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Brother Bernard Gaudeul
Superior General

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INSTITUTE
OF THE BROTHERS OF CHRISTIAN
INSTRUCTION

CIRCULAR LETTER

of

*Reverend Brother Bernard Gaudeul
Superior General*

THE JOY OF BEING A BROTHER

*"I beg you to lead a life worthy
of the calling which you have
received." Eph 4:1*

Dear Brothers,

From time to time, we shall meet one another by letter. Two or three times a year, perhaps, and not necessarily at great length. These "circulars" will not be the impressively structured treatises of my predecessors in which we all found so much light and encouragement. Yet, I hope that they will touch your hearts and help turn them towards Christ.

Generally, they will try to address our day-to-day preoccupations. Eventually, they may form a synthesis; only time will tell. In any case, they will not be dictated by logic alone, but will come from the heart and, I hope, they will leave room for the Spirit.

I am looking forward with joy to this periodic contact with you. The superior may sometimes appear as a remote person; he himself may feel rather isolated within the four walls of his room at Rome or elsewhere. These pages will remind him of the hundreds of Brothers, each with his own name and his

own countenance, belonging to no one else, according to the Apocalypse, but to Jesus and to the Father.¹

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Where do I start?

At the beginning of this generalate, I should like to thank the Lord for having called us, the 1500 Brothers of Christian Instruction of Ploermel, to our vocation and to do that, I want to share with you the many reasons we have for the joy we experience in being Brothers.

There are so many who lament the passing of the "good old days" and who, armed with alarming statistics, raise their voices in constant complaint.

Where then can arise this exultant joy which shines in our heart? The joy of faith which knows in whom it has believed, the joy of hope which knows it will obtain what it desires, the joy of love which never doubts having the last word, being the last word.

Rediscovering the reasons we have for being happy in our calling will help us lead an even more generous religious life. These pages are intended to do just that.

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It all started by a call from the Lord, a pressing but discreet call, heard in the secret of the heart, a

¹ Rv 3:12, 7:3, 14:1.

call totally respectful of our freedom, a call to love. It was repeated several times, softly insistent: "Come, follow me! Come and live with me and soon like me, to listen, to understand, to love, to become one with me and soon, to speak about me".

And we answered yes, like Peter, Andrew, James and John at the lake side, like Matthew in his customs house, like the others on the slope of a mountain. We left all and followed Jesus.

A foolish escapade to which everyone is invited. It is not solely the prerogative of religious, but religious publicly profess to pursue this quest for Christ relentlessly. To this end, they concentrate all the powers of their being, their intelligence, memory, imagination and feelings. They consecrate themselves to this search by vows from which nothing of what they have, what they do, what they are, escapes. Such is their reply to the call and to the gift of God: "All that is mine is thine"². There are other options. They choose Jesus, Jesus only, not through a process of elimination, but through a clear act of preference. Folly to the world, but wisdom of God! "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men"³.

We could have done many other things! There are among us peerless teachers, graduate engineers, specialists of all kinds who could have achieved enviable success in the world. And it is evident that the directors and the bursars who are so adept at their important responsibilities could have forged brilliant careers

² Jn 17:10.

³ 1 Co 1:25.

in the public or private sector. Religious life is not an escape for the incompetent. Temptations are always there: money, power, autonomy, honours... "I count everything as loss. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse in order to gain Christ and be found in him"⁴. We were fascinated by his look, converted by his words, seduced by his person. We attached ourselves to him so as never to lose him. He did not look at our wretchedness, he considered only our good will. He accepted us to make us his friends and his witnesses.

He invited us to share his company. It was there that the Apostles found their happiness. Now he opens his tender heart to us and so, throughout the months and years, we develop an affection for each other, we give ourselves to each other. In the midst of the most absorbing or even painful situations, this mutual knowledge and love grows and is enriched. We allow ourselves to be loved and he introduces us into his intimacy, to a gradual penetration into the mystery of his person, marked by moments of shadow and light. But, if it sometimes happens that we draw away from him, how can we resist his look of sorrow and like Peter, how can we not shed bitter tears for having betrayed him?⁵

Christ is faithful. He remains with us, enlightening, encouraging and supporting us. He makes his home within us; clothes us with himself⁶. He gradually

⁴ Ph 3:8-9.

