

## VIEW FROM THE TOWER: LASALLIAN HISTORY AND FUTURE

### The Lasallian journey against the background of the history of the ideas

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#### ABSTRACT

Brother Pedro Gil offers some key ideas for a historical re-reading of the lived journey of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in its past fifty years, starting with the question of where we place ourselves when we try to understand what is happening: where we look, what is our basic historical reference point for understanding our work and to respond to the question of the possibilities of our educational institution. From there he invites the reader to raise some new questions: Are we able to propose a response that is capable of showing the overall sense of the Lasallian journey? Is there some place from which to interpret the past and flesh out better the possibilities of the future of our institution? The author sets out from the journey lived by the 1960 to 1990 generation. It seems that from there one can understand better Lasallian history overall. This overall view shows the sense of the past, it systematizes and targets names and concepts from three centuries of Lasallian history and it provides some guidelines for a possible future.

*Key-words:* historical reading, Institute, declaration, Lasallian journey, Lasallian community.

#### INTRODUCTION

To begin this reflection, let us consider an image and an experience. Let's imagine that we are climbing up a tower: we follow the winding staircase and we rest once in a while, leaning against a windowsill. Each time we do this we see a partial view, a neighborhood, a street, an area of the city. As we continue to climb, at each stop we see a broader view, so that our first view is integrated into areas that are wider and wider. Each time we see better where a particular street is, a highway where we can differentiate certain neighborhoods in the city, where the park is... Each time we appreciate how the elements are integrated with others.

But at no time do we see more than a partial view, because our view is limited by the frame of a window: one angle opens to us but others close. To go up is to open another angle but we continue to be limited by the angles of the window.

When we finally reach the summit, when there are no windows but only a railing that protects us and we have in front of us the overall view, then we can integrate all the window views into one single view. Now the view is 360 degrees.

Now we can see where the great park in the west joins with the new city with supermarkets, where the old neighborhood ends and where there are motorways, where the river comes from which had previously drifted away as our view was going from one window to another. We now see mountains in the distance and we realize the nature of this great valley and of the hills that follow from the bottom to beyond the city of the tower.

The distinct areas were the object of fragmentary views, filled with details the more we looked down on them, and with reference points to the overall view as we went up. And only at the end, when we reached a suitable site, only then was everything connected and we realized where we were and of what we were a part of. The key: a suitable site.

### *Events and currents of thought*

The same thing occurs with history. History also requires that we place ourselves in some place that will give us a panoramic view.

We don't always see it that way, it is true. Because, in a naive sort of way, sometimes we try to separate events and social movements from history: we give "objective" value to the events and we put the social movements in the area of the debatable, what can be interpreted, a kind of "philosophy of history" which is highly subjective. It is logical that, as long as we think that way, all of this historical discourse of the history of ideas or the place of the view of history seem to us to be expendable, without its own value.

This stance is really naive in two ways: first of all, because it considers events as the result of chance, with no causality nor logic; and secondly, because it ignores that what we call "history" is the result of the play between what is unchangeable in human nature and the infiniteness of its hope. Certainly there are constants that are maintained or which even are repeated within the journey of nations. But, animated by those constants and at the same time giving them consistency, there are movements of advancements and retreats in the life of nations that allow for looking at events as signs of movements that overcome them and give them meaning. Concrete events, then, refer to the causes and horizons that transcend them.

All social institutions are the result of this historical play and they are understood based on this play. Therefore institutions come into being and disappear at specific moments and not at other moments. Therefore the succession of events goes along leaving footprints bit by bit in the history of nations that allow one to speak about a before and an after, of high points and exhaustion, of relations and jumps. What is needed is to take a long, careful look at the overall picture: then these events show their real prominence, like those events in which the concentration of sight on a particular point allow one to see volumes in a two-dimensional image.

These footprints, in turn, allow one to detect much broader systems. For that moment events have already become manifestations of the movement of ideas or concepts about the world. Then we can talk about history, how, starting from determined moments of the life of a person we can build his biography.

...This would require, like in our image of the tower, to place ourselves in determined moments or determined foot in order to find true overall views.

## THE PANORAMIC POINT

### *1. Understanding what we are living*

We are saying that the same thing occurs with history as it does with landscapes and scenery.

Normally we place ourselves in "partial places," in front of areas that fascinate us with their details and concrete faces of persons who perhaps we even know by their names. They are our people, of our own age, with our interests, in our school, perhaps. In history, events, situations, persons. Little by little, if we have the occasion to have a look at other viewpoints, we learn that there are other people and other lands and other ways of looking at life or work or culture or leisure time or family or religion. In history there are constants, movements, thought, evolution.

To reach these realities, that is to say, to go from the concrete to the general or to include the concrete inside the general, what is needed is to find new places from which to view things. When we do not have them a very human reflection grows within us: fed up with trying to understand things without achieving it, we withdraw to our place of life, to the portion of the city that we know. There, in silence, we try to speed up the possibilities that life offers us. We even end up by forgetting that there are other areas and we believe that the meaning of the whole is contained in what we are living in our area.

Face to face with history, when we do not have the occasion to place ourselves in the appropriate place, we are not successful in moving from anecdotal, close glances that are very much ours, very detailed and perfectly quantified perhaps, but which do not have meaning in themselves. When we do not know a place that sees the whole panorama, we drown ourselves in our own daily work and we fail when we try to point to the future. We are worried and surely for that reason we join any kind of formation program.

Therefore we open this reflection with the question of where we usually place ourselves when we try to understand what is happening. Where do we look, on what do we base our historical reference to understand our work and respond to the great question of the possibilities of our educational institution? It is an invitation to ask ourselves where we place ourselves in order to understand, concretely, the change that our society is going through and we are forced to imagine new ways for defining diversification, programs, relations between our school and society, between its methods and professional success, between the scientific and social integrity. We can ask ourselves, for example, what we do in order to understand the question about sustainable development and our contribution to development.

So are we able to propose a response that is capable of showing the meaning of the overall Lasallian journey? Is there some place from which to interpret everything that has come before and to flesh out better the future possibilities of our institution?

