

BEING BROTHER, A GOSPEL CHALLENGE FOR MISSION

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General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools

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1 I am very happy to be with you on the occasion of your General Chapter and to speak about the topic of fraternity, which is something essential for our Church and our world. As a Brother of the Order of Preachers, I am addressing you Brothers of the Christian Schools, and it is my intention to spend the time I have with you this morning at the «school of Christian fraternity» and/or «the Christian school of fraternity».

2 After some words of a rather philosophical nature (in paragraphs 1 and 2), I shall refer to the New Testament (in paragraph 3), and after that I shall make some theological reflections about elements which can develop fraternity and give it structure (paragraph 4). Finally, I shall try to show the extent to which fraternity is essential for the mission of the Church as the sacrament of the Kingdom sent for the salvation of the world. Fraternity is in effect the principal characteristic of the Church's mission and the only possible policy for society (paragraph 5).

1. The hard test of «living in common»

3 A few years ago, a group of young Christians invited me to one of their meetings to discuss the question of solitude with them. The title they gave me for my half hour presentation was: «Does solitude stick to us and get under our skin?» Naturally I replied «Yes it does stick to us throughout our entire existence, but we need to distinguish it from isolation». To exist and to be oneself means being unique, separate and distinct from others. Being and 'being alone' are one and the same thing! Solitude is a given, an experience, an awareness, and it is ontological. Isolation on the other hand is the result of circumstances, the outcome of events, situations and decisions. **But while we exist as single individuals, we are born from other people, we live among others, with others and thanks to others. And we also give life to others with others.** Human existence takes place in the real world of experiences which vary according to the individual, in the experience of paternity or maternity or filiation, in the experience of being sons or daughters and then of being parents, in the experience of being brothers and sisters. We are therefore at the same time both separate and connected. The idea of solitude and the experience of being are 'related parties'.

4 In order to live and to impart life, to think, to love, to give, we must be both alone and with others as we **join the 'common' with the 'personal', and that is always a difficult test.** Education should always be concerned with **solitude** and **communion**, both of which must be within the capacity of everyone to be assumed as far as possible and lived out with all the demands and difficulties involved. In that way, solitude should be happy and fruitful. Fraternity is both a gift and a task. It is an apprenticeship 'on trial' as an option for the common which involves taking part, sharing, siding with others, being a participant.

5 The shared aspect of life is a given reality that puts us to the test. It brings joys, happiness and pleasure, but it can also bring us suffering because of our own personal limitations or those of others. It brings its share of difficulties, and requires us to adopt attitudes and behaviour that we may not always like. For that reason, Père H.-D. Lacordaire, who restored the Order of Preachers in France, described fraternal life in community as «the most gentle and the most painful of burdens».

6 The common life is something that has to be brought about. It needs to be made to exist in the light of day. It is to be distinguished from the 'collective', in which there is the permanent danger that the *they* will replace the *us*. In the words of Gilles Hanus, «The 'us' gets swallowed up in the 'they', because the 'I' no longer counts as an individual». [See *L'épreuve du collectif*, Paris, Verdier, 2016]

7 The 'I' and the 'we' do not fit in well with the collective. In a group which is a community, there is always place for a real 'we', although it may not be perfect, since **it remains a project to be fulfilled.**

2. Fraternity and community

8 In our societies, the word 'community' has become a commonplace and can even become a pitfall. In France for example, we talk of the muslim community, the Asian community, the homosexual community etc. One can also detect the development of a what may be called '**community-ism**', which consists in stressing the specific ethnic, religious, cultural and social features of a community that exists at the heart of a society as a whole. Such communities can produce a certain crisis in the community of a nation, a school or an ecclesial group.

9 In connection with religions, people tend to talk readily of the sectarian aberrations to which some communities may fall prey. **Close resemblance is the basis of every community, sometimes exclusively so.** There is the same origin, the same identity, the same religion, the same convictions. But studies have often pointed out the difference between a sect and a Church. We say our Church is One, but that richness is enriched and made more healthy by the other attributes affirmed in the *Credo*. Its holiness is beneficial for the members and for those around it, especially other communities. Its catholicity accepts all the diversities of race, culture, language and customs. Its apostolicity leads to new adherences and communions which respect the liberty of the others. These 'qualities' of the Church can be an inspiration for fraternity.

10 What makes community is not resemblance or complicity or common interests or even a feeling of well-being. What makes community is **the need we have for others who are different** in terms of sensitivities, convictions, thinking and aims, so that we can work in a common undertaking which is important to us. Being Brother means we recognise that the other is different, yet we still feel there is a certain likeness and closeness between us.

11 In community, **the development of fraternity begins with respect** for one another and continues through a recognition of the need we have for others and **the desire to become members** in complementarity and interdependence through being together, living, thinking, working and celebrating together.

