
The Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice: A Report

General Council of the Brothers of the Christian Schools¹

Introduction

In his letter of 15 May 1979, Brother Superior General gave a preliminary report, together with some comments, on the responses received from the Districts and Delegations in reply to proposition #14 of the General Chapter of 1976.²

Each District will submit, before December 1978, a report to the General Council in which it will show how it has put into practice (and in the immediate future will do so) the principles of the *Declaration* and the orientations of the present General Chapter concerning the educational service of the poor and action on behalf of justice. Annual review and updating by the District itself is also called for.³

The present dossier has been prepared in fulfillment of this commitment. If the document is appearing somewhat later than previously announced – early 1980 – it is simply because comments from various sources and different parts of the Institute indicate that the preceding dossiers (Consecration – Mission – The Young Churches – Formation – Community Life) had not as yet been adequately studied and that it would be preferable to allow a further lapse of time before undertaking the publication of a new document.

Coincidentally, circumstances are such that the dossier is now appearing at the start of the Tercentenary.⁴ Its appearance at this time is more than a symbolic one; rather, it provides us with an opportunity to highlight this particular year by a more active study and commitment on our part, by making us re-live the call of him whom God raised up “to give a Christian education to the poor”

Ten Districts or Delegations did not submit their reports as called for by proposition #14. So we can see for ourselves the extent of the response, which though not unanimous, is nevertheless considerable

The reports give clear evidence that educational service of the poor is a matter of *general concern* throughout the Institute. The programs are varied, the projects numerous, and explicit reference to the Holy Founder is constant

The *promotion of justice* is seldom mentioned in the reports, at least in an explicit manner. And from the observations made and the programs described, it is obvious that little connection is made between the service of the poor and the *promotion of justice*. This failure to mention the *promotion of justice* in an explicit manner, and the fact that no analysis has been made of its relationship to service of the poor seems to indicate that the various dimensions of this perspective have not yet been fully grasped. Far from considering the *promotion of justice* as a

sort of separate – and extraneous – issue, we should view action on behalf of justice as essential to the broader view of service to the poor that is desired by the contemporary Church, since it gives this service a firmer social dimension

The Promotion of Justice

Proposition #14 requested from the Districts a report not only on the educational service of the poor, but also one dealing explicitly *with efforts made to promote justice*.⁵ Again, in his letter of 15 May 1979, the Brother Superior General, on the basis of a first look at these replies, could write:

In this section of the letter wherein I treat of the reports received, I would also like to comment briefly on a second point concerning the *promotion of justice*. I say briefly, not because this is less important or less timely to deal with, but simply because the answers received are clearly of less consequence. One District declares that our contribution to this social question is worth nothing, or very little! The overall impression given is one of awkwardness in the face of the problem – we are just not ready to confront the issue. Therefore, we feel a certain reluctance to talk about it in a natural way; we experience a certain fear of drawing from such a confrontation consequences requiring too much commitment.⁶

Of the 63 reports which serve as a basis of this study, 33 say nothing about the *promotion of justice*, while at the same time they have much to say about the first topic, the *educational service of the poor*. Thirty say something, at times, very brief, about this subject

A small number of reports stress the fact that the movement in favor of justice – be it social, national, or international – has become very extensive, without our involvement! It would be an error, they say, and one we have made, to imagine we are the first to involve ourselves here, or that we are the leaders in this movement. Entire countries have committed themselves to this movement. For her part, the Church has joined in this movement, for example, following the Synod of Bishops in 1971, or by the extensive assistance she has given those engaged in the struggle for justice. It is not necessary, then, for us to innovate, but to catch up with what has been going on. How can an educator ignore what is vital for a very large number of his contemporaries? How can he be content to view this in a speculative manner without taking an active part in this movement?

Several Districts mention creation of a committee to promote justice. One objective, among others, of this committee is to include in the basic formation programs of the Brothers some sensitization regarding social justice.