**Yes, there is and it may be present in the generation from 1960 to 1990.** It seems that from there the overall portion of our history as a Lasallian community and society is understood well. That overall

view shows the meaning of the past, it systematizes or places there so many names and concepts such as we have over these three centuries and it opens clues for a possible future.

As we point this out, we are invited to recall what there is in that generation: where it is and how it is (or where it was and how it was), what it brought to us, what names it has left us, what doors it has opened for us, and which have been closed to us. It shouldn't be a difficult task because we have all lived through this, whether in our own vital personal journey or in that of people close to us.

We, yes precisely on 2013. Because all of us have lived through that generation: some have done this in full maturity, others saw it grow, and we have all been helped to experience the District journey and that of our lives. We all know that generation very closely, in such a way that the hypothesis of this comparison of the panorama and the tower is a valid one, we have sufficient ability to understand the overall view of our Lasallian story. Having lived through the generation of change we are given the tremendous gift of new insights and responsibilities which are still to come. Today, this... 2013, at the threshold of the General Chapter.

So what is there in this period from 1960 to 1990, from the point of view of our Lasallian community? What can we who have lived through it say about it? How does it help us to interpret the relationship between the Lasallian world and the world of ideas? How will it help us to understand what may be coming?

## *2. Thirty or forty years ago, in the Generation of Change*

During that generation, above all, the General Chapter of 1966-67 took place.

We could also begin by recalling Vatican II, May 1968, the Vietnam War, the baby boom or even structuralism. As Lasallians it is better to begin with that General Chapter and to see it as a reflection of just how much was happening and as a door way to what did happen. That assembly tried to express the awareness of the Institute of the Brothers as they faced the exhaustion of the historical cycle that we were going through and it tried to propose new clues for us, in accordance with social innovations.

Those were the days of the **Declaration of the Brother in the World Today**, the changes in the **Rule** and in the system of governance, changes in Chapters and Assemblies, renewal in what the Brothers studied, introduction of a totally new spiritual and identifying vocabulary.

The Chapter itself and all of its work and consequences thereof should be kept in mind, as is logical, as well as the shock of Vatican II: the entire Church set itself to look at the world and history with new eyes, trying to find the signs of God in life where God was leading them. The Council meant for us a guarantee that we were not mistaken when we imagined a new world, where change and building a new world were urgent. It was, at its very base, a recalling of the presence of God in time, in History, and thus we were obliged to look around us, asking ourselves if what was happening was the face of God or not.

What was happening was, for example, the great Sign that we called May 1968. At that moment, which we could surely not understand but now, forty or fifty years later, we see what those memorable days were saying about the tiredness of a way of understanding life that no longer responded to the world's new dimensions. They were saying that the time of Descartes and Galileo and the encyclopedia and colonialism and empiricism...were no longer useful.

In that way, the monetary crises were triggered, the gasoline crisis (1973), the constitution of new monetary and commercial control of nations (Trilateral Commission, also in 1973). They had already emerged after the Second World War (Breton Woods, 1944) and they were in development, but in those magnificent days they were becoming truly universal and that are how all of us became aware that we were all part of everything. No one was free to configure his house apart from others, or political models oblivious to others, or to create autonomous financial systems or protected commercial networks.

In those days we realized that the world was no longer a place of inexhaustible resources but something that we all belonged to and that, therefore, we needed it in order to continue living. And so we were opening a new way of looking at science, culture and politics. It was as if all previous time had reached its summit and how a new model of society and the person were being raised.

We noted this in our way of working in educational institutions. We filled them with new things, we diversified, we did all these things by being closer than ever to the possibilities society had to offer and we journeyed little by little towards relationships that we had never had with other institutions.

Paradoxically, along this path of organizational plenitude we experienced a drastic reduction in the number of Brothers and an unexpected challenge: to respond the new dimensions of the world with entirely new personnel. We did not understand it at the time but it was the face of the great change: the collapse of all previous models.

The paradox of the simultaneous plenitude and collapse: today, twenty or thirty years later, we understand very well that perhaps during that generation the great reshuffle was carried out. As a whole, everything that happened at that time, from Kennedy (1963) to the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) was a privileged moment in which all that had happened previously was blown apart. So it is difficult for us to understand that in those days all models of life and culture, of religion and politics, of esthetics and science, of philosophy and systems of communication were reshuffled.

Therefore the model of the Brother that we had received from our three-century tradition also needed to be reshuffled. This happened at the precise moment in which our Districts were most numerous: there could not be better circumstances to understand what was happening...

## A THREE CENTURY VIEW

### *3. Far away, where our territory begins*

The Generation of Change is like a watchtower that allows us to divide all Lasallian history into two views: before 1960 and after 1990 (these dates are only approximations; they are really symbols, moral or spiritual references).

With regard to "before 1960" we ask: In virtue of what can we say that there is continuity over the course of so much time? What is it that permits us to affirm that the model of Brother in 1690 continues to be institutionally alive and still in force some two-hundred years later? Is the time between 1680 and 1960 just a single time, a continuity?

...To this we add the vision of the panorama and the tower: yes, from the watchtower of the generation of change this can be very much appreciated.

Throughout these two and one-half centuries there were different events and even perhaps some breaches or great crises, but not even this invalidated the continuity like what was going to happen next. With all these tremors over the course of these two and one-half centuries there still was nothing like what happened in the thirty years of our watchtower generation. Let's take a look at this.

In reality the world was coming into Modernity when the Lasallian Institute came into being. Precisely because of that, it was constituted in that way. The connection was perfect. In those days, for example, Newton had just published his *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (Mathematical Principles of "Natural Philosophy," that is to say, of physics); it was the first text or the first presentation about modern physics. **1687**: the previous year the Brothers had held a constitutive assembly of great importance, expressing a kind of commitment – a vow? – to the project in a way we do not know precisely.

"Mathematical principles," we say, and that is what is important: exactly what the Brothers did with the school which in turn they were inheriting. They applied to it (the school) the organizational rigor and the spirit of calculation and exigency that Newton had applied to physics or that Spinoza had applied to ethics and politics or that Descartes had applied to philosophy or that Huyguens had applied to medicine, Bayle to the means of communication (these names are not important individually, but they are important overall). That was the secret of their success.<sup>1</sup>

The first Lasallian community was the daughter of its time and it received the Lord's call to serve the poor of its time.