12 Consequently, the development of fraternity depends more on the **circulation of the spoken word** than on a shared good or a shared activity, because those things can only acquire meaning through speaking and listening to each other in joint reflection and dialogue.

3. Being Brother/Sister. A Gospel Call

13 By way of introduction to this section, I want to say how glad I am to note that the Gospel speaks of the **brothers and of sisters of Jesus** (e.g. Mk 6,1-6). It pleases me to know that he did not grow up in a small family unit comprising father, mother and an only child. We know he had at least four brothers (whose names are given to us) and at least two sisters (since they are referred to in the plural). Whether they were real brothers and sisters or just cousins is not important in this context. The point is that **Jesus did not grow up alone**. Yet paradoxically Jesus says hardly anything about his mother or his father or his family. On the contrary, if he had done so it would have been awkward for us to think of a family clan which could claim to have 'produced' the Messiah! His reserve concerning his family lineage and heritage shifts the emphasis to the line of his disciples, men and women, including us, who are his brothers and sisters.

14 The New Testament presents us with many invitations to live as brothers: e.g. Romans 12,10; 12,16; 15,7; 15, 14; 1 Colossians 11,33; Galatians 5,13; 6,2; 6,9-10; 1st Thessalonians 5,11; Ephesians 4,2; 4, 32; 5,21; James 5,16; 1st Peter 5,5; 1st John 1, 7. (These are the references given in the document *Fraternal Life in Community* published in 1994 by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.) Take for example «Love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honour.» (Rom 12,10) «Through love, become servants to one another.» (Ga 5,13). These promptings have their roots in the gospel revelation of God as Father and as Son, «the firstborn of a multitude of brothers». (Rom 8,29) Jesus did not emphasise his natural family, but he did insist on his new and real family. «Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you. [...] Who is my mother and who are my brothers? And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.» (Matt 12, 46-50 The disciple is invited, in line with what was demanded of Abraham, to leave everything and follow Jesus. (cf. Mt 19,27-30). **While respecting and being thankful for those natural human roots in family and society** which have made us the people we are through our personal histories, we are called to create and embed ourselves in **the new relationships of fraternity characteristic of the Kingdom to come**. Our first roots are important, but they must not get in the way of those new roots which can be described as eschatological and which find a place for a multitude of brothers.

15 Jesus made known to us the true face of God by revealing to us the intimate relationship which unites the Son with the Father and the Father with the Son. He has allowed us to enter into this mystery by being **coheirs with Christ** sharing the right to call God Father as heirs of His Kingdom, His Will, His daily bread, His Pardon and His Salvation. As a result, we are **jointly responsible for the extension of that Kingdom**.

16 We can only do this through the mystery of the eucharist. It brings about our incorporation into Christ and the Church, and it commissions us to **become one body with the men and women who are our brothers and sisters**, so that salvation may reach the ends of the earth, through Him with Him and in Him but also through and with ourselves. We must therefore make fraternity our own, live it as Church, give witness to it and make it a reality for all men and women individually, especially the deprived and powerless. (cf. Matt 25, 31-46)

17 The brotherly gift *par excellence* is peace. After the resurrection, the first words of Jesus to his disciples, locked in behind closed doors through fear, were «Peace be to you!» (Jn 20,19 and 26). And it was on the same day that, for the first time, he called them «my brothers». (Jn 20, 17). Peace is also the first word that the disciples were to say to those who received them when they were sent out two by two. «Peace be to this house!» (Lk 10,5) In the eucharistic liturgy, the word 'peace' occurs seven times between the brotherly prayer of the Our Father and the communion of the brothers in the body and blood of Christ which makes them one body. For this peace to arrive and be fulfilled, brotherly love must be present on its three indispensable levels: **the happiness** of being in a paternal/filial/fraternal relationship; **friendship** in which the joys and difficulties of the work are shared as well as its fruits; **agape** the capacity to give one's life for those one loves.

18 Baptised Christians in general and religious in particular, are urged to **adopt a fraternal way of life which acts as a sign**. That involves learning to be Brother, in a relationship which is both intimate and universal. In line with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10,25-37), it is a matter of being able to move from the imperfect question of «Who is my neighbour?» to the more correct question «Which of the three showed himself to be the neighbour of the man who had fallen into the hands of thieves?» In other words we go from the question « Who is my brother?» to that of «**For whom have I been a brother?**»

