

LETTER TO THE LASALLIAN FAMILY (1)

1 - KEY CONCEPTS TO BEAR IN MIND WHEN READING THE LETTER TO THE LASALLIAN FAMILY (1)

1. THE NOVELTY OF THE LETTER

«We are aware that we are participating in a new historical fact in the Institute and which is going to identify us as "the Body of the Society", as "the Lasallian Family".» (Circular 422, p. 19)

We should stress first of all the fact that this is *the first time an important document* drawn up by the superiors in Rome is addressed at the same time to the **Brothers** and to the **lay people** who, throughout the world, work in Brothers' schools or are in contact with them.

The Letter is addressed to the **Brothers** as the "*principal heirs of Lasallian spirituality*" since the Brothers are "the mainstay of the Lasallian experience." (Circular 422, p. 13)

There are consequently important conclusions to be drawn from this:

- There is a challenge to be true sons of St. La Salle: after all, "noblesse oblige!"
- There is a moral obligation to offer guidance to Lasallian movements and associations.

The Letter is addressed to **lay people**, whether associated or not, who, *thoroughly imbued with the spirit of St. La Salle, pursue their commitment* to the Lasallian educational apostolate and contribute to its vitality.

Secondly, the Letter was written at the formal request of the 41st General Chapter of 1986. This request is contained in **Proposition 6**:

«That Brother Superior General and his Council address our lay teachers and the Lasallian Family by means of a Declaration or Circular Letter, expressing all that they envision for the present and future of our Educational Ministry.» (Circular 422, p. 14)

«The Brothers as members of the Church live in this world and are necessarily sensitive to the problems which arise in each successive period of human history. They experience the same desires and anxieties as the rest of men. It is important for them to recognise that the signs of the times stress the urgency of their mission in the world today, the necessity to renew their religious life, their apostolic ministry, their presence among men.» (Declaration 8, 1)

2. KEY CONCEPTS TO BEAR IN MIND ON READING THE LETTER

«The Lasallian Family... is a new phenomenon that over these past decades has been developing in the Institute with ever increasing strength and creativity.» (Message of the 41st General Chapter to the members of the Lasallian Family)

1st CONCEPT: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

First of all, the Letter to the Lasallian Family must be read in its historical context.

Just like the Church, the Institute also has become more and more aware over the past few years of the crucial role of lay people in the life and apostolic mission of Lasallian establishments.

We have moved on from a situation in which "we considered ourselves as the proprietors of our work and mission" (Circular 422, p. 13) to one in which a great many lay people share our educational apostolate and make a considerable contribution towards the vitality of our work in the Church. «There has, therefore, been a considerable evolution from the not too distant past when we had to employ lay people because of the difficulties of the times and considered them simply as auxiliaries.» (Circular 415, p. 24)

As far back as 1975, Brother Charles Henry had already spoken about the *Lasallian Family*, in the prophetic way that characterised some of his utterances, and in the same terms as we use nowadays: «We are becoming more and more aware of the importance and necessity of joining forces –Brothers, former students, parents and young people– and forming a Lasallian family. This family group which is very close to our heart springs from something that is equally close – the Christian school which has such great potential and is so rich in possibilities.» (Speech to the Italian Lasallian Congress, Bolsena, September 15th 1975).

Brother Pablo Basterrechea, when he was Vicar General, spoke in the same vein and went into greater detail about the *Lasallian Family*: he considered the various groups of Lasallian lay people «as being very closely associated with the Institute of the Brothers, sharing the same apostolate and the same love, and inspired by the same hero. This close association does not blur the distinction between different charisms and vocations; but it integrates these dynamic elements in a single apostolate, which is perceived and pursued in common.» (Speech to Spanish Lasallians, Valencia, December 8th 1975)

The 40th General Chapter had the following to say in its Proposition 6 on the Mission of the Institute: «The Brothers will share their Lasallian spirituality and the leadership of their works with all the members of the educational community. They will be concerned with the continuing formation of those persons and will make them aware of the different degrees of belonging to what is called the Lasallian family.» (Circular 403, p. 76)

In 1981, the Visitors who were taking part in the intercapitular meeting examined the question of "openness to lay people". At the outset they stated that «the increasing number of lay people working with us in schools is a sign of the times which *the Brothers must be able to interpret.*» (Circular 415, p. 23) (Our italics)

They were careful to point out also that «the very nature of our work makes us one of the groups in the Church which has most to do with laymen and that in anything but a superficial way, since we have to form an educational community and even, given the right conditions, a faith community... We are called upon to fulfil a new role, that of sharing our spirituality with lay people whom we look on as our equals.» (Circular 415, p. 24)

Finally, between December 28th and 30th 1985, there met in Rome the Combined Institute and Lasallian Family Commission. The commission included 6 Brothers and 6 laymen, and Brother Patrice Marey, General Councillor, was chairman. They drew up a report for the 41st General Chapter. The document had the following to say about the importance of the lay movement in the Church of today: «This movement should not be thought of as a threat or as competition with regard to the work of the Brothers. It should rather be looked upon as a grace from God, whose historical importance and significance we have to learn to understand: it is for us a sign of the times.» (Document, p. 9)

2nd CONCEPT: THE CALL TO CONVERSION

The Letter must be read also in the same spirit as that which characterised the 41st General Chapter of the Institute, a spirit that can be summarised in two words: **conversion** and **renewal**.

The Chapter called upon the Brothers, in terms I would call moving, to become converted, that is to say, to undergo a profound and serious spiritual transformation, a radical change of heart and to breathe new life into our apostolate.

That is why when we read, study or meditate on the Letter, we should constantly bear in mind the Pastoral Letter of Brother John Johnston, Superior General, written on January 1st 1987, and especially pages 11 to 32.

Let us quote for the moment just the following paragraphs which offer a good summary of the wishes of the General Chapter:

«Now is the time, we believe, to state loudly and clearly, that the Lord calls us, as Brothers of the Christian Schools, to live a life in the Spirit which is genuine, profound and focussed on our mission. That call is addressed to every single one of us.» (Message of the Chapter to the Brothers, p. 21)

«The Message calls us to BE Brothers of the Christian Schools in and in relation to this world. It calls us to let go of whatever is holding us back and to follow Christ without reserve and without looking back.» (Pastoral Letter 1987, p. 15)