

Articles

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The “Lay State” – a Signifier of Transformations in the Church?¹

Abstract

This article explores the renewal lay people initiated at a decisive moment in Church history. In the 16th–17th century, with the development of the modern school, lay people were given the responsibility to teach religion and to guarantee Christian education in schools. A new type of religious congregation, with exclusively lay members, emerged. They had an impressive impact, worldwide, over the past three centuries. However, as the members of these congregations declined dramatically over the past decades, one wonders whether new generations will succeed in guaranteeing continuity in the near future. Or will ordinary, secular but baptized lay people create new forms of association while taking on responsibility for school education?

Michel Sauvage (1923–2001), a French member of the De La Salle religious order, studied the theological identity of the lay “teaching brother” as initiated by J.-B. De La Salle at the end of the 17th century. The present situation, with 1.9% brothers left and 97.6% ordinary lay teachers in the educational institutions worldwide, seems to suggest that, once more, a historical mutation is occurring in the church.

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Keywords

Laity; lay religious congregations; religious education; apostolic spirituality; Christian education in schools.

1. Introduction

Michel Sauvage made a fundamental contribution to the historical and theological understanding of the lay identity of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The questions he posed and his constant revision of his thinking are an invitation for us to broaden our overall view and make it more complete. The lay state is presented as being a “signifier” of something else – a process of evolution – rather than as a state of life.

My understanding of the lay state is that it is a concept expressing relationship, and not one that is complete in itself. A factor involved here is the classification of human beings, never fixed in a context where institutions play a part. This concept implies also a particular idea of identity. The lay person differs from other persons regarding one or several criteria. These criteria evolve as institutions are forced to change by their interaction with their environment.

The evolution of the idea of the lay state puts us on the trail of what is envisaged by the introduction of classifications. As a result of this evolution, we have been able to conclude that the components of the so-called “lasallian identity” have been reorganised under the influence of new contexts, different from the one in place at the beginning of the Institute.

The focus of the work of Brother Michel Sauvage is twofold: on the one hand, a well-informed examination of present-day reality, of contemporary society; and on the other, a new interpretation, or even a new construction of the life’s work of John Baptist de La Salle in its historical context, made necessary by the questions we are asking ourselves today².

By combining these two lines of approach, he introduces a kind of “re-contextualisation” of the lay character of the Institute. What has become of the distinctive characteristic of the Brothers’ identity as a result of the transformations brought about in modern and even post-modern generations?

² It is important to note here the contribution of Brother Maurice Auguste, in particular, in Cahiers Lasalliens 2 and 11, and the very close collaboration with Brother Miguel Campos.

My contribution may be summarised under four headings: 1) the emergence of an “exclusively lay Institute” in its historical context, and the development of a theology of the “teaching-brother”; 2) the impact of a certain number of “analysers” which can help us understand the evolution of the term “lay” in the Institute; 3) the final views of Br Michel regarding the paradigm of the “teaching-brother”. Finally, a new realisation that made him dream; 4) the lay-state, a signifier of transformations in the Church?

2. An Exclusively Lay Institute. Historical and Theological Exploration

2.1. Historical background

‘Catechesis and the Lay-State’³, the monumental thesis published in 1962, forms the backbone of Michel Sauvage’s whole theological work. In it, he evokes in a most enlightening way the emergence of lay people as preachers and catechists. His reading of history enables us to understand better the Founder’s approach.

The Church of the Apostles was composed of Jews and “converted” pagans, faithful who transmitted to one another their new understanding of the God of Life, as preached by Jesus of Nazareth. It was only by institutionalising their community and by identifying and specifying different responsibilities and charisms that a certain form of hierarchy was introduced into the Church. The concern to ensure the apostolic succession, and the identification of bishops and priests as the guarantors of the orthodox transmission of the Christian faith, introduced a distinction between the cleric and the lay person. Initially, the role of lay people in the Church was, as parents, to be the primary announcers of the faith to their children. As medieval society evolved, this distinction became radicalised, bringing about an increasingly problematic polarisation.