⁵ Lk 22:61-62.

⁶ Ep 4:24, Col 3:10.

takes possession of us until he lives our life and, so to speak, our life becomes his: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me"⁷. Without losing any of our identity, we come to personalize him somehow, we become for him a surrogate humanity⁸. We relive his paschal mystery, we prolong his incarnation. Indeed, we find in him our identity, we become what we truly are, sons of God.

To describe the richness and the depth of this communion with Christ, Holy Scripture uses various images: those of the friend, the child, the bride, the brother; those of the vineyard and of the marriage feast. In spite of their disparity, these images complement one another as they try, however unsuccessfully, to explain the mystery. They can only provide feeble hints, for Jesus alone can make us experience it as he invites us into the garden where the union is consummated⁹.

There, little by little, he shares with us his most cherished secret, the joy of his Sonship; he reveals to us the mystery of God! He unveils his Father's face, a Father who loves us to the point that he is willing to give us his only Son, and who invites us to share in his very life. Thus is eliminated the concept of a selfish, jealous, vindictive God. He is a Father who gives, who gives himself, who loves, in whom there is nothing but love, indeed, who is nothing but love¹⁰. Not only does he pardon, he saves: "God so loved the world that he

⁷ Ga 2:20.

⁸ Elizabeth of the Trinity.

⁹ Sg 5:1.

¹⁰ 1 Jn 4:8.

gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"¹¹.

Now we know that we are loved and all our resistance crumbles. Our heart is opened. We recognise that we are children of the Father, called to share in the sons' inheritance. We hear him tell us the very words he first addressed to Jesus: "You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased"¹².

Incredible, ineffable words! They give us wholeness and peace which consecrate us in the Father's service, making us holy and blameless in his sight and destined in love to praise the glory of his name¹³. We in turn live the perfect religion of the well-beloved Son, ever "turned toward the Father"¹⁴. We make our own this fundamental disposition of Jesus in each and every word and deed, which enabled him to say: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me"¹⁵. With him, like him and in him, we become praise, adoration and thanksgiving to the Father, in a word, a eucharist. We penetrate, astonished and overwhelmed, into communion with the Trinity. It is a process which we shall never complete. The Holy Spirit will gradually initiate us more fully into this mystery if we allow him to bring to maturity his gifts: "charity, joy, peace, long-suffering, goodness, confidence in others, kindness, self-control"¹⁶.

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¹¹ Jn 3:16.

¹² Lk 3:22.

¹³ Ep 1:4-5.

¹⁴ Jn 1:18.

¹⁵ Jn 4:34.

¹⁶ Ga 5:22-23.

This joy is deep within us, like a still pond unruffled by the eddies on the surface, and it will have its very special moments of renewal and expression, especially in prayer and the Eucharist.

Times of contemplation and communion, when we are alone with God, in total abandon and faith, beyond words, completely absorbed in the silence of admiration, the simplicity of presence, beyond sensible enjoyment, in utter self-oblation. Hours of tenderness, when the child is the pride of his father, when the bride surrenders completely to her beloved. Hours of intimacy, whose fragrance enhances the whole of life in a wonderful variety of ways.

Occasionally, there are days of pure bliss, when heaven, when God himself seem within touch. In the words of a French writer, "Il fait Dieu"¹⁷.

Yet, more often, there are dull, gray days, filled with struggles and temptations, in dryness and obscurity, without major disruptions perhaps, but not without occasional failings. Yet, they are peaceful days, thanks to the enduring friendship which through repeated thoughtful gestures give concrete expression to the words of the Gospel: "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven"¹⁸.

Now and then, days full of crosses when the bitter wine of suffering fills the soul. Days during which the Eucharist is celebrated in a tortured body or a broken

¹⁷ Didier Decoin.

¹⁸ Mt 7:21.

heart, in union with the Son's immolation to the Father for the salvation of the world. As disciples of Christ, how can we refuse the cross? Isn't it the ultimate grace of purification which will conform us to Christ and make us "beloved of the Father"¹⁹? The martyrs accepted it joyfully, deeming themselves unworthy of such a grace. In the fourth century, religious life appeared as the new martyrdom. Saint Therese of Lisieux saw religious life a martyrdom of love, one offered drop by drop, in various ways: illness, infirmities, sufferings of the most painful kind, like heart-rending assignments, shattering failures, endless spiritual dryness, and trials of all kinds, often borne alone, in silence and with great patience.

