

DISTRICT ASSEMBLY ON MISSION
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THE BROTHERS AND THE EDUCATIONAL MISSION

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INTRODUCTION

Before I turn to the topic of Brothers and Mission, I will say a word about my role in District leadership.

The position of Director of Continuing Formation was created by Brother David when he began his term as Visitor in 1995. The Brothers of the District had recently legislated a change in the structures that support the ongoing formation of the Brother from entry into the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools through his later and final years. The Director of Continuing Formation's responsibilities reflect this legislation which acknowledges and accounts for research in human development that encompasses a person's physical, emotional, social, professional, spiritual and religious development and maturation. The goal set forth in Section A of the Action Plan, i.e., "vitalizing the Brothers' personal, community and apostolic life," is reflected in the service I provide the District in my capacity as Director of Continuing Formation.

This morning I will divide my remarks about the Brothers and Mission into three sections.

The first will review select quotes from the Brothers' Rule that instruct the Brothers about the integral connection between mission and vocation, and describe the unique role mission plays in the Brothers' relationships with each other and those with whom they are engaged in the work of the Institute. The second will present an overview of the demographics of the Brothers today, locally, regionally and internationally. The third and, to my mind, the most interesting and challenging, will reflect the views of the Brothers of the District of San Francisco about mission, what tugs at our

hearts and arouses our passions about the form, shape and substance of what we do and how we do it, and what we see ourselves sharing with others. It is, I believe, in these self-perceptions and passions that the future reveals itself for the Brothers as we are enlivened by the Holy Spirit and, in turn, enliven or animate the work of the District and the international Institute. Our mutual efforts as Partners and Brothers to formulate a plan and fan the flames of a common vision for mission will, I believe, be supported and encouraged by the Brothers' voices, speaking with energy and vitality about themselves as participants in this awesome and extraordinary endeavor of human and Christian education. Then, with a common voice and a common vision we can together examine trends in availability and service; influence and animation; leadership, shared mission and shared vision – all for the sake of the mission we receive from the church and validate by our lives and our consecration.

I. The Rule, Brothers and Mission

Since the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was officially recognized by the Church in 1725, six years after the Founder's death, the Brothers lives have been guided by *The Rule*. The current Rule of the Brothers was formulated and written by the 41st General Chapter in 1986 and was officially adopted by the International Institute on September 8, 1987. In the spirit of Vatican II and reflecting the inspiration of *The Brothers of the Christian Schools – A Declaration* which had been published nineteen years earlier, *The Rule* enthusiastically acknowledges the partnership between Brothers and others who work in the mission, and calls the Brothers to both hospitality and active participation in what is referred to as “the promotion of Christian laity.” It is a document that articulates the spirit of the Institute; defines the vocation and prescribes the formation of the Brother; and states the Institute's mission, purpose and governance. As might be expected, references to the Brothers and mission in *The Rule* of 1986 are numerous. Among the most striking references are:

- “The Brothers, in fidelity to the call of the Spirit and the charism of their Founder, consecrate themselves to God in order to exercise, by association, their apostolic ministry.” (2)

- “By virtue of their mission, the Brothers establish schools and cooperate in creating educational communities inspired by the vision of St. John Baptist de La Salle.” (13)
- “The Brothers are entrusted with their mission by the Institute, a mission especially to the poor.” (14)
- “From the beginning of the Institute, the Brothers have fulfilled their mission ‘together and by association.’” (16)

II. The Brothers Today

There are approximately 6,000 Brothers in the world today, living in about a thousand communities. The places from which the Brothers come and which they in turn serve along with their Partners are richly diverse and are enlivened by the cultures and customs of 84 countries. The Brothers’ mission throughout the world is enriched by many religious and spiritual traditions, as well as the aspirations and dreams of men and women who through the centuries have been convinced that faith-based education is a key to human development and the advancement of the world community.

There are approximately 850 Brothers in the United States. A recent publication of the United States/Toronto Region lists 177 Brothers as full-time elementary/high school teachers and 31 Brothers as part-time high school/elementary teachers in the United States and English speaking Canada. These men are working alongside 2,757 full time Partners and 153 part time Partners.

There are 123 Brothers in the San Francisco District, ranging in age from 24 to 93. Eleven (11) Brothers are forty years old or younger; forty-three (43) are between forty-one (41) and sixty (60); forty-eight (48) are between sixty-one (61) and eighty (80); twenty-one (21) are between eighty-one and ninety-three (93). Seventy-five (75) Brothers are involved in some level of active ministry within the District; forty-four (44) are retired. There are currently twenty-six (26) Brothers working in the District’s secondary schools and sixteen (16) working at St. Mary’s College; we are grateful for the presence of one (1) secondary school Brother and three (3) College Brothers from other Districts. Eleven (11) Brothers are involved in other

apostolic works in the District and another eleven (11) Brothers are involved in District service. Six (6) Brothers are engaged in international service. Six (6) Brothers are also involved in work outside the District's apostolic commitments and six (6) Brothers are on sabbatical or are full time students. Within the past four years, the District has lost nineteen (19) Brothers; ten (10) have died and nine (9) have left the Institute. To put this statistic in perspective, within that same four year period, five (5) Brothers have entered active ministry in the District.