The 12th and 13th centuries are considered to be a transition period where the status of the lay person in the Church is concerned. The advent of an urban society, of commerce, of an intellectual renaissance, of a communal movement, brought about the infiltration into the Church of a reformist movement. Lay people had access to a living and dynamic faith which inspired them to preach the gospel on their own initiative. The reasons they gave for doing so

³ M. Sauvage, *Catéchèse et Laïcité. Participation des laïcs au ministère de la Parole. Mission du frère-enseignant dans l’Église*, Paris 1962.

were contextual – the failings of the clergy, and as a consequence of this, the religiously uneducated population. A new model of pastoral responsibility was established: the lay preacher. A case in point was the Vaudois movement. There was also Francis and the Franciscan Order, and Dominic and the Dominicans who, as lay persons, introduced this new ministry. Innocent III intervened several times and decided in their favour. In 1210, he approved the Franciscan movement, stipulating that preaching by lay people, even when founded on a vibrant spirituality, had also to be based on studies, competence in theology and a remit from the Church.

What is striking is, really, that “lay people” contravened the established norms governing the ministry of the Word. In fact, the case they had won abolished the distinction between clerics and lay people as far as the preaching of Christ was concerned – the expression of the enthusiasm which is very much part and parcel of the Christian faith. A certain way of thinking, a legal framework and a Church structure seem to have been overturned. The necessary authority to preach the faith in the name of the gospel was now understood differently⁴.

By attributing to himself a new freedom by virtue of his faith, the “lay person” laid claim to a new position in the field of apostolic work. In relation to the established ecclesiastical orders, he did not fit in and operated in a different way. However, very quickly, the new “mendicant” and “preaching” orders submitted to ecclesiastical discipline and their ministry adopted a clerical status.

2.2. 16th–17th century: the “teaching-brother”

The 16th century is associated with the Council of Trent and the Counter Reformation. Numerous religious trends and movements bear witness to an astonishing vitality. The French School of Spirituality is part of this context. It inspired and accompanied “lay” men and women who played an important role, in particular in the development of schooling, a strategic instrument in promoting modernity. And, as had happened in the case of the poverty preached by Francis in the 12th century, it was still necessary for lay people to be recognised as ministers of the Word, teaching in Christian schools, and for them to also find their specific status in the Church.

⁴ See the very enlightening study on this subject by G. Agamben, *De la très haute pauvreté. Règles et forme de vie*, Paris 2011.

Michel Sauvage describes the catechetical movement in Italy in the 16th century, and in France in the 17th. Lay "associations" appeared, devoted entirely to Christian education through the schools.

It is important to note that the lay people, taking on a pastoral role, are understood here to be "non-clerics". They are defined by, and adopt an identity, using the clergy as their reference group: they define themselves by what they are not.

Once again, we are witnessing an emerging inductive and historical process. A certain number of unexpected and unplanned events led John Baptist de La Salle to become aware of something he had not realised before: the discovery of families and their children excluded, in practice, from any kind of human emancipation. This was a great shock for him. It forced him to change the way in which he perceived social reality.

De La Salle created an association, formed exclusively of lay men, distinct from clerics, but also from "ordinary" lay people. By adopting their own lifestyle, a distinctive form of dress, by forming a stable association, the Brothers created by their enterprise, a new identity in the Church, this time, firmly rooted in the lay state.

Brother Michel attempted to delve deeply into all these aspects, inspired by contemporary issues and sensitivities. He demonstrated, clearly, the present-day relevance of historical events in order to propose a credible future for the mission of the lay person in the Church of tomorrow.

2.3. Towards a theology of the teaching-brother

On many occasions, Sauvage stressed that the commitment of the Brothers is inspired by a specific spirituality: a spirituality of the school apostolate. He suggests that the components of the identity of the teaching-brother fall under two main headings: God reveals himself in life, and consecration. Here are some examples:

A. The concrete situation of the life of the Brothers is important on condition that it provides insights for their faith. Brother Michel returns frequently to this point:

- see everyday life as the place where the Word is revealed and where the creative activity of the Spirit takes place;
- God appears in the web of events and in the subtle and imperceptible process of listening to people (in the world, but not of the world);
- the Spirit of God changes the place where the sacrality of our relationship with God is experienced (the street, the school, the profane dimension of human life);

- God’s action is revealed in the destitution and life of the poor: the traditional “religious code” has broken down;
- abandon an ecclesiastical ministry, remain “lay” for the sake of total commitment. . .
- B. Consecration
 - the importance of a personal experience which underlies the gospel journey and inspires changes of direction, conversions, changes;
 - the teaching-brother consecrates himself to God for a mission in the world – for the salvation of abandoned children/young people – and allows himself to be consecrated by his communion with the mystery of Jesus Christ;
 - constitute a community founded on Providence, welcoming the unexpected, attributed to the God of life;
 - the ministry of the Word is a participation in the universal priesthood of the faithful stemming from their baptism and confirmation;
 - the Word of God is announced through action, in a coming-together of being, thought and action, as a living experience of truth.

