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RHEIMS '89

OPENING ADDRESS

July, 3rd 1989

From July 2nd to July 5th, there was a Lasallian Family gathering in Rheims, organised by France Region, in which more than a thousand people took part. The gathering was opened and brought to a close by an address given by Brother Superior General. In this article and in the one that follows (17-15-D-41) we publish both speeches.

A couple of years ago I heard several young Brothers from Asia speak with great affection of one of their former teachers, a missionary Brother who had made a great effort to master the local language. "He spoke to us at considerable length and with great enthusiasm in our own language," said one of the young Brothers. "We were grateful. We appreciated immensely his love and respect for us and for our culture, but –unfortunately– we never understood one word of what he said!"

I hope that your experience today with my French will not be the same!

CELEBRATING OUR UNITY

When I first learned that the Region of France was planning this assembly, I was delighted and –even before receiving an official invitation to participate– recorded the dates on my calendar. I was pleased because I am convinced that such assemblies and congresses have great value in fostering our unity as brothers and sisters in the Lasallian Family. Assemblies such as this cannot, it is true, substitute for other kinds of programs – such as those of your outstanding Center of Lasallian Formation. But they serve an other purpose. They give us the opportunity to celebrate, that is to say, –to praise God and to thank him for the great grace of being called to live our baptismal consecration as followers of St. John Baptist de La Salle. Such assemblies provide us the opportunity to share our experiences; to reflect on ways of living our Christian and Lasallian commitment more wholeheartedly and efficaciously; and to enjoy together our union as brothers and sisters.

What a blessing it is to be able to celebrate this assembly in Rheims, where it all began. Rheims: birthplace of John Baptist de La Salle; site of the Mother House of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, where Adrian Nyel asked Canon De

La Salle for the help that changed his life and shaped the lives of thousands of young people throughout the last three hundred and ten years and indeed, in various ways, of all of us. Here in Rheims we can go as pilgrims to the numerous other sites which recall moments of great historical importance for the Lasallian Family: the College des Bons Enfants, the Cathedral, the Church of Saint Maurice, the Basilica of Saint Remi, the Church of Saint Jacques, the School of Rue de Contrai, the Sacred Heart Boarding School, the former Boarding School of the Brothers (now the Jesuit College), the tomb of Blessed Brother Arnould and, not too far away, the sanctuary of Our Lady of Liesse.

A WORLDWIDE MISSION

The presence of the Superior General of the Institute at this assembly is a reminder that the mission which began so modestly here in Rheims three hundred and ten years ago is today lived in more than half the countries with membership in the United Nations. Yes, the mission of the disciples of St. John Baptist de La Salle has become a worldwide mission. For this reason I am grateful for the invitation to share these days with you and am particularly appreciative of the orientations which Brother Jean-Marie Thouard and Preparatory Commission gave me for this address: a message on the international Institute, on the international Lasallian movement: its ramifications, its basic perspectives, its hopes."

"The international Institute"... "international movement." Our mission is to contribute to the building of the Kingdom of God. Our mission is to "make a difference" in this world: to make a difference through our efforts to procure the human and Christian education of youth throughout the world, particularly poor youth. Our Institute is today an international institute thanks to the Brothers of France who made it possible for the charism of De La Salle to animate Brothers and collaborators the world over in touching the lives and hearts of youth.

The Lasallian mission is lived by some 8.500 Brothers and a multitude of collaborators –it is almost impossible to estimate the number– all participating in varying degrees in the spirituality and educational tradition of John Baptist de La Salle. Among these collaborators in some eighty countries of the world are lay directors, administrators, and teachers, such as many of you; a certain number of priests and men and students; members of associations and boards of direction; members of staff and employees; former students; benefactors; friends; and, of course, those for whom our mission exists, the young people God confides to our care.

"TOGETHER AND BY ASSOCIATION"

As members of the Lasallian Family, the Brothers and their collaborators are striving to work "together and by association" for the human and Christian education of youth, especially poor youth, in schools of all kinds and at all levels: pre-school, elementary, middle, secondary, teacher-training, professional, technical, agricultural, university.

Anyone who reflects on the mission of the Lasallian Family throughout the world cannot help but be impressed by the complexity and diversity which influences profoundly the particular shape of the Institute of John Baptist de La Salle in each country. Your Lasallian brothers and sisters and the youth they serve are people of a variety of races, colors, cultures, languages, and religions. The manner in which they live the Lasallian mission is profoundly influenced by the political and economic realities of each country.

DIFFICULT POLITICAL SITUATIONS

In a number of these countries, the Lasallian Family finds itself in difficult circumstances, circumstances that call for extraordinary faith and courage.