It needed to do it through elementary Education (because the poor could not think about anything else) and they did it by introducing mathematical rigor in the model of school and methodology. This was the Conduct of Schools. Or the Method of Making Interior Prayer or the Rules of their community or simply the organization of their daily lives and the territorial fabric of their Association of Schools.

Everything they did had the same spirit: for example, they could not accept a canonical structure for their community when there was not anything else except a monastic one. They knew that they were not monks and that, naturally, they could not live outside this world: therefore, in reality they consecrated themselves to God by consecrating themselves to the popular and modern school. That is way, for example, they declined to make monastic vows and they did not understand them when they were imposed on them (the truth is that they took advantage of this situation because from the institutional point of view, they were the perfect undocumented persons<sup>2</sup>).

This is how the entire first century of their existence is understood, the **XVIII**, when the life of their institution was far ahead of canonical definitions.

These were one-hundred magnificent years in which everything was defined. They, in the spirit of the signs of the Enlightenment, offered to their society the model primary school and its organization that later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had to be disseminated. This cost them one-hundred years, but they did it.

<sup>1</sup>Reference to Paul Hazard and Foucault.

<sup>2</sup>This is strictly true: until the days following after the *Conditae a Christo*, in 1900, the Brothers did not exist from the canonical point of view.

**First** there were thirty or forty years of spreading the model all over France. It was the great task of the Superior of the era, Brother Timothée, who died when the Encyclopedia was born, starting in 1751. He had already left to the world the formula of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, firmly set in place, both in operations and in identity, both in running the schools and in social foundation, especially a Christian one. **Then**, the remaining forty years up to the Revolution, they did not grow so much numerically, but yes they did consolidate themselves.

They did things that today seem incredible. In a world that knew nothing about teacher training they set the program up, even on an advanced level: there were the first years of formation with the novitiate and the first years in school; then came the Scholasticates, real training with a university character to it. In a world that knew nothing about a National Ministry of Education, they established one that ran perfectly on the overall State level, so that the Superior during the Revolution, Brother Agathon, was in fact the true minister of education of popular instruction in France.<sup>3</sup>

They reached the Revolution with only 118 educational establishments, it is true. But they were powerfully set up, both on the primary and secondary levels (only eight of those schools were secondary schools, almost all were magnificently organized as we know today). In a world marked by illiteracy, they had already begun to edit school textbooks for their secondary schools and circulars for the ongoing formation of their teachers. When popular education was not yet a social right, they had already established a financial system for their sustenance and coordination...

#### *4. The other side of the French Revolution*

Nevertheless, between 1792 and 1804, they disappear. The Revolution. If we hurry the image of the view from the watchtower, we would see that terrible decade, going from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a kind of scar, a brief cut in the landscape. Nothing more.

In fact the French Revolution is something like that in the panorama of our history: as if suddenly a flaw had opened up in our territory...and then nothing. A flaw, a great crevice that marks an event but does not give rise to new orography. Both sides of the unevenness, the same territory, the same type of vegetation, and the same roads...The Brothers passed through the revolutionary cataclysm very well: yet another surprising thing, given the fact that no one was prepared for this like they were.

In their internal constitution there is clear continuity between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The change is in the appearance of social organizations that offer them new possibilities for development. That authentic leap is the meaning of the apparent flaw, the cut between 1792 and 1805.

If the Revolution had abolished them it was as an institution that seemed to be governed by some vows: ten years later it recognized them as an institution that is specified by educational service. From vows to a social function is the change, from one side to the other of the Revolution. Before and after, the same reality and the same project: a Christian group that is characterized by life in common and by elementary educational service to disadvantaged classes. That and those were their vows. Because what united them is, on the one hand their way of living out their faith in God: effort, organization, exam, generosity, silence; on the other hand, the way they lived our service to the poor: elementary logic, classification, empiricism, effectiveness. Their vows were faith, school and community (the order of the three is not very clear).

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<sup>3</sup> Reference to Cassirer.

The Empire automatically makes them members of the Imperial University, that is to say, functionaries of the new ministry for education. All the other religious institutions will grow under its protection or its light: all will design their own model (Rule, Conduct of Schools, Novitiate)<sup>4</sup>.

And it is here where their second century opens, **the 19<sup>th</sup>**. It is easy to imagine how things would go, if we recall the dynamic of social institutions: **recover** the previous, organizational **height** and success; **crisis** or new needs for adaptation. One generation for each step. Like any great enterprise.<sup>5</sup>

By 1834, in the space of twenty or twenty-five years, they had already grown as much as in the previous one-hundred years: a sign of their perfect adaptation to the new world of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Starting from that time their success is affirmed and developed like never before, reaching all corners of France. There they coined the formula of their success and they will provide it for their diffusion throughout the world (which will happen by the middle of the century, coinciding with middle-class expansionism or colonialism).

But in the last third of the century things will be new again, as Leo XIII recognized in **1891** (*Rerum...novarum*). Innovation was in the development of educational programs, in accordance with the development of society. The topic had already emerged fifty years earlier, in the 1830's: they knew that their work could not be limited to elementary logic, but that now they needed to incorporate content and other sciences and it was not easy to combine the cultivation of reasoning with that of memory. This was the challenge of the General Commission in 1834, for the revision of the Conduct of Schools. Very early on they fell into the trap of memorization and the Superiors made the effort to remember that. But the fact is that the presence of scientific content in the program was for them one of the great challenges with regard to their basic tradition.

After that, innovation was in the new relationship with the social administrations in charge of educational service. On the one hand, their very own country of origin changed the previous model of relationship when it distinguished the religious from the lay, so that no one of a religious character could enter into systems of government supported by the Administration. In this way, the "free" primary school was born: it needed to establish its own programs but above all its own system of funding. Starting from that moment the Brothers would begin to clamor for service of the poor...

