn, promised to ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit to give continuing vitality and inspiration to the human beings who share in carrying on this one mission. In the *Theological Synthesis* which he presented at the conclusion of the Rome **International Congress on the Consecrated Life Today** in November, 1993, Jose Cristo Rey Garcia Paredes wrote about mission as follows:

*“Mission proceeds and comes from God. In it the mission of the Holy Spirit is actualized in a visible way, the same mission, in fact, which in a mysterious way, energizes the march of the nations towards the Reign of God .... For this reason*

*we are aware that the mission is not an activity that is simply added to the being of the Church. It is its very being. The Church is called to be sign and docile and humble instrument of the mission of the Spirit to be a witness of the love of God for the world, to proclaim Jesus Christ and to make him present, to commit oneself to the task of reconciliation and of making all men and women of the earth brothers and sisters.”* (Page 19)

But the word mission itself is also used more broadly in a contemporary sense to describe the particular purpose of many kinds of organizations. For example, the title of “mission statement” has been appropriated in recent years by many business organizations in order to state their underlying aims and philosophy: *Why* does this organization exist? *What* does it try to achieve? *What* are the principles which guide it?

It is against this rich background of meanings that the expression itself, *shared mission*, is better thought of henceforward as the *Lasallian Mission of Human and Christian education* which is by its very nature today, a *shared mission*.

### **3.15 The importance of education for the Church**

The Church’s document of 1965, *the Declaration on Christian Education (Gravissimum educationis)* from the Second Vatican Council, before setting out certain enduring principles regarding education, justifies its role in education because of its obligation, its “*mandate from her divine founder . . . to promote the welfare of the whole life of human beings, including their lives in this world*” (Preface pluralized and adapted). The document then begins by asserting that all persons “*of whatever race, condition or age, in virtue of their dignity as human persons, have an inalienable right to education*” (1), thereby endorsing the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child** of November 1959. Becoming more specific, it asserts that “*all Christians . . . have a right to a Christian education*” (2) (emphasis added); that the obligation to educate belongs first of all to parents before becoming the responsibility of society as a whole (3); and that the Church is particularly concerned that the spiritual aspect of education be seen as essential. The role of the school is seen as essential (5) and parents should have the right to choose the kind of school they wish for their children. (6) The Church’s role “*is especially evident in Catholic schools*” because of the service it can offer “*in developing the mission of the People of God.*” (8)

This concern for education has been continued since the Council, notably through a series of documents issued by the Vatican Congregation for Christian Education. These include *The Catholic School* (1977), *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to the Faith* (1982), and *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1988). Consistently developed through these documents are the following principles listed in the Introduction to the 1988 document:

*“ . . . What makes the Catholic school distinctive is its religious dimension and this is to be found in a) the educational climate, b) the personal development of each student, c) the relationship between culture and the Gospel, d) the illumination of all knowledge with the light of faith.”*

To focus these ideas today in relationship to the existence of Catholic schools in countries where there is greater religious pluralism or where the Christian religion is a minority religion, the following principles need to be kept in mind:

- *the educational mission of the Church, based on the principles of the Gospel, asserts that all human persons have the same right to an education which enables them to live with dignity in their particular society and culture. Such an education, through the offices of the Church, is extended to all those of the Christian faith or of any other religious faiths who wish to profit by it;*
- *the educational mission of the Church is to make Jesus Christ and his Gospel more widely known but it must never be a proselytizing effort to win new adherents to the Christian faith (cf. 1.23);*
- *in seeking to present the religious principles and attitude to life which it believes should underlie all education, the Catholic Church, in terms of its own official teachings, must be respectful of other religious beliefs and practices and indeed encourage the educational process through dialogue with other religions (cf. 2.6);*
- *throughout its history, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools has been open to sharing its educational practices with all those who have become its students, as has already been mentioned (cf. 1.23; 1.24).*

Lasallian Schools, therefore, as the earlier treatment of the Lasallian Heritage has indicated, have a clear *mission* linked to the historical reasons for their existence. That is why it is now important to consider the mission of the Brothers of the Institute in this “new” way of living the *mission* which is one of the constitutive aspects of their vocation. (cf. 1.42) Second, it is no less important to consider the *mission* of those many educators in different parts of the world who share in the educational work of the Lasallian School without being members of the Institute. Third, there are those who work in various aspects of Lasallian works but without sharing the same adherence to the Christian religion. In what sense can it be said that these latter educators “share” in the traditional *mission* of the Institute? Such educators might rightfully claim to be willing to be associated with the educational work of the school, to carry out the duties for which they were engaged as educators in a professional way but to have no particular interest in furthering what they are now told is part of “*the mission of the Catholic Church*.” Profound respect for the religious freedom of each teacher makes it important for the Institute not simply to assume their participation without consulting them as to whether or not they wish, or feel free, to *share this mission*?