One report insists on the role of Brother Superior General and his Council in this sensitization. It calls upon them to stress the directives of this sort found in the propositions voted by the last two General Chapters.⁷

Reflections Suggested by the Content of the Reports

The content of the reports warrants some reflections. In effect, the affirmation we made at the beginning of this study evokes some questions: the reports, after having listed numerous achievements in the area of the *educational service of the poor*, become incomplete or even silent regarding the *promotion of justice*. *Does not this silence and this incompleteness suggest a number of things?*

Some Objective Difficulties

The reports coming from countries with authoritarian regimes bring out the difficulty of establishing any educational program for justice differing from that taught by the official ideology of the country. At times even, simply mentioning this subject leads to one being accused of Marxism or of capitalist imperialism, depending on the dominant political doctrine of the country concerned.

When visiting these countries, the General Council could see the frequency and the seriousness of this difficulty. In addition, this explains the discretion of certain reports. Brothers living in areas enjoying freedom of expression should avoid peremptory judgments about these delicate situations and understand the difficulties faced by their Brothers.

On the other hand, neither is resignation in the face of the existing situation a possibility. Being a prophet has never been a comfortable task, and the end of Christian education is not to reproduce educational, civic, or social models imposed by force. The directive we have given in all these instances is to reflect and to act in close union with the local Church. If the reflection of this latter is insufficient, let us turn to that of the universal Church, working thus to awaken the social consciences of those around us.

Like the Kingdom of God, of which it is one of the clearest indications, justice is sought for and realized with scanty means, those that are at the disposal of the educator, in daily patience, but in union with all who hunger and thirst for this justice.

An Unknown Land?

In order to explain this relatively brief mention of the *promotion of justice* in the reports, at first glance it is tempting to say that this is an unknown land for the Brothers, one where only a few explorers have gone. “We are just not ready to confront the issue. Therefore, we feel a certain reluctance to talk about it in a natural way,”⁸ while the *service of the poor* is more familiar to us, rooted in our thinking by a tradition coming from the Founder and still very much alive.

However, a slightly more attentive reading of the reports leads us to discern that, quite often, *the reports mingle the two things, service to the poor and the promotion of justice*. In fact, what does it mean to serve the poor, if not to begin by establishing a minimum of justice in their regard through facilitating their access to education, thus helping them develop their skills through the use of a pedagogy adapted to their culture so as to make the Gospel available to them in their

own language? *Service to the poor* and the *promotion of justice* far from being incongruous depend on one another and complete one another.

A Parenthood Affirmed by the Declaration

The General Chapter of 1966-1967 expressed itself clearly regarding this subject in the *Declaration*:

Service of the poor requires that a Brother use the opportunities of his apostolate to oppose all forms of poverty of frustration, to maintain a special concern for the full human development of those who suffer poverty, and to stimulate their desire to improve the milieu in which they live. Sensitivity to the needs of individual persons and a preference for an apostolate to serve the poor can never dispense with efforts to establish a more equitable social order which is aimed at the elimination of poverty.⁹

The spirit of the 39th General Chapter is unambiguous. The obligation to work toward establishing a more just social order, not only is in keeping with *service to the poor*, which is an essential element of our consecrated life, but it proceeds from it:

The orientation by preference of the Institute toward the education of the poor does not exclude the Brothers from involvement with other social classes. They may even be sometimes obliged to this type of work because of special pastoral needs, or because of the demands of the total operation of the District. But when the Brothers are not teaching the poor directly, it is important they nonetheless be identified with concern for the poor and the work of the Institute in their favor. This identification will be assured by the Brothers' efforts to develop a sensitivity to the problems of injustice and peace through doctrinal and social teaching, in order that their students participate effectively in the mission to which the Church calls them in the world today.¹⁰

A Fundamental Change

The difficulties experienced by the Brothers in working toward the *promotion of justice* are undeniable. They indicate how much time is needed for the new orientation in the Church, one supported by a General Chapter and voluntarily accepted in principle by the entire Institute, to become a fact in our actions and in our decisions.