But in other countries, where they had arrived during those decades, the problem was the same: they needed to establish a new design for their presence in society, their recognition, their funding, their service, their specialization. This also would result in a not very easy solution because all of this was new to them. The best example, perhaps, was the Latin Question between 1880 and 1900.

Wrapping all this up, innovation was now the change of social, religious and political sensitivity. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was clear that the world needed to be looked at in a different way and therefore one needed to look at life in community, consecration and faith in a different way. Everything. The Brothers, like the entire Church, had a lot of doubts before getting some glimmer of hope and they ended up paying for this. Just like the entire Church during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This is how we understand the magnificent episode of 1904, when the ten thousand Brothers living in France were seen as being outside of the lay. They had to leave their country or their community. If

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to Llerena

they wished to continue in education they had to expatriate themselves or leave the Institute. Of the ten thousand, some four thousand stayed in France, some retired, some apparently secularized; another three thousand were effectively secularized; and the rest were spread around the entire world, welcomed by the remaining four thousand Brothers who were outside of France at the time.

Gone were the successful days of Brother Philippe, Superior General from 1838 to 1874, and the perplexing times of Brother Gabriel-Marie, when the response came from all sides within the Congregation itself (especially in France), as a sign of the deep adjustment problems in face of what was happening. Fortunately, during the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century institutions of formation that had been set up a century earlier had been recovered – they disappeared during the drama of the French revolution. In that way, when they were spread throughout the world, they brought a kind of balance for the century consisting of at least three things: a system of education that was guaranteed to work in certain environments, no doubt it was the best; an enhanced formation process, potentially renovated, that was already established throughout the world and that would allow them to acclimatize better to all places; and a spiritual style that was forged between the canonization of their Founder and the proximity to interior life as seen in the Company of Jesus.

### ***5. One-hundred years ago, but near, very near***

2003 - 2013: in recent years many of our establishments have celebrated the centennial of the arrival of the Brothers. These are the centers where the expatriates from France arrived, between the General Chapters of 1901, 1905, 1907 and 1913 (four within thirteen years; another flaw in our journey which, like the one a hundred years earlier, did not break the continuity of the landscape). All of us in one way or another have had the occasion to recall events and persons who were very close to our present.

It was precisely that closeness and that celebration that helps us to understand our discourse on the structure of this particular landscape that we call the History of the Lasallian Community.

Because it's about something that is very much our own: it's about places that we know where perhaps we ourselves were students and where we worked. And it speaks of persons who perhaps knew our family ancestors. All of us have recalled them at some exposition, conference, or in some publication. We have seen photos and perhaps even met some who were pictured. That is why all of these seem very "close" to us.

But while the same contact us totally convinced us that they were "close" to us, yet belonged to another world. Or ours was another world, without question. That is why this "closeness" itself became evidence of the change for us, the end of one period and the stirring of another. We need only remember that is was that building... or where was the house of formation, how many Brothers were in the school, what was the program, how did they dress, which students did they have, how they were supported financially...to realize that those Brothers of ours, they were so "close," and yet they lived in another world. So close and yet so far.

They were no longer in France, they were newly arrived or had arrived there twenty years earlier, but they continued to be French. They continued to live a model they had been born with and had consolidated in that place in Europe. They had their problems, sometimes serious ones, but they continued with the same model. But in their training all had learned French, and they even studied the Rule in that language, they were organized vertically, centrally, according to the style they had learned since the days of Napoleon.

During the terrible **first fifty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**, they had seen many Superior Generals, some with mandates that were strikingly short and amidst extremely abnormal circumstances (two world wars, the emergence of Fascism, horrible local wars, the collapse of financial systems, etc.) When days of reasonable peace or exhaustion arrived, that is to say, by the General Chapter of **1946**, the will of the majority was very clear: to restore, reorder the universal differentiation in which they lived. Everyone wanted to reunite with the lost harmony and they thought that they could recover it by "restoration," returning to what had been in place one-hundred years earlier.

It was the last moment of this great first part of our history that we see coming almost to the gates of our city, from our vantage point of the tower.

It was obvious that the formulas coined in the eighteenth century and spread in the nineteenth century no longer worked. These were dramatic, even extreme years that are very difficult for us to imagine. Now they felt restless, lost. Now that there no longer seemed to be so much violence and the world was tired of so much change, they thought that they could return to serenity, to retreat indoors.

And they devoted themselves to restoration with a violent, ten-year effort. But it could not be.

What would happen to them happen to the institutions created after World War II: in trying to bring back the past, they ended up bringing a future that would change everything. In the Lasallian world it was obvious that it could not work: by **1956** everyone saw that the Rule that had wanted to establish by decree (1947) was not going anywhere. Novices would continue to memorize it, almost like something that had an expiration date. This would open the door for new times, for the generation of change.

For the time being, since everyone was in a construction phase – in Buenos Aires, in Memphis, or in Turin – the most striking side of the life of the Brothers continued to work: there were many of them, they were growing in number, and they had plenty of work, so that their facilities were growing. They were tired of meaning, but they had more than enough work. It was a combination that in those days we could not understand. Overall, it was a better breeding ground so that the vanguard of change would emerge with power.

All around, movements of recovering the secular condition of the Christian faith were emerging (Catholic Action, Secular Institutes), situations of approaching faith by labor means (priest workers, JOC), the centrality of Sacred Scripture, Incarnation Theology (Biblical theology dealing with earthly realities). Amidst all of this the doors of Vatican II would open.

It was obvious that where sensitivity towards new things was the strongest, the sense of institutional maladjustment among the Brothers was equally strong. Their spiritual and institutional profile was not consistent with historical circumstance. Everyone would learn this quickly. Without anyone realizing it, everything was already in place for a changing historical cycle.

It was in this kind of climate that we received the drafts of the Rule on the verge of the Chapter of 1966.

## THE GENERATION OF CHANGE

### *6. Recovering the responsibility*

On the eve of the Chapter of 1966 and as proof that an entire era or cycle was ending, in the Institute two complementary slogans were circulating: **return** the Founder to the Institute and **return** the Institute to the Brothers.