What emerges clearly from the writings of Brother Michel is, really, the meaning of consecration. He stresses the importance, disconcerting for De La Salle, of being drawn into a situation which was completely out of place in his universe; and of having recognised in this, the evidence of the action of the God of life, a God who was different from that of the clericalised ecclesiastical Institution. He followed this evidence, left by this unexpected and surprising God. What is important, especially for the “vocation” of the Brother, in the light of De La Salle’s life, is the fact that he had been profoundly affected by an urgent social problem, and had recognised. in his reaction, the action of the God of life.

It was an unobtrusive experience, initially imperceptible, but then leading to a surprising and profound realisation. It was so important that it affected his whole being and pledged his future to a commitment without any reservations. The fact of being spoken to by someone affects a person at the deepest level of his being. The “I” awakes to a different life, elsewhere and lived differently. This discovery is priceless. Hence the commitment: “I” consecrate myself and allow myself to be consecrated. The response to others, which I found on my way where I did not expect to find it, is echoed by that of other persons who unexpectedly had a similar experience. The “we” takes form in a shared endeavour. No institution, no Rule, no authority, no group-based discipline can superimpose itself on the personal responsibility of the individual. No one can surrender this responsibility to anyone else.

De La Salle paid particular attention to this surprising development, to the road he had been led to follow. He grasped its meaning and its implications. This is what his whole spirituality is centred on. He "took personal measures" to remain faithful to it. Counsellors guided him as he came to this strictly personal realisation (his own vocation). They encouraged him to act accordingly, despite current ideas and structures. He was greatly concerned that the Brothers influenced by this same discovery should "take personal measures". This was the secret of his approach to teaching: the Brothers are supposed to practise themselves what they go on to teach their pupils.

2.4. The 20th and 21st centuries: further transitions

Brother Michel is challenged by the thinking of contemporary society. It leaves him perplexed. Has it become necessary once again to defy the historical discipline of the Church's apostolate?

The Brothers, now a minority, are faced with an overwhelming presence of secular lay teachers, who are not consecrated, not religious, have no "vows", are baptised and confirmed, but often are not Christians. The co-presence and the collaboration of the Brothers with secular lay people has sparked off the idea of sharing the mission with "ordinary" lay people.

The Institute is challenged also by the complexity of the modern world. Integration in this state of things calls for new, well-researched, interdisciplinary areas of expertise, in order to detect where, and in what way, children and young people are in a disastrous situation, and risk losing any hope of a fulfilled life. The five Colloquia (1994–1998) served as a workshop where this question was carefully considered by the international Institute⁵.

These many challenges led Brother Michel to dream of a re-foundation (1997). Does this mean that a certain historical foundation has run its course? that new situations and issues affect the very identity of the Brother-teacher?

3. Analysers

Disparities, identified on numerous occasions by experts in the sociology of religions, have, quite clearly, much to say about an increasingly pervasive change in society, which has important repercussions on religions. We can call these

⁵ Bulletin of the Brothers of the Christian Schools No 245 (1999).

disparities “analysers” affecting traditions deeply rooted in western society. These silent shifts or changes cannot be controlled by structures, authorities, or by institutional discipline.

By analysers we understand events, incidents, situations, ways of thinking and acting likely to reveal a reality (or views), which are implicit, underlying, concealed, and different from the perception or representation (of views) generally divulged or accepted as being real or true. Heads of institutions try to clarify what these analysers “are saying”, by using institutional analysis, or by systemic analysis. Hearing what they have to say could help us accept more easily a reality which is different.

Brother Michel identified a certain number of analysers in the form in which they were able to appear in the history of the Institute, but without using the technical term. He documented and examined them meticulously to make them “speak”⁶. I shall consider four of them. Each example concerns the interpretation of the “lay” character of the Brother.