In those dark and sorrowful times, we should cry out with Saint Paul in his Roman prison, "With all my affliction, I am overjoyed"²⁰. It is the joy of the unconditional oblation, which one day shall blossom into beatific joy, that of the slain Lamb receiving glory and honour from the multitude of saints²¹. The religious will thus have responded to God's initial call to him. He will return to the Father, having lived his whole life in filial abandonment, in which he will have found his joy.

We should be dazzled by such perspectives in which our lives should find their only meaning. They are available to all of us, if we believe, if we surrender to God and let him transform us. Many of our predecessors have experienced them as we can see in the

¹⁹ Mt 3:17.

²⁰ 2 Co 7:4.

²¹ Rv 4:7.

obituaries and the biographies of our Brothers. Saints like Theresa of Avila, whose fourth centenary we have just observed by rereading her works, described them vividly. Don't we tend to think that such sublime perspectives are reserved for others? Yet, why should we be excluded? Divine liberality is all-inclusive, it is offered to the poor and to little children who know that they do not deserve such favours, but who do not place obstacles in the way of the gifts of God, which they know how to accept with simplicity and gratitude.

After several years of religious life, we are occasionally overcome by sadness. We take a close look at ourselves, at our past, and we see how little we have accomplished in response to God's grace. We constantly encounter the same struggles and the same failings; we are overwhelmed by our infidelities. When we consider the love which God has bestowed upon us, and the way we have responded to that love, we are filled with shame and disgust. We are tempted to give way to discouragement.

Father de la Mennais often forewarned us against this, perhaps the most insidious of temptations. Wouldn't it be much better to simply acknowledge our ingratitude and to throw ourselves into the arms of our merciful Father, relying totally on his compassion? He would embrace us, clothe us in our best robe, place a ring on our finger, new shoes on our feet and even kill the fatted calf for a joyous feast²².

With God, let us have the simplicity of a child, who is not surprised when he falls and when he needs

²² Lk 15:20-24.

help to get up. Among Brothers, let us not be harsh, but ever ready to show understanding and forgiveness. Finally, let us put an end to self-scrutiny which fosters feelings of guilt and despair. Let us view our conduct with discernment, carefully distinguishing between what stems from superficial sensibility and what springs from the basic orientation of our being. We must cope with the sudden disruptions of the former, cleansing them progressively, pacifying them in all patience and humility, with the firm conviction that our fundamental dispositions are far more important than these transitory disorders.

The Father calls us to holiness in the person of his beloved Son. May each of us accept his will, whatever it may be, and surrender to him today and forever. Let each one say, with our Blessed Mother: "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to his word"²³. Then, he will sing with her: "The Lord has looked at the lowliness of his handmaid. He worked marvels for me"²⁴ and, like her, he will rejoice in God.

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How can one keep this joy for himself? "One does not become a Brother for himself, but for others" Father de la Mennais used to say. How can we remain silent about the knowledge of Christ, acquired in daily prayer, attention to the divine presence and commu-

²³ Lk 1:38.

²⁴ Lk 1:48-49.

nion with the Trinity, which gives our life its meaning? How can we fail to share with others all that we have discovered during years of intimacy with God?

Jesus himself, who was totally dedicated to God, was also completely dedicated to men. He sought only one thing, to reveal the Father and his divine plan of love, and thus, to bring happiness to everyone. His will found its supreme expression when he offered his life for them: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son that your Son may glorify you"²⁵. "I have made known to them your name and I shall make it known, that the love with which you love may be in them and I in them"²⁶.

Jesus invites us to imitate him in his calling as teacher and prophet, who gives his life so that his disciples may possess the Truth which makes them free. In the midst of our contemporaries, especially youth, we are to be his voice and his light. A magnificent task!

At present, there is perhaps no apostolate of greater urgency — or of higher yield — than ministry to youth, since they are the future of the Church. Yet, more and more, they live next to the Spring of Living Water without knowing him. Can we, who drink of it so deeply, allow them to ignore it? All the more so, since this apostolic activity, which springs forth from our prayers, is itself the medium in which it is renewed.

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²⁵ Jn 17:1.

²⁶ Jn 17:26.