What great hope was switched on within us, forty years ago! They are two simple, fecund, brilliant formulas in their potential. One was spoken in reference to sources, of the knowledge of an appropriate identity beyond the current clichés. This phrase was used especially in reference to the height of Lasallian studies, that is to say, about the message of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his first community. It did us all a lot of good. At that time we were all able to look beyond what was happening in order to interpret the journey taken.

That is why the second perspective also needed to be established: if you are trying to renew the awareness of the origins, you also would need to recover the capacity of commitment, responsibility, participation, self-government... It was the great work, in this case, of the General Chapter. It not only radically changed the structure of government, and Institute leadership, but above all the spirit that had imbued relationships with one another. It was, in summary, to recover the community which perhaps had faded somewhat behind the cult of obedience.

With those two guidelines, the Brothers embarked upon – we embarked upon, as the histories of our Districts will recount – a quest, filled with hope, to redefine their international models. From the basis of those two guidelines, they set about interpreting their heritage in the difficult job of recomposing their institutional portrait.

Of course, it was not easy for the Generation of Change to interpret what it was receiving. It had no perspective and it understood better what it should avoid than what was specifically valuable in its heritage. In an institution like ours, much more than one General Chapter was needed (no matter how magnificent it was) to effect the change that we felt was necessary in the days of Vatican II – even though we are talking about a Chapter (the longest one in history, the only one that had two sessions) that was to last a year and a half.

In that year of **1966**, what did the Generation of Change receive that was of great value? Lasallian identity? What needed to be returned to the Brothers and to the Institute as its proper value and institutional formula?

### *7. The heritage in five lines*

Perhaps at the time, we would not be able to categorize as we now can, but it is very clear that we were living it. And also now it is enough just to review the spirit with which gave ourselves to District leadership.

Heritage can be interpreted based on five axes, which capture the relationship between the Institute and various societies and previous cultures and at the same time propose the challenge of its adjustment to the new times.

Reviewing history from the year 2013 gives us a privileged clarity to understand it although it constantly turns against us and challenges us. It is as if we do not limit ourselves to interpret what happened and we place ourselves in our present, in what we are living today. But let's not get too far ahead and let's still leave a couple of pages between 1966 and our future: what was all that about, what was its profound portrait?

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In all five lines of that great "return" we find first a block of three: service of the poor, the perspective of the world of work and education as an initiation into reasoning. They are the deepest portrait of the modern elementary school.

1. Clearly, the Lasallian institution was born and lived to serve the people on the margins of society. They were first, namely, the children of artisans and the **Poor**. Then, as society changed, they were all target of basic or fundamental instruction. Finally, but not only in recent time, they were students who were thinking about the world of work, professional instruction.

The Poor taught the Brothers how much they needed for their passage through history. There is no demagoguery in affirming this. They verified in the poor the validity of human and scientific terms they thought they knew. And they taught the method or the institutional configuration of the school. On this subject, however, one must sense that to be true to the fundamental affirmation, over the course of three centuries of Lasallian history 'poor' and 'poverty' have meant different and complementary things, especially in relation to education and educability.

2. Because this is the second instruction of our history – the Brothers' school was always **oriented to the world of work**. It was not a curriculum established for later continuing cycles of instruction, but it was aimed direct insertion into society. It was always about a school that dispensed with the University and thought about the step from the Brothers' school to the world of work.

The perspective, also in this case, needs to be qualified a bit. On the one hand, the statement that the Brothers' school, in general, was not intended for University is indisputable. But on the other hand, it is also indisputable that the term "university" today means something different than it did just forty years ago. The extension of work training programs has diversified and made the institution of the University more democratic than it was a short time ago – it used to be totally elitist.

The problem for us today is to know if our model, as a result of our received heritage, should move closer to the University model of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or towards that which is emerging today, much more towards ongoing dialogue with the world of work and therefore much more difficult to typify. In the light of our history it seems clear that the second one would be the choice.

3. This is better understood when you combine these two perspectives – the Poor and Work – with the third one: **the world of logical reason**, that of structures. This has to do with what we highlighted especially when we mentioned the model of the Lasallian School of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: it was not a school of content but one of structure. It is obvious that this formula cannot be maintained today as such. This was already the case in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so we should not be surprised.

What a school of reasoning should be today – and not just for the university world – is that it should be a school of method over a school of content. It should impart an education where the structural roots of

reality and science count more than programs of distinct disciplines. It should be a school that thinks more about units of meaning than linear structures, about living systems than disciplinary processes, more about issues than specialties. 54

Thus we find ourselves in the very heart of our heritage, with the tremendous challenge of the paradigm shift these days. Right away we see that it is not something just related to education, but it deals especially with science, culture, religion, and society as a whole...

.....

But the heritage was and is configured around five traits. For three centuries the dialogue with institutions and ideas not only led to a model of popular education, but also to the profile of the teacher and a community of teachers. Also in these two new factors we had to find both the richness and challenge of our heritage, in facing new times.

4. The days of the generation of change made evident the following factor or axis that left us the heritage of three centuries and was at the point of being shipwrecked during the years from 1960 to 1990: **the Community**. It would not be fair to observe Lasallian history without highlighting this axis, which is crucial and qualifies everything. It would not be fair because to do so would be to forget that Saint John Baptist de La Salle did found Christian Schools but Brothers of the Christian Schools. It had to do with an organization, not just an idea.

The term "Brothers" means that the persons who assume the leadership of those schools do not consider themselves to be indifferent nor independent among themselves. They belong to the same project and they live together. Therefore, they are a brotherhood and they call themselves "Brothers." Not each one separately: they are together. Their institutional model, then, is not based on the quality of the schools but on the quality of the group of people who run the schools. One world among two perspectives.

If at any given time, over the course of twenty or thirty years, that perspective is neglected or forgotten; the specific value of the institution is lost. Anyone can understand, in fact, that only a group of teachers who live out their daily tasks as a shared mission, only they can assume with stability the three previous axes. They are such hard workers and so counter-cultural that only a community can face up to the wear and tear of maintaining it for three centuries.