4. Fraternity developed and structured as 'living'

19 I believe that for a Christian it would be interesting to think about fraternity in terms of its source, namely the mystery of the Trinity. The three persons of the Trinity can inspire certain aspects of fraternity, of community life, lived ecclesially and socially. They also symbolise three aspect in the unfolding of fraternity. **The person of the Father** reminds us that every human community (ecclesial or religious) and every fraternal relationship is a gift made to us, which goes before us and makes demands on us. Consequently, every act of living should be experienced as a gift to be welcomed in faith, but also in trust when it comes to human communities. **The person of the Son** reminds us that every relationship, every living together, every community, is a work in which each individual must participate, and where conversely each one must give of him or herself in response to that same gift. Every human community, every act of living together is also a trial and a testing ground. It is in these relationships of living that we are most tested. That is where we are exposed to judgment. That is where we meet with difficulties and conflicts, and where we feel the need for forgiveness. **The person of the Spirit** reminds us that every act of living together is fruitful, and that it will produce true

unity, while recognising individuals, if it really binds us and brings us together while also separating and dispersing us by commissioning us.

20 When the living together is done with the right vitality, it does not come alone, but brings a **sense of meaning to existence**. How can we best illustrate the link between the two? Perhaps by reflecting on the word **covenant**, since it is by making a covenant with humanity that God makes it possible for them to be in communion and community. When the covenant is for real, the people involved agree to join together, to hold things in common, to work in common, and their living together gives each individual an increased sense of meaning to existence. Every covenant is the result of a call, and in a way the call is the point of departure and origin of the covenant. In biblical tradition, we are called to enter into a covenant alliance and live. When God makes a covenant, He also makes a **promise** of a goal and a future, not just in terms of property and lands but above all as a call to acquire the capacity to live and to be in communion with Him and among ourselves, the call of the Kingdom. In making an alliance with humanity, God also provides **the way and a law**. The law is the way, and it is also the light for the way.

21 Consequently, living together always gives people a meaning to their existence and that meaning is essential for **the structuring of the individuals themselves and for the structuring of communities**. However, for meaning to be truly imparted, the living together needs to be more than just a wishy-washy 'being there' in a juxtaposition of individuals, as it is from time to time. Rather, it must be a real joint undertaking, a **companionship**, a course pursued and hence involving movement.

22 I really want to stress the idea of **paying honour** to each other, which is implied in every desire to live together, every fraternal relationship, every alliance. Honouring somebody means first of all recognising their existence, that they are there and their presence is important. Honouring somebody also means recognising what we owe to them, what they have given to us, what they bring to us. But on an even deeper level, honouring somebody means recognising the mystery which inhabits their lives as individuals. We ought to love in others not just what we know of them, but also what we do not yet know, what is still to come, what will appear later, what they are called to be, what they are capable of doing. Honouring somebody other, implies at the same time an approach to the other, an interest in knowing and recognising them but also a certain distance in order to show them respect and preserve their sacredness.

23 Every act of living together is a gift, but it is also **a task** entrusted to us, and to which we must apply ourselves. Living together only exists if the people concerned apply themselves to the task. However, as you well know, as soon as we set ourselves to work we meet with disappointment or disappointments. In general, it is usually the others who disappoint us, but it is sometimes true that we disappoint ourselves. When faced with disappointment in our living together, it is important to hold on and to stay with it, keeping in mind the example of Jesus the Son. Our 'Passover' lies in undergoing the test by continuing to work with the others and to participate in spite of it all. But there will be no Passover unless we decide to stop and

take a look at ourselves. And even if we do not so decide, our living together will oblige us to do so in one way or another, because living with others always makes us reflect on ourselves and on our choices. Living together puts us in our place, shows us our qualities and limitations. So, paradoxically, living together brings each of us back to our solitude, our identity and our unique character.

24 Now let us look at some of the conditions for living together properly.

- **First condition: share things in a real way** while respecting differences. In other words, we must have a real friendship for those with whom we live and work. Sharing means caring for others and really sharing responsibilities and tasks.

- **Second condition: be true and faithful.** We find the four words that should characterise living together in Psalm 84 (85): «*Love and truth will meet, justice and peace will kiss each other*». Love and peace are the positive poles; justice and truth, are the critical poles where the difficulties are found and Passover takes place.

- **Third condition: the importance of facing conflicts and of forgiving.**

25 Every community (a family for example) is a place **which brings together and actually unites human beings who love one another, but it should also support each individual in his or her activities, especially the vocation to which they are called.** Living together does not mean being imprisoned in a covenant relationship, rather it means helping each individual to develop progressively in the entirety of the social, professional and friendly relations which they have now or will have in the future. This is something very important for education. The relationships between parents and children or brothers and sisters are important, but they will not survive if they prevent individuals from going out to other alliances and relationships. Human equilibrium is fragile, and is more like a permanent lack of equilibrium, a lack of balance in the running of the engine. Confidence is the point of departure for the process of maturation, which takes place through living together with others. In order to mature as human beings we need to be filled with the confidence which will enable us to set out on the road.