Youth! It was for Jesus the favourite part of the flock. We can all visualise the Gospel scenes where he lets the children draw near to him, where he embraces them, places them on his knees and puts them up as models to those who would enter his kingdom. Is it so sure that these are images of another era, which leave us indifferent today?

It is true that our students generally do not have the freshness of children and we are often more sensitive to their shortcomings which annoy or pain us. In spite of this, we should try to experience something of the joy that Our Lord felt in the presence of young people, and be happy to have been invited by him to live in their company. Even today, aren't the students of our primary grades especially good models of the confidence and dependence which we should have towards God, our provident Father, since "of such is the kingdom of heaven"²⁷?

In general, the Brothers are more involved with adolescents and young adults. They hope to make a success of their lives for themselves and often, for others. They tend to be optimistic, generous, open-minded, avid for freedom, sensitive to injustice and surprisingly resistant to indoctrination. They have much to offer: their joy of living, their optimism, their dynamism and their love for simple values.

Yet, they feel insecure. Aware of their limitations in a sophisticated, increasingly complex world where advanced training and formation are indispensable, they worry about the future. Their insecurity eng-

²⁷ Mt 19:14.

enders dissatisfaction. The values which beckon them, which many, indeed, have experienced, fall short of their expectations and often leave them with a bitter after-taste. Occasionally, in their quest for distractions, they have given in to excesses, but more often than not, they are seeking other orientations.

Our role is to introduce them simultaneously to culture and to faith, imparting a complete knowledge, respectful of the values of the human sciences, and of the rights of God, the Alpha and the Omega "from whom everything has its origin and towards whom everything is directed".

For our students, we hold the key to knowledge. From the earliest years, we unlock for them doors to a wonderful world. Truth and the beauty expressed in creation and discovered in human sciences bring exhilarating joy to the mind — although many students fail to appreciate it fully — and can lead to the search for the Truth and Beauty in which the human mind finds endless fulfillment. They adumbrate a greater Truth, a greater Beauty which we are called upon to reveal to our students.

The teacher's calling is indeed wonderful! The teacher forms the intelligence that it may grasp the truth of beings, the truth of being. He stimulates it to understand more fully, to "comprehend", that is, to make part of itself, to take in, to embrace, to become one with truth. At the same time, he tries to have his students see the impossibility of total comprehension, the insignificance of the seeker vis-a-vis the magnitude of creation. He invites them to humility at the little they know of the vast world which has been freely given to them.

This attitude is fundamentally a religious one. The student will acquire it less through direct experience as a learner than through contact with a person, a teacher, who exemplifies the attitude and inspires others to discover and appreciate it. Thus, scientific inquiry, undertaken with a disciplined and unassuming approach, is already a preparation for accepting the faith. The scientist's or the scholar's humility and thirst for knowledge prepare an opening to the divine mystery: "I thank you, Father, for having hidden these things to the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes"²⁸. The human mind seeks the last word in everything and is therefore open to the subsistent and eternal Word, the Word of God which gives consistence to all things. It is a kind of stepping-stone to God's revelation through the Incarnate Word. A Christian educator knows this and cannot rest until he has achieved his goal, this initiation, with his students.

This Word, it is our privilege to pronounce it in catechesis. There is perhaps no greater joy for a Brother than to do just that.

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Yet, it is the whole educative attitude of the Brother which awakens his students to their Christian vocation, to the spiritual and religious dimension of their existence.

There is an art of doing this, of respecting personal freedoms and vocations, which persons living accord-

²⁸ Mt 11:25.

ing to the liberty of God's children and in openness to the Holy Spirit readily discover. The Brother knows how to impart self-control; respect for others, especially the poor and the downtrodden. He knows how to make his students appreciate the beauty of effort, of work well done, of wonderment, service and generosity. He can instil homely virtues like politeness, honesty, tolerance and considerateness, modest virtues which contribute so much to the quality of life in society. He knows too, how to develop in his charges an appreciation for creation and the Creator and an optimistic outlook on the world: "And God saw what he had made and behold, it was very good"²⁹. He knows how to share an evangelical perspective, attentive to physical, economic and social miseries and even more to intellectual, emotional and spiritual sufferings and to the means of addressing them.