5. And so we come to the fifth, perhaps definitive, axis: **interiority**. It is understood as the root of the previous ones, the source of everything and the destination for everything. If any person or group can provide this program it is because his life is not limited to movement within the appearance of reality. The Brothers' life, besides entering into the dynamics of history throughout the previous three centuries, is based on the belief that God is the true face of what is happening. He is the reference point for their work and their history. He is the definitive source that calls them forth from the beginning of time and waits for them at the end of everything. So nothing is what it seems and everything is a sacrament.

The experience of the previous three centuries shows that it is this and nothing else that could ensure the passage from modernity to an institution like ours. They can live rightly or wrongly, even in situations of clear temporary schizophrenia, but they can never go wrong. The Brothers were not a coherent model between their institutional project and certain manifestations of the life of each school, but always, above all, it was their understanding of everything based on the spirit of faith. There was

nothing that could not be understood through the spirit of faith. At least the essence of reality was not exhausted in their personal understanding...

### ***8. Another user's manual***

1960 - 1990: Anyone can understand that in the days of the Generation of Change it was not easy to understand all of this and to build upon it as a result. It was not such an easy "return" as we thought at the time.

It turned out that one thing and the other one – the Founder and the Institute – had been accumulating an "instruction manual" over the course of three centuries and, starting from the generation of change, those instructions were almost illegible. It was not enough to "go back." We had to reconstruct the user's manual.

It can be said that we have been trying to do this for forty years. We began with the Rule, before and after the Declaration, the reflection on Association or the New Community and now we are facing a new Rule of life. In between all of this, we have territorial restructuring and new designs for educational service.

The great lesson in all of this is the way of looking at things. The play between text and context teaches that the fundamental thing is not either one of the two elements but their interaction. In this interaction, separable elements become constitutive dimensions of the same reality, of a new system. In this way, the five axes of the heritage – the wealth and the challenge – are mutually meaningful, so that each one of them, by themselves, leads us to dead ends, perhaps absurd fundamentalism.

## **SO FEW YEARS FOR SO MUCH WORK**

### ***9. The Third Step***

As we think about this and especially if we get it right by letting ourselves be filled with what we see, a very clear message comes to us. It is a source of joy and concern at the same time.

We recall this as we review the awareness that the Brothers had of their own identity over the course of these sixty years. Thus we see that there were two ways of looking at the dimensions of our identity until 1966 or so; and since 1990, also more or less. In the middle of the two, as a time of passage, a generation we all know very well has passed...

The logic that leads from one to the other is the progressive awareness of belonging to a living context of ideas and societies in development. As this awareness grows, the view of reality is deeper, more ambitious, more creative. That is how we understand that over the course of forty years the interpretation of the same texts can be varied or rich. This has happened within the Lasallian Institute with proposals in 1967 and the following years. Their understanding has grown hand in hand with the awareness of belonging to something that transcends the Lasallian Institute itself.

It is very clear that over the course of these fifty or sixty years there have been three very specific times: first, the continuation of previous centuries; second, meditation on and the definition of identity; and third, redoing educational structures and methods.

It seems very clear, I think, that the first step was the continuation of the past, as a reflection of a world that still existed but little time was left to make it history. It can also be seen that the second time period was burst upon with enormous force by the awareness that we were facing new times and because of that we had to reconstruct all methods between God's call and the Lasallian program and society in which all of this had to be lived.

But very soon we saw that the work was and is twofold: that first an interior rebuilding is needed and then the institutional rebuilding remained to be done. These last thirty years have shown this without question: at the beginning of the change we thought that it was especially about changing our souls, our creed, our relationships, our vocabulary, our community... Little by little, other evidence was imposed on us with overwhelming force: the rhythm of social change cannot be responded to only from our inner self, but it would now require new institutional structures, that is to say, now ways of envisioning our project and our response to the Lord.

Over these last thirty years we have seen that yes, our number of Brothers decreased, but in addition the design of any educational program was changing. Nowadays it would no longer suffice to send sixty Brothers to the great school in the capital so that it could continue to function. What would those 60 Brothers have done as they faced diversification, pre-school levels, midday hours, immigrants (children and adults), the emergence of the third sector, new communication technologies, different political sensitivities, new systems of funding schools... No. Even if they managed all this themselves, they would not have been able to continue to maintain what they already knew to do. They would have had to create something that never existed before. And here they would have to refer to items unknown in their community history.

That is how it is. No one had told us before nor did they prepare us for what happened. The facts tell us this later. That is why we speak of the three steps in our lives: continuation, interior rediscovery...and institutional redesign.

It is comforting to see this. Especially because you cannot rest on any laurels. You must act on what you understand. This does remove bewilderment and shock. But everything else remains: interior quality, the ability for relationships, funding systems, curricular design, formation stages, vocations. It takes away perplexity but not problems: surely this is the best proof of the validity of the diagnosis.

### ***10. New networks...***

Here we are in the tower, with a 360 degree view, overwhelmed by the sense of being part of a long history and searching for signs along the way for this new time.

From up here, looking back, it is clearly seen that the heritage has come to us incarnated in a specific type of institution and in a specific structure for animating society. It is very clearly seen how the great find was, on the one hand, the makeup of communities in running the schools. And that, complementarily, the secret was in establishing networks of said local communities. The great contribution of the first Lasallian generation was to incarnate within that structure those five traits that have come to us.

Because all that discourse on the Poor/Logic/Work and the Community plus Interiority needed a structure which at the same time would support it and be consistent with its social moment. The inner

structure of those five axes – which for us is still an enormous challenge – is something still exciting if we realize that it's about institutional realities: it must go beyond persons and be offered to society in a credible institutional structure. 57

And they did it. As seen from here the paths of our history, as we were lead by the origins, speak of that simple brilliant idea: a body, an organization, an Association. Each core of the network with its clear and specific identity; the set of all the cores, also perfectly identifiable and significant.

It is there, perhaps, where our panorama reveals the greatest innovations. From the height of the generation of change one can see very well the scope of the evolution of ideas and societies in the journey of the Lasallian Institution.

Above all else, it is seen that in this society the Education/Poor game no longer means primary school or higher education but what the school has always been and what the Poor have found within it: an institution for insertion into society through training. Social insertion? Training? But is there something new in this? Hasn't any educational program always had this?