3.1. The response of the Brothers to the Bull of Approbation (1725) and the Preface by Brother Irénée to the Rule published in 1726

Without worrying too much about a strictly juridical appraisal of the Bull, the Brothers paid little attention to the subtleties of Church language. They saw the approbation of their Association and, above all, the requirement to adopt the three vows proper to monastic life, as the recognition of their Institute dedicated to school education. There was a mistaken belief that this meant joining the ranks of religious Orders with solemn vows. The fact of not grasping these subtleties of language diverted attention from the real intentions of John Baptist de La Salle regarding the classifications in fashion in the hierarchical Church. The fact of having given way to these shifts had consequences which lasted until the middle of the 20th century!

This distortion is clearly reflected in the Preface to the Rule published in 1726. We see in it an aristocratic view of a religious state, which is superior, cut off from the world. It puts forward a clerical idea of a consecration seen as an end in itself, an idea verging on the casuistical. The specific vows, as envisaged

⁶ Cf. M. Sauvage, *Jean Baptiste de La Salle et la fondation de son Institut. “Frères consacrés” en Église pour le Monde*, “Cahiers Lasalliens” 55 (2001); *Le Temps de la “Sécularisation” 1904–1914, Notes et Réflexions*, Études Lasalliennes 2, Rome 1991; M. Sauvage, *Vie religieuse laïque et vocation de Frère*. Recueil d’articles, Études Lasalliennes 8, Rome 2001; M. Sauvage, *La vie religieuse: Esprit et Structure*. Recueil d’articles, Études Lasalliennes 10, Rome 2002.

by De La Salle, no longer figure in the document. On an institutional level, the novelty of a ministry of the Word is concealed, neutralised. It will live on, however, in the day-to-day life of the Brothers, in their spirituality lived out in their schools and communities.

3.2. Memoir on the Brothers without vows (1904) and the votal status proper to the Institute (1976 study)

Brother Louis de Poissy, Assistant from 1882 to 1913, coping therefore with “secularisation”, set about removing irregularities regarding the vows in the Institute. The publication of the *Normae* (1901) and the preparation of the new code of Canon Law (1917) put pressure on members of congregations with simple vows to put their house in order. The Church did not accept the idea of religious not having vows. In the Institute, it was traditional to pronounce vows – it was, of course, of vital importance in order to ensure the continuity of its work – but it was left to the discernment of each Brother whether to do so. It was not a strict obligation.

As for Brother Michel, while not denying certain failings, he stands up for not only the Brothers in question, but also for the principle already established at the time of the Founder. In his criticism of the approbation of the Rule in 1947, he insists on the necessity to abandon standardisation and centralism; to go beyond a dualistic and essentialist mentality; and to abandon personal “sanctification” as the primary end of lay religious life.

3.3. The question of the priesthood (1946–1966)

The repeated requests on the part of a certain number of Brothers to be able to gain access to the clerical state made it urgent to examine thoroughly the origins of the vocation of the Brother and the thinking of De La Salle.

It was necessary to wait until the Vatican II Council for the presentation of a new vision of (lay) religious apostolic life – a vision to which Brother Michel made a personal contribution – and to shift the issue of the priesthood back into the context of the specific identity of the Brother. By asserting its independence regarding this matter, the 1966 General Chapter awakened a new collective awareness of identity.

3.4. The Declaration (1967) and the revision of the Declaration (Lima 1999)

It took more than ten years and the two sessions of the 1966–1967 General Chapter to make the Institute recognise formally, that a period of history

had come to an end. The “backbone” of the historical charism had to be reconstituted for a different world. The Declaration⁷ provided this prophetic vision, sketching out the outline of a different future. This document served as an analyser of an evolution that could not be ignored. Towards the end of his life, Brother Michel assessed the Declaration in the light of the road travelled over the previous 30 years, spurred on by his perplexity in the face of the radicalisation of the problem. The renewal called for by the 1966–1967 Chapter was no longer sufficient at the end of the 20th century.

4. A Dream and a Question

The extent of the transformations in contemporary society led him to dream: this would be the only way possible to avoid paralysis and stimulate the longed-for creativity. More daring was needed. The key question concerning the identity of the teaching-brother had shifted towards the shared mission, considered as “a response to the real needs of young people today”. A somewhat disappointing perspective, for Brother Michel, “because it is satisfied with simply recalling that the Institute is composed exclusively of lay religious”.