Through his teaching and other educational activities and even by his quiet but attentive presence among his students, the Brother gradually reveals the image of Christ. It is an image that should illumine and fascinate every youngster who attends our schools. Hundreds of Brothers have found herein their human and religious fulfillment. They saw beyond the present, beyond the four walls of their classrooms. They perceived hearts being touched, being moved and transformed and they witnessed in unobtrusive wonderment a blossoming of holiness which they nurtured with their prayer and their penance.

Very often, the least conspicuous Brothers make the deepest impressions on their students; youth has

²⁹ Mk 16:15.

always been responsive to the disinterested gift of self. Who knows the impact of a kind word, a smile, a charitable service. So many of our former students could say that they really felt loved in our schools! Who can ever measure the impact of a life spent in a laboratory, a workshop, a gymnasium, a school yard, a dining room, a study hall, a dormitory, or in a bursar's or a headmaster's office?

Brothers who are good listeners: how many of our young people feel misunderstood! Brothers who are considerate: how many of our youth feel rejected! Brothers who trust their students: in spite of appearances, young people can hoodwink their teachers! Self-consciousness often leads them to mask the best of themselves while what is essential is occurring in the secret of their hearts.

Education is a long-term investment; its best fruits ripen slowly, in adulthood. It calls for humility, patience and, above all, hope.

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Beyond doubt, however, the Brother's greatest joy is to be able to speak about God. We have personally heard the command of the risen Christ: "Go into the world and preach the Gospel to the whole of creation"³⁰. He has given us the Holy Spirit who utters the Word in our very hearts. It is like a wine which cheers us, it reaches our lips, and those who listen are "cut to the heart"³¹.

³⁰ Gn 1:31.

³¹ Ac 2:37.

Speaking about the one we love, awakening hearts to his love, preparing them to welcome him, helping young people progress in their spiritual life, helping them back to the right path when they have strayed, enabling them to choose Christ as their life-long travelling companion, is there a more worthwhile goal in our calling? Is there any greater joy for an apostle than to have helped others know and love the one to whom he has given his life? Having opened the hearts of the young to the Truth of Jesus Christ and thus, to happiness, wouldn't that be our greatest success?

The means of doing this are numerous, and we must exercise our ingenuity to reach everyone in our schools: catechesis, various religious celebrations (Eucharistic or reconciliation services, liturgies of the Word), retreats, recollections, pilgrimages and, for the older ones, the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius.

Our zeal should make us enterprising. Never has there been a more pressing need to proclaim God's Word nor a keener desire among many to hear it. The hunger of the human heart is boundless; how can we fail to assuage it?

Unfortunately, human respect, fear and especially, feelings of inadequacy often paralyse us, especially in dealing with the older students of our secondary schools. We allege the lack of time or training. Can we mean it? We would be competent to teach mathematics, languages, science, the classics, and yet would be incapable of proclaiming the Word of God, which is the Science of Life!

How can we accept that Brothers who have consecrated their life to Jesus Christ would have nothing to say about him? How can we admit that daily con-

tacts with him in prayer and in the Holy Mass would leave us without a message? How can we pretend that years of spiritual reading and of religious studies done in accordance with the *Rule of Life* would have borne no fruit?

We know that in the later years of schooling the faith of our students is often at stake; yet, we would be incapable of helping and guiding them? How can we, as apostles, not feel challenged by such inadequacy? Is it conceivable that at the very time when youth feel the greatest need for the witness of men who have integrated their faith and their knowledge and who are equipped to give an account of their option for Jesus Christ, we would abandon them?

There are silences which could reveal emptiness. There are abdications which could be culpable, even grievously so.

What makes them even less excusable is that what is involved is less a matter of knowledge than of witnessing. The more advanced students concede the impossibility of expressing in perfectly lucid language the mystery of God; like every other person, Jesus Christ (or the Father, or the Holy Spirit) are more readily understood by the heart than by the mind. It is less a matter of understanding than of loving Him; less a question of explaining Him than of making Him loved. The same Holy Spirit who will make us savour Him will make us find the words to help others savour Him. What our older students can't understand is our inability to explain our commitment to Christ when we are so competent to explain the academic disciplines we have mastered. After years of daily contacts with his word and with his person, how can

we have failed to become "specialists concerning Christ"!