Yes, precisely. They have always been present. What is happening, and the times demonstrate this, even societies do that also, is that it is no longer happening. Or almost no longer. How, social insertion through training is no longer an objective for educational institutions to use but it is now the combination of said institutions with several other ones. And perhaps it is these others that count much more than the first ones in the final analysis.

Experience is teaching us that social inclusion is a process and its success results from the complementarity of various institutions. Anyone who thinks about it knows that a new society is emerging at the doors of our school and in front of all of us, right here at the foot of our tower, on any given day and on any given morning. Social inclusion through education, especially among the Poor, today is the result of institutions that have gone far beyond the conventional school areas so that the educational goal or training is no longer exclusive to conventional institutional education but the interaction of networks of institutions.

It is said that new societies are providing two apparently contradictory phenomena: on the one hand, educational institutions have limited their role in training and specialization; on the other hand, social institutions are assuming tutorial roles with regard to socialization or least the social insertion of persons. It is as if the educational component has disappeared from one place only to reemerge on other places in other ways.

It is seen clearly on the new side of our panorama that society is no longer set up as it was five hundred years ago when we received it through the design of middle-class institutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Now it is something else which seems a bit diffused by its interactivity: it is not limited to institutional specializations or to very precise places, as we had always been familiar with. Now it is carried out through the interplay of various institutions and it reaches a much broader territory.

Therefore what must change now is not the design of the current school institution (on any level) but its relationships with all social institutions. The innovation is not so much on the inside but on the outside. It is an area in which we, the Brothers today, have much to say.

So it is logical that their educational plan, their Christian program, should be embodied in institutional forms that until a short time ago would not have qualified as being educational. Now, however, in the

new networks for the socialization of the needy, we realize that they offer us new clues for the ministry of education.

It's easy to see the magnificence of this challenge for Lasallian tradition. And, if anyone is surprised, this is not a chimera; it was already stated in the Declaration of the Brother in the World Today, in 1967 (see, in particular, its third part). Perhaps this may be another of the dynamics behind our District Chapters for at least the past twenty years?

### *11. ...of new communities*

And the second clue, the other foot of the institutional formula of the past three-hundred years: the Community capable of living it out.

Here also our watchtower shows us tremendous innovation. If in the institutional area it is called the new social configuration, in this case it is called the New Evangelization and the emergence of New Ministries. Nothing less. Anyone who takes the time to consider the time before and after the Council can see this – the "doorpost" of the generation of change for Christians.

Because, since the design of the educational institution that we had received by heritage was finished, the validity of the personal sign of the past three centuries regarding the specific profile of the Brother as a consecrated man who lives with other Brothers in a consecrated community had also ended.

It was a typical profile of a society that no longer existed: evangelized and without a Christian laity, 1690 in Paris or 1940 for us. For the evangelized society, the profile of the person who tried to give himself to apostolic commitment and adopt the ways of a monastic community was something that was automatically significant. Due to the lack of the laity, all forms of evangelical commitment had to adopt monastic ways by secularizing them. For both sides, it was a personal and community profile that had ceased to be significant: this society was not evangelized yet nor was apostolic commitment limited to forms of monasticism.

The New Evangelization needs, as it always did, institutions that are capable of incarnating the Word of the Lord amid the culture of social institutions of an era. For that reason all forms of evangelization needs institutions that are capable of showing people the social fertility of the two faces of the Christian God: his Incarnation and his Absolute transcendence. We must remember, in times like ours, to avoid the suicidal simplicity of those who are quick to report that the era of the religious has passed and now it is the era of the laity.

We do not need to hurry our metaphor of the view from the tower to recall that all societies are made up of these two dimensions: the immediate and definitive, the possible and the hoped for. Without the combination of the two, society does not exist and it opens the way for all kinds of manipulation and exploitation. Without that combination, a society ceases to be human.

In the overall view of these centuries in front of us, the two functions were carried out by consecrated communities: together with the rest of social institutions they contributed to their people the sign of the absolute transcendence of God, and that of his love for daily life, through their apostolic commitment and their attention to details (a contribution not exclusively limited to communities misnamed as communities of "active life", but typical of all communities, active and contemplative).

Today, with the emergence of the Christian laity, that is to say, with the secularization of apostolic ministries, a good part of this balance has been broken: there are now new groups of believers who must contribute to the two dimensions of God and of Jesus. And the previous groups are distressed, believing this to be nonsense. However, in the very heart of those new groups there has to be those who will more specifically present the witness of each one of the two faces of God. They will do it among both of them, among the two new profiles of the Sign. They will be part of the same community, but they will be complementary, not identical...

### ***12. Simply, by being able to look***

Perhaps this means, again going back to the Declaration of 1967, rediscovering Baptismal consecration.

And we, inhabitants of this new city, are required to change the way we look at things, to read things in a different way. To understand, for example, that the activities of formation that we carry out today in our Districts are the new way of articulating formation inside the Community of the Christian Schools. Or to understand that the commitment the truly committed to our Christian programs is the new face of the calling of God within the Lasallian family tradition. Not the model of the Novitiate-Scholasticate, nor that of Brother-plus-helpers. It is something else. A new ministry: that of the Community of the Sign. (In which not everyone will fit, of course, and I say that with all due respect).

Elzo speaks of a "post-secular" time or generation. What can this expression contribute to us in our work of discernment? Basically this: it has to do with discovering the face of the new religion, but not restoring the other one, the one prior to secularization.

Some people interpret this situation of ours as a kind of lesson, a type of historical correction. For these people, the previous generation was a big mistake, and they swept away many things they shouldn't have. So they are determined to restore these things. "Restore:" that's the word. They are talking about putting back in its place what we had taken away so that tomorrow we can see it again. To see again what we used to see. That is what restores means.

And to do that would mean precisely not to take into account the great contribution of the Generation of Change: in doing that we did many things that were needed to be done, and they were not done badly. We took away things that we needed to take away because they reflected a disincarnated institutional state, fixed on a time of history that was more faithful to the community than to the Word of God. For that reason we had to do it. And also for that reason, understandably, on more than one occasion, we thought that in doing this, in purifying our house, everything was now done. And, of course, it wasn't.