4.1. Observation

To suggest a possible way forward for the vocation of the lay religious brother, he chooses a different starting point. The number of Brothers compared with that of lay persons prompts us to look again at the intentions of John Baptist de La Salle, and to reflect on the question of the lay state from a prospective point of view. But the present demographic situation of the Institute calls for a re-foundation. Brother Michel asks himself: “What could a re-foundation be today, if not of the Institute, at least of undertakings inspired by the Lasallian charism?”⁸.

Let us look first at how the ratio of teaching-brothers and secular lay people has been reversed.

⁷ Le Frère des Écoles Chrétiennes dans le monde d’aujourd’hui, 39^{ème} Chapitre Generale 1966–1967.

⁸ *Cahiers Lasalliens* 55, p. 248.

1. The data in figures⁹

	2004	2007	2010	2013
Brothers	2,345	2,393	2,150	1,736
(% of teaching staff)	3.2%	3.0%	2.8%	1.9%
Lay staff.	72,572	74,248	76,623	87,666
non-FSC religious, priests	730	720	678	388
TOTAL	75,647	77,361	79,451	89,790
% total laystaff	95.9%	96%	96.4%	97.6%

2. Evolution of the lay status of the staff in FSC schools

Emergence	16th-17th century	1950s-21st century
From the "teaching-brother"	Lay, non-cleric, but "consecrated", the teaching-br. is institutionalised in canonical "religious life".	
to the secular lay teacher		The secular layperson, "non-consecrated", no "religious-life" status, no "teaching-br." identity
Context of transition	Church and society clericalised, normative position of hierarchical Church in society	Society secularised, de-clericalised; institutional Church socially marginalised.

4.2. The question Brother Michel asked himself

He notes the emergence of an unexpected Institute. The Declaration had not foreseen the "Shared Mission", a response to the massive presence of lay secular collaborators, and a decrease in the number of Brothers. He recognises that this unforeseen change is indisputably positive, and he shares the views of those who see, in this, a sign of the renewal of the Institute through the action of the Spirit.

But he does ask himself: "Might there not be a future alternative for a specific Brothers' vocation, which would not depend on the shared mission (as it is practised and defined at the present time), without being, however, a fearful retreat to a «Brothers' ghetto»? This alternative is, I think, perhaps, essential for the future of the Institute, but beyond doubt, for the authenticity of its life today"¹⁰.

Is the alternative still centred on the specific vocation of a Brother who is "a lay, consecrated, non-clerical religious"? What alternative would he envisage

⁹ Data published in the *Memento*.

¹⁰ *Cahiers Lsalliens* 55, p. 286.

which was not based on an historical model which would have to be shared with secular lay-people?

Looking back at John Baptist de La Salle's "foundation", Brother Michel picks out four transitions centred on the fundamental importance of the lay state, urging a different way of envisaging membership of the Church.

- De La Salle immerses himself in a social situation on the fringes of a Church turned in on itself. He becomes a member of the laity. The ministry of the Word in the school returns to the laity. He establishes the foundations of a Church for the world, abandoning its clerical yoke.
- For essentially pragmatic reasons, his plan requires completely committed men who dedicate themselves totally to their mission. The community of teachers is composed exclusively of laymen practising a spirituality which is specifically their own. They represent the Church which serves the needs of the people. There appear new "mediators" to preach the Kingdom. The teaching-brother represents a new mediation of the God of life.
- With the Brothers there also appears a new identity for the minister of the Word. Their "association" has strong links with a personal and collective experience: the lay claim to their own autonomy in the Church. It exists in concrete terms as a form of life and "by running schools", and not on the basis of a legal statute or a formal rule. Their autonomy derives from the community in which fraternal equality emphasises commitment to the mission.
- The Brothers learn to focus their attention more on events than on the institution. "...it is in the very fabric of human relations, in the midst of events, that the imperceptible action of God takes place. For De La Salle, faith...is first of all attention to the concrete events of life in order to discern in them the calls of God"¹¹. The evangelical and spiritual journey of the Brothers is seen as the work of God. Their consecration to God is rooted in a very concrete and representative reality.