The numbers tell the story. The life of the Institute is not only enriched by the partnership we represent at our gathering this week, it is in a very real sense made possible. As Brothers we recognize the work of the Spirit in bringing us together and extend to each Partner present in this room our hospitality and our gratitude. We also ask each of you to join us in praying for vocations and in actively inviting men to respond positively to the urgings of their hearts that move them to choose the life of a Brother.

III. The Brothers of the San Francisco District and The Mission of the Institute

In preparation for this presentation, I elicited the help of each Brother of the District by requesting a personal response to the following questions:

- 1) Do you have concern(s) about the influence of the Brothers on the District's educational mission?
- 2) From your perspective, in what specific ways are the Brothers effectively influencing the educational mission of the District at the present time?
- 3) From your perspective, in what specific ways could the Brothers more effectively influence the mission at the present time?
- 4) What questions should be asked (that have not yet been asked) in order to come to a clearer understanding of the distinctive influence of the Brothers on the educational mission of the District?

It is impossible to do justice to the many insights and perspectives I received in response to these questions, but I will attempt to reflect a sample of the rich and provocative views they represent. In general the Brothers' responses can be organized under three topics:

1) Diverse communities responding to diverse educational needs; 2) The role of Brother as educational leader; 3) Sharing responsibility and leadership.

Diverse communities responding to diverse educational needs:

In my seven years on the District's leadership team I have come to appreciate both the challenges and the graces that accompany accepting and embracing diversity as a fundamental principle in the exercise of leadership. As we embark on this week of dialogue and engage in strategic formulation of a common vision, I present to you, the delegates of this Assembly, the challenge to recognize and celebrate the differences as well as the similarities among us and to find new ways to honor the various roles we play as Partners and Brothers in bringing the mission to life.

The founding of the Institute began in the spirit of faith and, as it were, with the recognition of a specific need, the education of under served, poor and disadvantaged youth. By extension, communities of teachers (referred to as Brothers) were formed to respond boldly, courageously, practically, effectively and dynamically to this identified educational need. From the beginning it was communities, not essentially charismatic or outstanding individuals, that made concrete the mission. As one Brother states, "It's how we are *together* that matters." And another Brother similarly echoes, "...It's how *we* are doing the mission, how *we* are responding to the call to serve the poor [that is important]."

Likewise, the Founder had a clear sense of not only where to place his educational communities but also how to utilize the gifts and talents of individuals to get a job done. One Brother reminds us that an important consideration today is the strategic placement of Brothers to effect the most impact within the context of a mission that is now shared with others.

Another Brother expresses his concern that we not *spread the Brothers too thin*. This same Brother reminds us that engagement in mission is an essential component of the Brothers' communal life and that the recent movement toward shared mission needs to be viewed along side the compelling aspect of our communal relationships. One Brother suggests that mission is both a defining characteristic of the vocation of a Brother, i.e. his identity, and an activity in which he and others engage. An understanding of these two related but distinct aspects of mission, i.e. identity and relationship with others, may facilitate the Brother's communication with others about mission. One community in the District points to a challenge in implementing our mission today, i.e., not allowing ourselves to so narrowly define the poor that we exclude those who are just beyond our definition's boundaries. This Assembly will address that issue. During this week, I will serve on the committee that studies the diverse economic and social situations that impact those we serve.

The role of Brother as educational leader:

In recent years we Brothers have begun to speak with each other with new intensity about our identity. As community and apostolic contexts become more and more diverse, as religious life becomes the object of intense scrutiny in the Church, as numbers of religious diminish and religious institutes re-organize to meet ministerial needs and the needs of their members, we Brothers engage in dialogue about what we do, who we are, where we minister, and how we present ourselves personally and as a group to others. The role of Brother as educator is a thread that continues to run through our conversations.

Brothers frequently use the word *presence* when they speak about mission. A key to our carrying out the mission is the witness we give by being active, prayerful, participative, accessible and available. At our best we are both prophets and risk takers. In order to engage prophetically and courageously in the mission we must not lose (or give away) our ownership of the mission, not an ownership that excludes others from embracing the mission *with* us, but one that acknowledges diversity and complex relationships *for* the mission and focuses on the unique, active functions of all who participate. If

we begin to see ourselves as *passing on the mission to someone else* or *participating in someone else's mission* we will have lost sight of who we fundamentally are, owners of and “spokesmen” for the mission who share fully and vitally with others in its life.

“What uniquely do the Brothers do?” or, as Brother David asked last night, “What is the kind of leadership we must exert to advance the Lasallian mission?” Some Brothers feel it is important to remind ourselves that we are first and foremost teachers in schools, that the “vocation of teaching,” is the bedrock of our identity. Recent District attention to the religious studies curriculum in the schools has exemplified our commitment to teaching. One Brother identified *spirituality*, and specifically the spirituality of St. La Salle, as the defining characteristic of our schools. Some Brothers want to avoid a presence that is interpreted by others as symbolic, i.e., representing a rich legacy and history, but not making an essential contribution. What structures support hearing the Brothers’ voices, especially when they speak collectively? Are the Brothers comfortable with expressing themselves in a collective voice? It is unclear to some if qualified Brothers are willing and/or are encouraged to assume leadership positions in schools.

