

SHARED MISSION AND THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

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As the forty second General Chapter sets the priority of Shared Mission for the next seven years at all levels of the Institute, it roots this emphasis at the center of our spiritual life:

Our communities of faith, our religious communities and our families can become sources of stimulation for this broad movement which is spreading, not only throughout the whole Church, but which involves men and women of other religious traditions. All this provides a wider context for shared mission as a growing reality in the Church today, thanks to the promotion of the laity, the ecumenical movement and the appeal of Pope John Paul II for a new evangelisation for the year 2000 (1).

Formation of our Brothers, initial and continuing, and our colleagues will require explicit attention to: 1) the renewal of the laity in the Church (2), 2) collegiality and corresponsibility, 3) cross cultural formation for mission (3), 3) ecumenical formation (4), 4) training for interfaith collaboration and dialogue, as well as 5) the relationship of the Lasallian charism to all of these dimensions of shared mission. In this note, I would make a few comments about the ecumenical dimension of our priority for shared mission.

First of all it is important, theologically, to be clear about the difference between our interfaith outreach and collaboration with humanists and the ecumenical commitments of the Catholic Church. As Catholics we believe that we are in real, if imperfect, communion in Jesus Christ with all who believe in Christ. We are in a level of sacramental communion with those who are baptized, and even more intimately with those to whom we are committed to full unity by official dialogue: Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed (Calvinist) and Methodist. The Roman Catholic Church has also special dialogues with Pentecostals, Baptists, some Anabaptists and

Evangelicals. These relationships are resources to the Brothers in their cultivation of shared mission, as well as in educating their students in a zeal for the unity of Christ's Church.

Secondly, the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, published by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity of the Vatican in 1993, contains a whole section on Common Witness. This can be seen as the Roman Catholic Church's incentive and encouragement for shared mission with Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox churches and their members. These incentives are pivotal for the formation of the Brothers and for administrators of the Christian schools, but they are also resources for our nonCatholic Christian partners in shared mission to help them understand the Brothers and the ecumenical priorities of the Church to which they belong. An ecumenical spirituality is essential for all Christians who find themselves called to shared mission in whatever context.

Thirdly, the collaboration in common witness in the Christian school has an important contribution to make to the whole Christian community, especially from the perspective of the Lasallian charism. We find that the Lasallian charism resonates with the faith of many other Christian churches, and special communities within these churches, because of its priority for the Word, for education, for the option for the poor and for community quality of Lasallian education. In the Christian school, faculty, students and even those who share our mission on boards and in local church contexts, Christians of various churches have the opportunity to pray together; to come to know the spiritual, ethical, liturgical and historical traditions of other churches; and even on occasion to study the ecumenical progress in the dialogues between churches. As it is important to share the history and charism of De La Salle and the priorities of the Catholic Church with our nonCatholic Christian colleagues, it is important for Catholics who share mission with others to come to know the specific traditions of our Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican colleagues and to be receptive to the progress towards full communion that has taken place.

Fourthly, ecumenical formation for shared mission will need to take account of the specifics of the context. In parts of the world where nonCatholic Christians are rare, as in southern Europe, Latin America and parts of Eastern Europe, care will be needed to discriminate among the Christian minorities (5). Recognizing that some Christians are ecumenically open, while others are more aggressive and "sectarian" in their behavior will be important (6). Shared mission will be possible with some individuals, even when their churches or communities are not open to common witness. Where intergroup cooperation is common place, account will need to be taken to allow shared mission to be informed by the principles of Catholic

ecumenism and the specific progress in the pilgrimage towards full, visible unity (7). Difficulties in one context should not allow generalizations about a particular church and all its members.