By summarising, in this way, the historical components of a foundation, one can distinguish, more easily, what was introduced that was really different from the paradigms in fashion. A certain number of aspects, indispensable at first sight, depend, in reality, on the historical context or pragmatic circumstances.

Is Brother Michel suggesting that a certain rupture with our historical past has to be considered, given the transition which is taking place in contemporary

¹¹ *Cahiers Lasalliens* 55, p. 253.

society? The signifiers (indicators) associated with the transmission of Christian tradition seem to have lost their sharp impact and their meaning. This failing concerns, above all, it seems, the mediators who, for centuries, were the proponents and implementers of the apostolic life of the Church: the clerics and lay religious.

Is Brother Michel inviting us to recognise, finally, that secular lay people, believers and members of the Church, should be bearers, by virtue of their baptism and confirmation, of the Lasallian charism, in the same capacity as the teaching-brother? Should we abandon, in a more widespread manner, the subtle exclusivity, still associated with "professional" mediators of the preaching of the Word, endowed with a canonical statute?

Does the decrease in the number of priests and religious indicate, simply, that the society and Church in which we find ourselves has greatly changed, and that contemporary society, well-educated and socially-attuned to a globalised world, has its own different view of life? And that today also, "faith...is first of all attention to the concrete events of life in order to discern in them the calls of God"? These secular lay people constitute almost the entirety of the staff of Lasallian establishments. Could there emerge, from among these people, another model, a mediator of the Gospel, with a different identity, with the experience of being married and a parent? Would it be unthinkable for a secular lay person to be a bearer of the same Lasallian charism, but in a different way? And in what sense is the apostolic identity of the secular lay person complementary to that of the "teaching-brother", priest, monk?

It seems that the present-day context is forcing the institutional Church to revise and reconstitute the signifiers of its presence in the world, and of its representation of the living Christ.

4.3. Lasallian re-foundation

"What could a re-foundation be today, if not of the Institute, at least of undertakings inspired by the Lasallian charism?" Does a "re-foundation" imply that an historical "foundation" has come to an end, and nothing will follow? Or, does this historical foundation keep all its value on condition that contextual presuppositions are maintained?

Brother Michel explains that he is speaking of a Lasallian re-foundation, one therefore, that involves the paradigm introduced by De La Salle. What is central here, once again, is to identify what, in profoundly diversified contexts, threatens to destroy or hinder the development of other people – an experience

that had affected De La Salle and his Brothers – but not retaining the model of the teaching-brother. So, elsewhere, in a different way, in different living conditions, and the prophetic impetus would come from secular lay people.

Would this mean, on the one hand, that the paradigm of the teaching-brother, in the minority in his own establishments, remains in force and keeps all its originality in the contemporary context? But that, on the other hand, it would be also an undertaking in which secular lay people would assume a founding role, and be “institutors”? Their specific living conditions would then constitute a dynamic component of their identity; the term “Lasallian” would describe married lay people, parents, living in a variety of family situations, linked up with multiple areas of solidarity and ways of belonging, with loyalties to a complex and sometimes demanding social network, considering difficult problems. For them, the teaching-brother would represent an historical paradigm, an inspiration, a witness to a specific form of alliance with the God of life. They would then have to invent a form of life, a form of “consecration” and an association, guarantors of stability, at the very heart of life as “secular” lay people. They would then have to create a paradigm of the mediator of the mystery of life in an open, pluralistic and multi-religious context.

Would it be for these lay people, called “ordinary”, to take over this territory by virtue of their baptism and confirmation, and to outline an evangelical and spiritual journey inspired by the charism of John Baptist de La Salle, but elsewhere and in a different manner?

Brother Michel does not envisage this in his idea of a re-foundation. The Brother remains firmly where he is, as a mediator of De La Salle’s plan and of the Institute. The ordinary lay people, secular and more numerous, will take on professional duties, but will leave intact the “religious” non-clerical Brother. Regarding pluralism, he speaks of the activities – of the Brothers – as being increasingly vast, multiple and diverse. The various activities (social aid, delinquency...) are the remit of professions essentially more of a lay nature, inspired by a “shared mission”, of which the Brother would remain the link with the foundation. The revision of the Declaration highlights that what was involved was the “renewal” of the vocation of the Brother in the light of a new understanding of religious life.