We must be innovators, seeking out new ways to serve the marginalized. Our identity as Brothers is best concretized in the visible dedication that Brothers as teachers have to poor students. Are the Brothers as individuals and/or communities seeking new ways to take direct responsibility for shepherding poor students through our schools?

Our active participation in the formation and ongoing education of our Partners is very important in the minds of some Brothers. One Brother went so far as to say that every Brother today must answer the question, “How am I personally living out my responsibility by helping form Lasallian Partners?”

With the amount and quantity of change that has characterized religious life and educational ministry in the past three to four decades, it is not surprising that some Brothers feel disoriented. The paradigms are shifting rapidly and are requiring a degree of flexibility that can challenge our faith in ourselves and our institutions. In the face of these challenges, have some Brothers

opted not to put themselves forward as leaders? In this respect, the life of the Founder can provide motivation and encouragement. He consistently responded to leadership challenges with increased faith and commitment to his life's project, the mission of Christian education.

Sharing responsibility and leadership with others:

The legacy we embrace as a District and an Institute has a long and admirable history. What we are about this week builds on that legacy by charting new directions and responding to new educational challenges and needs. As a District we have embraced an Action Plan that is bold, concrete and unapologetic in its stance for and with the poor. As we gather in this room to plan our journey into the future, we must realize that we are in the midst of a transformation that not only challenges our institutions and structures, but also touches our hearts and calls us to new partnerships for the mission.

One Brother raises a provocative question, "Are the Brothers sufficiently *inspired* to embrace shared mission?" Or in another Brother's words, "Do the Brothers *buy into* shared mission?" And a third Brother wonders if, for some, the "Lasallian family" is considered a *fad*.

The complex sociological reality of today's world, including the diminished numbers of men who are choosing religious life as a vocation, can present hurdles to partnering for the education of the young. The paradox between diminished numbers of Brothers and expanded mission outreach has not been missed on the Brothers. Some quietly question whether we should be in closer proximity to each other to provide both support and a collective witness.

Committing ourselves to dialogue and ongoing communication, i.e., speaking our truth and listening respectfully to the truth of others, must characterize the Brothers response to mission. Such communication must be willing to assimilate diverse and sometimes contrary voices that raise difficult and challenging questions.

From the beginning of the Institute, the word *association* has been charged with meaning and energy. The word has always been spoken in the context of the spirit of faith and zeal that characterizes concrete day to day lived experience. Brothers come together to conduct schools, in the Founder's words, "*so that...minds can be enlightened by the light of faith.*" One Brother reminds us that we must be as committed to the *outcome* of our mission as the Founder was, asking ourselves, "Education for what?," while at the same time recognizing that the inclusivity and diversity we have embraced as an Institute and District will be reflected in the forms the outcome takes.

Some Brothers are convinced that the changes we have made in our school and community structures has had a profound impact on our understanding of mission. They believe that these structures themselves should be the object of careful examination, including a willingness to make alterations for the sake of our identity and mission. At the same time, one Brother reminds us, we must not be afraid to try new structures that will support our attempts to communicate and live important truths. Furthermore, an understanding of how we have been impacted by sociological and ecclesial circumstances will position us to make difficult decisions about our lives as Brothers and the mission for which we are responsible.

Conclusion:

And so, what directions and possibilities open to us at this point in time when hope and energy and vitality seem to be like a great wind at our backs, moving us into an unknown and yet strangely familiar future? What fears must we overcome and what obstacles within and outside ourselves must we face if the mission is to be lived authentically and with full participation by all who embrace its challenges, both Brothers and Partners? We can articulate a number of challenges as we gather today:

- How will shared mission be impacted by the diminishing numbers of men who choose to become Brothers and by the consequent widening gap between the number of Brothers and the number of Partners who share the mission?

- What resources and supports will we need personally and collectively to respond sensitively, creatively, practically and generously to diverse educational needs?
- In what specific ways can we increase our understanding and support of the unique roles played by Brothers and Partners in the mission?
- In what specific ways can we remain open to and respectful of the multitude of voices in our midst that demand to be heard, encouraging a diversity of expression while maintaining unity of spirit and heart?

While we can at times be confused and overwhelmed by the demands of working together for the poor, we are pulled along by the vitality and excitement that comes from 1) a new sense of our association as Brothers among ourselves and with others for the mission; 2) recognition of the specific gifts we are beginning to validate in each other as we celebrate and live the mission; 3) a willingness to be transformed and sanctified by those whom we serve and those *with* whom we serve; 4) new and rich levels of communication as participants with others in the mission; 5) new roles that others are calling us to as educational leaders and *formateurs*; and , perhaps most importantly, 6) a clearer and deeper understanding of the fundamental truth that guided our Founder St. John Baptist de La Salle's life, i.e., recognition of our personal poverty and dependence on God that in turn opens us to and prepares us for participation in the important ministry of human and Christian education of youth, especially the poor.