Brothers, "Let us preserve the delightful and comforting joy of evangelising, even when it is in tears that we must sow. May it mean for us — as it did for John the Baptist, for Peter and Paul, for the other Apostles and for a multitude of splendid evangelizers all through the Church's history — an interior enthusiasm that nobody and nothing can quench. May it be the great joy of our consecrated lives. And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes in hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world."³²

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Christian education is certainly not an easy task at the present. Was it ever easy? There are so many influences militating against it today! Isn't this an added reason for being more zealous? The aim has not changed. It remains the same as ever, to transform the men of this world into sons of God, to open each one to life with the Father to whom he has been called, to the Father who opens his arms to welcome

³² Evangelii nuntiandi 80.

and embrace him. Many young people have a distorted image of God. May our lives and our teaching reveal the true picture of his infinite tenderness!

Some contend that the school no longer has a *raison d'être*, that it belongs to a bygone era, that it is striving to perpetuate itself because it is a prisoner of reactionary forces, a remnant of the past with no bearing on the future.

Others think that an officially neutral school, one respectful of values and complemented by Christian education in the home and in the parish, would provide all the assurance that Christians can legitimately demand.

Rather than listen to the detractors of the school in general and of the Catholic school in particular, shouldn't we listen to the Pope and to the bishops? It is striking how often the former insists on the necessity of apostolic commitment for every Christian and especially, for every religious. Furthermore, the school is almost always in the forefront of the commitments he mentions. He does not think of it as dated, but as a timely, privileged means never before so urgently needed.

Let us listen to that voice. It is well suited to confirm us in the vocation we have received from the Lord!

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Religious educators, that is what we are as Brothers of Christian Instruction. We could have been elsewhere! In one of the prestigious orders which, across

the centuries, have accumulated merit and glory and, next to their monasteries, opened schools and universities which produced generations of famous scholars acclaimed by men. Orders which sprang from famed founders whose human and supernatural virtues have been acclaimed by men and officially recognized by the Church.

The Lord, in his wisdom and Providence decided otherwise. He knows what we are best suited for. He could call us only to what was best for us, for our fulfillment, and the apostolic impact of our lives. Let us accept his loving plan for us with the certitude that therein lies our ultimate success.

Our Congregation lays no claim to celebrity. It is a modest plant whose discreet, special and subtle fragrance is not heady. We are not destined to national or international acclaim. We do not shine in prominent positions. Rather, we are more likely to be found working at the foundations, away from the limelight. Why should we regret that? Why should we resent lack of recognition? To say the least, Father de la Mennais did not seek honours. Why should we be any different?

He always preferred for his Brothers the stamp of humility. He wanted them in the background, in obscurity, even. We are not featured at the front page of great newspapers or at other locations of high visibility. We are rarely, too rarely perhaps, seen at universities. We do not create headlines with our discoveries — or with our eccentricities. Rarely, too rarely, in fact, do we publish. Perhaps it is high time for us to return to one of our early traditions, for instance, in pedagogical writings.

We have in civil society and in the Church a specific role. In the eyes of some, indeed, of many, it is of little account. Our work is not highly rated on the stock exchange, not even the Church's, and our shares seem to be losing value. Catholic action, pastoral, catechetical and, the very latest issue, charismatic action — those are the stocks we should buy! One does not even stop to think that nothing is more pastoral than dealing with young people and leading them to Jesus Christ, nothing is more catechetical than teaching the mysteries of God and of the Church in a language they can understand, nothing is more charismatic than listening to our students and loving them as Jesus did and being the contagious presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst. There is no greater Catholic action than helping them to see, judge and act rightly in their own school setting. This having been said, let me add that I fervently hope that Brothers will become more involved than ever in pastoral and catechetical activities, in Catholic action and in that most welcome latecomer, the charismatic movement, which Paul VI called a great "opportunity for the Church and for the world", and which is therefore a special challenge for us Brothers of Christian Instruction.

Besides, of what account are human judgments? That our standing be high or low, what does it matter? Whom did Christ choose to be his Apostles? Peter and John are "uneducated, uncultured"³³, but they astound the sanhedrin with their wisdom. "Take

³³ Ac 4:13.

yourselves for instance, brothers, at the time when you were called: how many of you were wise in the ordinary sense of the word, how many of you were influential people, or came from noble families? No, it was to shame the wise that God chose what is foolish by human reckoning, and to shame what is strong that he chose the weak by human reckoning; those whom the world thinks common and contemptible are the ones that God has chosen — those who are nothing at all to show up those who are everything"³⁴.