Fifthly, we find that some churches share with the Brothers elements of a common charism. Lutherans' emphasis on the priority of the Word and the priesthood of all believers often place us in collaboration and common witness on the importance of the school and of lay ministry. John Wesley and subsequent Methodist commitment to bringing the good news to the poor and working classes, and advocacy for social justice, leads Methodists to an appreciation of the Lasallian charism when they come to know it. The Anglican concern for a Eucharistic spirituality and communal worship has led to the formation of a number of religious communities, contemplative and active. In particular places, the leadership in the local churches and even civil society have been trained by the Brothers and carry this vision into leadership.

Finally, Brothers around the world have a long history of shared ecumenical mission, which can be a resource for the renewal of this dimension of the Lasallian charism elsewhere. The Brothers were among the writers in the ecumenical catechetical curriculum in East Africa. For decades many of our schools have had other Christians as integral members of our faculties, boards and student bodies. Several of our Brothers in higher education have graduated from Protestant divinity schools. A Brother has served as spiritual director at an Anglican seminary. At least one Anglican bishop is a graduate of the Brothers' school. Brothers have worked together with evangelical Protestants in the biblical apostolate and been involved in World Council of Churches educational meetings on Base Christian Communities. Conferences have been sponsored with the Orthodox in what would appear to be a most oppressive and unlikely context. The Brothers in Santiago, Spain hosted the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order of the World Council. Brothers have taught in Protestant seminaries. While there are reports of Orthodox members of the Institute, who have not renounced their communion of origin to join the Roman Catholic Church, examples of volunteers and colleagues living in and sharing the spirituality of our communities is a more common experience.

Shared mission has many facets. There is rich potential here for the Lasallian vision of service of the poor through education penetrating ever more deeply into the lives of the churches, including the Roman Catholic Church. However, it also gives the Brothers the gift of receiving from other Christians the charisms of their heritage for the fostering of the Gospel and the

mission of the Christian schools in the modern world. The full visible unity of the Church will emerge when the Spirit wills, but in the meantime educators are called to proclaim this vision and hope as an element of Christian identity, and to serve its understanding through prayer and instruction.

NOTES:

1. **Brothers of the Christian Schools, 42nd General Chapter**, Circular 435, Rome: General Council, 1993, p. 16.
2. Cf. **Kenan Osborne, Ministry: Lay Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church**, New York: Paulist Press, 1993.
3. The Rule is very explicit about inculturation, hinting only, but not spelling out the ecumenical and interreligious component of that formation: "With an open mind and yet in a spirit of healthy criticism the Brothers study the variety of religions, ideologies, and cultural traditions of the areas in which they establish themselves." While this is a modest statement, it entails a fundamental reform in the formation program of the Brothers and their Lasallian associates. **The Brothers of the Christian Schools, The Rule**, Rome, 1987, p. 37, 18c.
4. Cf. **Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, Origins**, Vol. 23: No. 9. **Directorio para la aplicacion de los Principios y Normas sobre el Ecumenism**, Bogota: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 1993.
5. Cf., ie. **Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano, Santo Domingo: Conclusiones**, Bogota: Ediciones Paulinas, 1992, #132. p.107 ff.; English: Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1993, #132, p.95 ff.
6. The word "fundamentalist," applied to some Protestant, Muslim, Orthodox or even Catholic groups is quite unhelpful. Some Protestants, of course, apply it to themselves in which case it has a very specific meaning about beliefs in the inerrancy of the bible and the proximate coming of the millennium. Even among conservative Protestant groups, like Baptists and Pentecostal, there are open Christians who are willing to collaborate in shared mission. Other groups, called by the Vatican "New Religious Movements," distinctions are made between 1) "sectarian" Christians; 2) groups of Christian origin, like Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses; and 3) non-Christian groups. The latter groups, of course, are not considered when we speak of Christian ecumenism.
Catholics show themselves ecumenically open and sensitive, even to those who do not treat Catholics as Christians. However, students and colleagues need careful ecumenical formation where they have not been reared in an environment of pluralism and intergroup understanding is not part of the culture.
7. Cf. **Jeffrey Gros, "Roman Catholic Participation in the Ecumenical Movement at the Local Level in the US," Midstream**, 22:4, October, 1993, 41-52,