There are Brothers in certain countries of Eastern Europe where the Institute was suppressed more than thirty-five years ago and the Brothers strictly forbidden to live together. Despite their inability to exercise a normal apostolate, they have remained as faithful as they are able to the demands of their religious consecration. In Poland, however, the Institute exists and is blessed with vocations –but because Catholic schools were suppressed many years ago, the Brothers devote themselves full-time to catechetical apostolates and to service of the handicapped.

In Vietnam our seventy-five Brothers are allowed to live together but have no normal apostolate. Twenty-three Brothers in politically tense Burma try to serve youth in non-school apostolates, since Catholic schools are forbidden.

A year never passes without some area of the Institute being touched by serious political violence or even war. You have followed throughout the past fifteen years the tragic events of Lebanon. During the last two years, many of you, as well as your pupils, have contributed financially to help our forty-five Brothers maintain the seven schools they conduct for the service of the youth of that ravaged country. Our Brothers in Israel and the occupied Territories continue to do all they can for their Palestinian youth, even when the schools are closed. Time does not permit me to speak at length of our Brothers and collaborators in Sri Lanka, in Northern Ireland, in Ethiopia, in South Africa, in Nicaragua, in Haiti, in Colombia, in Peru.

DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

This very partial list of countries served by your brothers and sisters of the Lasallian Family is a sufficient reminder that our mission today is to youth not only of different races, cultures, languages, but also of religions. Many of our young people –and, course, a number of our teachers, parents, and former students– are Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucianists, Shintoists, Animists... Vatican II insists that it is the mission of the Church to make Christ's loving and saving presence a vivid and effective reality among all peoples. It is our grace and privilege to play an important part in this great mission of the Church.

I frequently suggest that we read newspapers and watch television news with the eyes and ears of Lasallians. As we follow political and social developments in particular countries we should call to mind our fellow Lasallians and pray for them, as well as for all those confided to their care.

A SHARED MISSION

Yes, the mission which began at the service of the youth of this city, then spread throughout France, is today at the service of youth in some eighty countries. Lasallian educators are striving to assist young people to develop their God-given potential as human persons and at the same time are challenging them to commit themselves to building a better world, a world where all can live in dignity and with respect, where all can live as sons and daughters of God, a world where all can live, therefore, as brothers and sisters.

That was our mission yesterday and that IS our mission today. But the way in which that mission is lived has changed dramatically in recent years. For most of our history, we Brothers of the Christian Schools ourselves received, lived, and passed on the Lasallian ideal. While we might have had help from a limited number of lay colleagues, it was clear that the schools were Brothers' schools and that it was the Brothers who ran them. As I mentioned at Buzenval last year, I began teaching in a college of three hundred fifty boys with ten other Brothers and one lay teacher. That school was a Brothers' school, a school animated by the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

LASALLIAN SCHOOLS

That traditional model no longer exists. For a variety of reasons, it has yielded to a new model. We have moved from a model of "Brothers' Schools" to a model of "Lasallian Schools". This change of language is not trivial. The difference the new language conveys is significant. The "Brothers' School" was a school animated by Brothers, with lay collaborators in a very secondary role. The "Lasallian School" is a school animated by the Lasallian educational community, a community of Brothers, lay teachers, priests, members of other religious institutes, parents, members of the various associations, staff and employees, former students, friends and benefactors, the young people themselves...

Our Rule is clear and emphatic: "The Brothers' community is ever mindful that its apostolic activity takes place within an educational community in which all the functions, including positions of responsibility, are shared" (art. 17a); furthermore, "The Brothers' community makes known to the rest of the educational community the essential elements of the Lasallian tradition" (art. 17c).

NEW ROLES

What this change means is that both the Brothers and their lay collaborators have new roles to exercise. To say, however, that the Brothers have a new role does not imply a loss of faith in the vocation of the Brothers. On the contrary. Our conviction is that "the young, the poor, the world and the church still need the ministry of the Brothers" (art. 141). But the unique contribution is not to be found in any specific service. It is to be found rather in their manner of living and in the message communicated and questions raised by that manner of living: "As religious vowed to the ministry of Christian education, the first apostolate of the Brothers consists in the witness of their consecrated life" (art. 24).

The mission of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is today a SHARED MISSION. You and I are blessed by God in being called to exercise this mission. Let us during this assembly praise and thank God for all the good that has been done and is being done today through the Lasallian Family. Let us ask God earnestly to make his Spirit come alive in us in order that we might make the loving and saving presence of his Son a vivid and effective reality among the youth He confides to us.

Brother John Johnston, Superior General