What matters is the look that Jesus directed towards us, a look that creates and recreates us, one that enlightens us and fills us with confidence and daring. Our hope is his hope, our strength is his strength, our words, his words. He transforms our poverty into riches. Praised be his name!

This should not prevent us from being proud of our founders, from recalling the glorious days of our Congregation as we reread the heroic deeds of our missionaries and of those who suffered persecution in 1903, and from venerating the truly learned and holy men of bygone days.

Even less should it keep us from loving our religious family today, a family which is doing its best to meet the needs of youth, to respond to the appeals of the Church, both in emergent and industrialized nations; a family where everyone is accepted, understood and loved, where a climate of trust, cordiality and frank openness prevails in the relations between the Brothers and their Superiors, and a spirit of sharing,

³⁴ 1 Co 1:26-29.

joy and love permeates interaction among Brothers of all ages and functions.

We inherited this family spirit from our Founders. Father de la Mennais had a deep affection for his Brothers. It appeared in the great sensitivity with which he wrote to the Brothers, in simple gestures of friendship and encouragement: a word, a tap on the shoulder, a mischievous stroke with his cane, a warm welcome to his office or to his room, frequent visits to the schools which never failed to spread joy and boost morale.

All the Brothers knew and felt that they were deeply loved, and when they had done wrong, when they had violated the Rule, they almost wanted a reprimand because they knew that it came from the heart.

We have kept something of the simplicity of our origins, an unequivocal evangelical sign which makes for happy communities.

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Surely, our communities are not perfect! How could they, composed as they are of men like us? What kaleidoscopes of infirmities! What pools of Bethsaida where the chronically ill wait for years, hoping that the waters of charity will be stirred, giving them a chance to be cured. Here we find the lepers and the paralytics, the blind, the deaf, the mute, the halt and the lame. Who is without infirmity? Who is without fault? No wonder then, that religious life is a school of holiness. But, as we well know, schools

are not intended for the perfect, but for those who would be more perfect toward the end of their course than they were at the beginning.

Isn't this what happens? How many there are who, through personal effort, fraternal charity and the grace of God gradually become virtuous in an open, amiable way, one that is neither grumpy nor meddlesome. Characters mastered over the years, in which passions subside and impatience gives way to serenity and compassion. Wonderful religious physiognomies of men competent in their discipline, dedicated to their charges to the very end, sources of joy for those around them. Relentlessly devoted to God and to men, they have achieved that rare success, the integration of their life in peace.

Does all this mean that we are blind to our deficiencies? Haven't we our mediocrities, our rigidities, our servitudes to habit and routine? Don't we often fail to distinguish between tradition and inertia? Don't some lamented departures raise important questions? Alas, yes! But the clouds must not hide the sun. How long shall we point to failures or partial achievements as excuses for procrastination? Why constantly focus our attention on disappointments? Wouldn't it be preferable to strive personally for greater holiness, thus enhancing the Congregation's credibility by our faithfulness and generosity?

Let us recognise our shortcomings: rushed, garbled prayers, communities where Brothers fail to speak to one another, where nothing is done in common, schools that are Christian in name only. Let us humbly bow our heads before the Lord and beg forgiveness. Let us learn to react when threatening signs appear

on the horizon. Joy will not be found in that direction. We should look elsewhere for our ideal.

Rather, let us turn to Jesus. He too had to endure mediocrity around him and experienced the sadness of cowardice and desertion. None the less, he continued on his way, inspiring the Apostles to follow him and they found their strength in him, even in martyrdom. Let us do likewise!

Who will sing of the joy of living with confreres who are proud of the past, happy with the present and confident in the future? Who will extol those happy communities where young and old get along so well, where are relived the tales of the men who made the Congregation what it is today, who left us a legacy of simplicity and holiness which we should receive as a gift from God? These are communities in which it is good to live because everyone does his best to understand the others, tries to correct in all charity, without rancor or exaggeration, strives to be a real brother to his brothers, being kind, understanding and available for service. It is a matter of tact, self-control, humility and a kindred virtue, a sense of humour. One must avoid dominating others, monopolising attention or being burdensome. On the contrary, he should be willing to be overlooked so that others may shine and yet be available in times of need, when there are hearts to console, pains to assuage or help to be given.