26 For me, the living together to which we are called means **the Kingdom.** The Church is a sign of the Kingdom and religious communities are also signs of the Kingdom. Every human community in which there is a fraternal relationships of quality is a sign of the Kingdom, because the Kingdom consists precisely in the relationship between God and others. The Kingdom has four gospel characteristics.

- It is **given**, and the brothers and sisters we are to love and live in harmony with are given.
- It is marked by **generosity and abundance** in goods, in the gift of self and in salvation.
- It is also characterised by **fraternal friendship** with Jesus, among the disciples and with everyone.
- Finally, it is **something that requires attention and understanding** so as to care for the sprouting seed in order to ensure a future for what is still fragile and needs to grow.

5. Why fraternity? Is it the only policy possible?

27 Why have fraternity? The French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin answers that question by saying it is a way of «**resisting the cruelty of the world**», and I shall summarise his book in this paragraph. [Edgar Morin, *La fraternité, pourquoi? Résister à la cruauté du monde*, Arles (France), Editions Actes Sud, 2019] He points to the following elements which I am happy to highlight. Fraternity cannot come about through an order from above. It cannot be imposed on us, but must come from each one of us since its source lies within us. Beginning with birth, two kinds of guiding programmes start to operate in us as humans. There is the egocentric programme of the 'me' and the 'I', and there is the relational programme of the 'you' and the 'us'. The wellsprings which take us out to others, either collectively as 'we' or individually as 'you', are the sources of fraternity. However, it is possible for fraternity to become closed in on itself and exclude the outsider. The idea of father/motherland, for example, can produce an ambiguous fraternity, which may be open to a beneficial fraternity with those outside the borders, or it may close itself in by taking various forms of nationalist pride. The existential need for mutual help can lead some to use violence to enslave others, or it may lead to useful forms of solidarity which promote the dignity of all. Concord and discord co-exist in all human communities. «Consequently, fraternity must be continually regenerated, since it is continually threatened by rivalist tendencies.» (Morin p.30)

28 May I suggest that, in the unlikely event that you have some time and opportunity for reflection, you might follow Edgar Morin and carry out an **inventory of the examples of fraternity** that you have experienced during your life, both the long lasting ones and the transitory ones. (Morin pp.31-35) In today's world, individualism has become more developed and it makes us less aware personally of the need for solidarity. Our individual cultures are becoming more closed in at a time when we have the greatest need for human fraternity. In such conditions, fraternity struggles to develop to any extent, but people today still dream of an **'oasis' of fraternity** (Morin p.45). Is this the hint or outline of a new world? How can we develop a fraternity which is at the same time local, national and international?

29 In every human community, there is an indissoluble link between the Eros which seeks to unite, the Polemos which seeks to separate and the Thanatos which seeks to destroy. And we must make a real **option for fraternity as a duty**, without entertaining the illusion that «the fraternity acquired is definitive». We need to understand that fraternity should be a means of resisting the cruelty of the world, and at the same time it should be a goal. **The goal cannot be the end point; it must be the path forward, our path, the path of the human adventure.** (Morin pp.58-59)

30 In the Second Vatican Council, the Church was defined as a sacrament «a kind of **sacrament, a sign and the means of an intimate union between God and every human being.**» (*Lumen gentium* n1; cf. also n48, *Gaudium et spes* n45 and *Ad gentes* n1) That means that the Church does not exist for itself. It exists for the world and for the life of human kind: «God wants all to be saved», «so that they may have life and have it in abundance». However for our brothers and sisters to receive this salvation, it is not necessary that they be

incorporated into the Church. Because «The Church is not a goal in itself, since it is directed towards the Kingdom of God, as its seed, sign and instrument.» (John Paul II *Redemptoris missio* n18), and it must not be mistaken for the Kingdom. Christ is distinct, and the Kingdom is distinct, while the Church is indissolubly linked to both.

31 The Church respects all human communities, including other faith communities and religions. It respects and supports its own members when they try to put fraternity into practice among themselves and with those around them and to be open to other communities. Giving witness to the Christian faith and to Christ cannot begin straight away with preaching and catechesis. **It needs to proceed by way of humility and fraternity.** It comes down to **becoming Brother** in the **sharing of life**, in the **hospitality** given to others and received from others, and in **dialogue** which has two principal axes: the vertical axis of the search for truth, for meaning and for God, and the horizontal axis of moving forward together in the building of a world that is less cruel. Christians have faith in a Father God who has become Brother and who desires fraternal friendship between Himself and us humans, and this faith invites them to become Brother and really be Brother in order to contribute to Christ's work of salvation for all.