4.4. Beyond the Declaration

Looking back, Brother Michel speaks of the relative failure of the renewal undertaken by the Institute since the 39th General Chapter. Was this because

any attempt at renewal, including the Declaration, is in thrall to ways of thinking institutions and widespread paralysis; to belonging to an obsolete world and mentality? He stresses the importance of seeing disturbing events as “signs of the times”; of making oneself more open to new prophetic interpretations; of thinking up new projects which foresee the future of the Church. It is, above all, changes in society which upset the forms of stability taken for granted in the past. Brother Michel refers to the Five Colloquia and, in particular, to the one on globalisation (Sri Lanka), in order to emphasise the novelty of our situation compared with that envisaged by the Declaration. This novelty puts into question a certain ideology of the religious life, of the teaching-brother, still considered (a gut feeling?) as an absolute truth. It is an invitation not to look any longer at a change *in* the world, but to involve ourselves in a world-change.

A “re-foundation” would have to re-interpret the historical components of the teaching-brother. Clearly, commitment to the poor needs to be put into the context of globalisation and not left exclusively in that of the school. Also, the catechetical ministry is seen more and more in the context of a secularised and pluralistic society. And then there is a paradox. On the one hand, Brother Michel sees the “re-foundation” as being within the traditional paradigm of the teaching-brother. On the other hand, according to him, the re-foundation would bring about a certain fragility, even a kind of death of religious institutes, quite apart from the people involved, but not necessarily of a posteriority.

His thinking about re-foundation clashes with this paradox. Present-day evolution calls for a more thorough study, going beyond symptoms. The starting point needs to be at the heart of the contemporary world, with its multiple appeals to humanise the seven billion people as a whole living on this planet. It is possible that the historical models of the ministry of the Word weigh down excessively on the present-day situation and prevent ordinary lay people from following their insights inspired by the Spirit in the face of the needs of people.

5. The Lay State, a Signifier of Transformations in the Church?

In his brilliant thesis, Brother Michel stressed that it was secular lay people who gave birth to the Christian community, taking on the responsibility of announcing the living Christ. He dwelt, for a long time, on the fact that in the

12th and 13th centuries lay people assumed the right to preach the Good News by virtue of a new experience of evangelical life. With time, a good number of them, including the Franciscans, allowed themselves to be “recuperated” by adopting the clerical status.

And in fact, by the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th century, lay people had refuted the reputation that lay people had of being illiterate, uneducated, incapable of sharing in the ministry of the Word of God. On the basis of their biblical and theological expertise, their mission from the Church and a spiritual life, lay people were accepted as ministers for the preaching of the Good News of the Gospel. This change brought about a transformation in the Church.

This was only an introduction to his exploration of the involvement of lay people in the teaching of religion in the schools of 16th and 17th century. In an original and detailed manner, Brother Michel developed a theology of the teaching-brother, lay, non-clerical, consecrated to God, adopting a specific way of life and spirituality, within a community framework built on association. The society founded by De La Salle became progressively institutionalised to become a religious congregation with simple vows.

So, urged on by John Baptist de La Salle, who made himself a layman among laymen, lay people forced open the doors of Church and civil mentalities and structures to make their own the ministry of the Word of God in schools.

Today, four centuries later, ordinary, secular lay people constitute a providential forum from which a different Church is emerging, stimulating a prophetic commitment to the society of tomorrow.

The paradigms of old, including that of the teaching-brother, had an inestimable impact and continue to have an undisputed importance for the emergence of a prophetic Church, the mediation of the God of life. This God of Jesus Christ is perceived and signified in different, new and even controversial ways on the basis of surprising experiences. It is up to the lay people of today, endowed with a vast amount of expertise and taking on important responsibilities, to realise that they are the forum where the God is revealing himself, subtly, in an imperceptible manner, as the instigator of the total fulfilment of human beings.

By sharing so fully in the transformations of life, of persons and of institutions, Brother Michel was a mediator in the revitalisation of the unique vocation of the teaching-brother. He excelled in the way in which he perceived changes, in undertaking striking analyses, in re-thinking his points of view, and in asking questions which opened the doors to a different universe.

In his questions and reflections as his life drew to an end, he left us a testament: the exploration of what has erupted into the lives of secular lay people today, the emergence of a different Church in which they will have to play a founding role.

Translator: Allen Geppert