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We could find many reasons for being unhappy in today's world. How can one overlook the disfiguring injustices, the denials of freedom (in the very name of freedom!) in so many countries, moral and civic corruption, incomprehensible suffering, widespread unemployment, the new massacre of innocents in hospitals of death, mass starvation, mindless terrorism and endless wars? ...

It is pointless to assume Pollyanna's inane optimism and to pretend that misery is non-existent as if we lived in the best world possible. But we do know in faith that evil will not triumph in the end. We know the One who has definitively overcome it, the risen Christ, "the Way, the Truth and the Life"³⁵ He has called us to follow him and leads us to the Father, the Plenitude of all Good. How then, in spite of all the distress, could our hearts not be filled with joy?

Brothers, do we experience within us the deep, quiet, transparent joy of persons who have made a success of their lives or who are in the process of achieving it? Do we have the joy of one who feels that he is exactly where he wants to be because the Lord wants him to be there, because he is doing the Lord's will, eyes fixed on the Lord, like the servant whose eyes are fixed on the hands of his master?³⁶

On the contrary, is there, deep in our hearts, the bitter sadness of one who has failed his life, the shattering disappointment of having missed the essential,

³⁵ Jn 14:6.

³⁶ Ps 123:2.

the impassioned encounter with the loving Christ? Instead of wasting away in lamentation, "If I could start over, I should not relive this life", we should turn to him without delay because in him everything can be forgiven and, in a moment he can transform a repentant thief into a saint³⁷ for nothing is impossible with God³⁸.

It would be good to take a look around, to see the joy expressed on the face of so many older Brothers whom the Lord has blessed during long years of faithful service. That same joy is written on the face of Brothers matured in and by responsibilities, completely happy with their lives spent in the service of the Church; it shows too on the countenance of young Brothers who have allowed Christ to captivate them, and in the hearts of novices and postulants who await with a holy impatience the day of their first profession, anticipating the joy they will experience if they join the Congregation without looking back. Any superior who visits communities can boldly affirm it, where Christ reigns, there is joy.

As religious we have sought God relentlessly and we have done our best to love him.

As educators, we have given the best of ourselves to our students to help them become sons of God.

As Brothers of Christian Instruction, we have lived in a Congregation with an inspiring past and with a generous involvement today in several countries in a mission of evangelisation recognised by the Church.

³⁷ Lk 23:39-43.

³⁸ Lk 1:37.

With the psalmist we can sing: "The measuring line marks out delightful places for me, for me the heritage is superb indeed"³⁹. Like so many Brothers before us, we shall be able to say, like Saint Theresa of Lisieux on her deathbed: "I have no regret for having given myself up to love".

That will not make the headlines, nor will it ever be inscribed at the base of important monuments, but it will be engraved, in the very heart of God and there, our name will never be erased⁴⁰.

No other happiness is of any value!

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I complete these pages at Santo Domingo de la Calzada, Spain, where the multitudes are fervently welcoming the Pope as the ambassador of Christ, come to renew their faith and revive their hope. On several occasions, the Holy Father has met with religious men and women: at Avila, the day after his arrival, at Loyola, where I had the joy and grace to go in the company of Brother Provincial, and in Madrid, on the eve of his return to Rome. He gave several homilies and addresses in which he stressed the demands of their calling and provided orientations for their reflection and their action. They are extraordinarily rich in content; we should spend some time pondering them.

During this holy season of Christmas and the Epiphany, before the crib, where "a Saviour has been

³⁹ Ps 16:6.

⁴⁰ Rv 3:5.

born to us, who is Christ the Lord"⁴¹, let us hear these calls to holiness. Like the shepherds and the magi, let us allow the joy of salvation to invade us and let us, like them, become messengers of the Good News.

Brother Bernard Gaudeul
Superior General

Santo Domingo de la Calzada
9 November, 1982

⁴¹ Lk 2:11.

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INSTITUTE
OF THE BROTHERS OF CHRISTIAN
INSTRUCTION

CIRCULAR LETTER

of

Reverend Brother Bernard Gaudeul
Superior General

THE JOY OF BEING A BROTHER

November 1982