This is the meaning of what we call the "post-secular" generation or time: it is the time to discover institutional expressions and forms that are faithful to the Word and to our time in history.

The wonderful thing about times like these is that they overcome any effort to program them. They force us to go from being intelligent to being attentive, from being builders to being listeners, from being inventors to being discoverers. Because the times get ahead of our calculations and they put in front of our eyes the things that should be there.

The sad thing about times like these is that it is difficult for us to "change our eyes." To change the way we look at our consecration or our community or our mission and to think in terms having to do more with foundation than with continuity. It is as if in the past limits were imposed on us in which consecration in the time of Boniface VIII (around 1300) counted more than consecration based on the Gospel or in the time of the first monastic lifestyle (1<sup>st</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries). There could be more examples of this type.

Our environment is filled with changes so great that at times we feel that we are unfaithful to the origins. So that when a change was too strong, too big, it would affect fidelity. That could be the case, but it is not necessarily the case, as history has shown us so many times in the history of nations.

It's not going to be easy.

But it is possible for us to look at new Lasallian forms from this perspective and to gauge them more in keeping with the dynamic than with a state of fixation, more from the point of view of diversification than organization, more from a close or local point of view than from a general one.

The fact is that this "post-secular" time has changed the signs of all religious identity.

### ***13. After the Generation of Change***

The Generation of Change is an event that transcends Lasallian limits. It assumes that the great period of history we call Modernity has been exhausted. As such, this generation cannot simply be a Lasallian phenomenon, a familiar anecdote in the great context of global history. The two facts – the universal category and Lasallian events – do correspond. The first one puts the latter in context; the second one is the concrete lived experience of the first within a centuries-old institution.

That is why we dare to think that from its high point one can understand what happened to us in the space from 1680 - 2013. And we dare to choose among two open possibilities for our panorama: another great phase of our history or our disappearance.

As we choose, we rely on more than on just the signs of history. They tell us that one cycle has ended and we are presented with the challenge of the viability of our heritage as we face circumstances that are not those from our foundation. This is the great challenge. But this is not enough for us to make our choice. In this case there is more than just interpretations of universal or family history. We are supported, to interpret the future, by the nature of the initiative on which all is based.

It is obvious that the makeup of the Community of the Brothers obeys and reflects certain historical coordinates. It was instituted in response to the possibilities and the needs of the society of its time: access of the popular class to the structures of modern society, such as that kind of modernity was understood by the middle-class of the time. That larger context marked the rules of the game from the social point of view.

But the history of our family tradition also shows that it did not emerge as a result of any administrative or scientific initiative or due to social welfare. It is worth remembering this today, Tuesday, October 13, during this week of calm and preparation for what is to come.

If the Community of the Brothers – once again, these names are not important individually, but only as a complete set overall – if it was rocked by the Great Teaching of Comenio (1679) and the Encyclopedias (Chambers 1728, French, 1751...Britannica 1768...), what made it come into being was the call of God. The Community or Society of the Christian Schools of 1700 had its origin beyond the circumstances that had made it socially possible, so that its true chronicle is in the **Meditations for the Time of Retreat**. Its source is expressed not in historical categories but in religious ones: not according to the proposals of Condorcet, for example (1795, in the French Revolution) or of Guizot (French minister, 1834...) but in the surprising fidelity of Brother Gerbaud and his followers in Lyon in **1810** or in the simplicity of Brother Benilde (1805 - 1862). And it was not socially configured according to the pontifical constitution *Conditae a Christo* (1900) nor the Law of Associations of France (**1901**...) which require legal and canonical forms but only on the faith of many anonymous Brothers. They bore witness in those days of the contradictory synthesis of generosity and ignorance in service of the schools of the Poor throughout the world, often far from their land of birth, from Söllér to Chiclana.

This very clearly shows us the Generation of Change from the watchtower we set up in the beginning.

Because in those days between 1960 and 1990, between the first Sputnik and the fall of the Berlin Wall, we all believed perhaps more in ourselves than in history and its ways. We believed, because we had to believe in it, more in our will to change the heritage than in the very nature of the heritage itself. And perhaps that is the reason during those thirty years, filled with faith in ourselves; we embarked upon establishing a Lasallian program based more on our organizational ability than in our belonging to a project that transcends all organizations although all were needed.

The Generation of Change is seen today as it was: a time for fine tuning, not a time for guidelines. Guidelines, which open us today to the future, were contained in the great premises of the General Chapter of **1966 -1967** (especially The Declaration on the Brother) and that of **1986** (the new Rule). Contents: Is one thing. Another thing is to have them assimilated and really institutionalized on the collective level.

In **1993** the Capitulants, for the first time, were asked to conceptualize what they had lived in the half-century that had passed from the Second World War and to gauge it as a time of transition, a time of change. (For the first time they spoke about "during these forty years we have seen how the world..." the generation of change was now ending). Since that time we are aware that it is up to us to develop all of that, although we must do it in socio-educational contexts that its first formulators could not have imagined.

The future already began thirty or forty years ago, yes. But only now, for just the past ten or fifteen years, when the dust settled from all the tremors, only now are we in the condition to ready faithfully the new Signs of God for our Community. Now we understand, from our watchtower, that our challenge is a double one: to re-read the Heritage (the five axes of our institutional structure) and to do it in a new Community.

This is the challenge, the real challenge, to this part of the panorama: a **new network of new communities**, because the dimensions of the "district," the "community," and of our educational program have changed. What do "community," "school," "Christian school," "district," "formation," "vocations," "spirituality," "method of interior prayer," "Brother".... mean now?

Of course in reality we should not talk so much about "challenge" as about opportunity: reliving the Heritage and reliving Community are the places where the Lord's Grace is waiting for us. He is the one who truly responds to all challenges.

The world out there, on the new side, is like that. And it is there where the targets of our program live. Therefore refoundation is much more than adapting to what is known. As in any new neighborhood in our cities, it is understood better if you view it from a little higher up and then you get a panoramic view.