But, on the other hand, we have just seen that, in large measure, there is an intuitive effort toward the *promotion of justice* which is carried out through *service to the poor*. This indicates that the change desired by the General Chapters, as well as by the contemporary Church, is beginning to make itself seen, be it only in an implicit manner.

The lack of information provided by the reports allows us to grasp the importance of the time in which we find ourselves, a time at once rich and uncertain, when a change is beginning to show itself in a visible way, while it is also far from being completed and not certain to take place.

In these conditions, you can understand that the General Council wants to use the opportunity provided by the reports to stress the *urgency of pursuing this change*, decreed by the General Chapters, and to try to do this with a new enthusiasm: *the promotion of justice is an objective that must be accepted in practice by the entire Institute so as better to achieve the service of the poor*. In the field of education, *service to the poor* is an integral part of the *promotion of justice*, but this latter goes beyond that. It is not content simply to help the poor; it seeks to fight against the things which unceasingly cause poverty and injustice, even in the richest nations.

One of the specific roles of the educator in this matter is to awaken – or re-awaken – many of our contemporaries, who, as a result of living in a world full of injustice, have become accustomed to it while not perceiving that individual advancement or national wealth is in great measure achieved to the detriment of the weaker individuals in a given society.

This is why reflection on the *promotion of justice* appears to us as a *central idea* in this dossier. This is so because we must have this far-reaching view in order to direct our apostolic action in keeping with the tradition coming from the Founder and directed to the *service of the poor*.

First Orientations

Before proceeding in the section that follows to a fuller development of sensitization, we would like to present some ideas that will summarize our reflections at this point.

The Road to Follow in Our Changes

To enter more fully into the spirit and the practice of the *promotion of justice*, we would like to reflect a bit on our own experiences. A Brother who gives himself sincerely to the service of the poor through education quickly learns not to content himself with assisting the poor person as an individual to overcome his poverty. Because, tomorrow, when he leaves school, the poor person risks being the victim of the implacable processes which create poverty. It is sufficient to recall the problems facing any young person trying to find a first job or to avoid unemployment. The Brother educator, then, is forced to become part of a bigger effort to combat the causes which incessantly create poverty and injustice. In this he must join with those already working to help the poorer classes to deal collectively with their life situation, to obtain a more equitable sharing of wealth, as well as better to safeguard the rights of the individual and of all people.

The road to follow in our change here is not an ideological one, but rather that of evangelical service, in its most profound and most efficacious way.

A Clear Choice

The struggle for justice must take place in very diverse areas, such as in the economy, politics, and the internal relations of a country, and even in international relations. And evidently, it also takes place in the area of education.

Consequently, it is up to us clearly to choose those means which conform to our vocation. Other means are good. Not only can we not ignore them, but we must coordinate our efforts with those

who pursue the same goal by such different means. But it remains equally true that we cannot do all the good, and that by choosing to become Brothers, we chose explicitly to work for the *promotion of justice* through Christian education.

An Inspirational View

For any educational activity to be vigorous and legitimate, it must be inspired by a great purpose. The *promotion of justice*, in connection with evangelization and making Jesus Christ known, can be the purpose which will animate the Brothers' activity, in school or out of school.

The Brothers are sent to prepare the way of the Lord in much the same manner as Saint John the Baptist. Their consecration constitutes them as messengers to the young to declare the truth that makes men free.¹¹

This goal of liberating individuals, and even society as a whole, is what should motivate us to work for justice and make the young people who come to us instruments in this quest.

A Call for Cooperation

The choice we have made of the *promotion of justice* as the guiding principle of our apostolic activity will lead us to enter more fully into the pastoral work of the Church and into efforts she is making to link together knowledge of Jesus Christ and the development of man. Soon we will have occasion to return to this idea.

At the same time, our activity should lead us to collaborate with others who are devoting themselves to the task of the *promotion of justice*. The necessary distinction among our roles does not prevent us from collaborating with them. Quite the contrary, it allows us to give them specific and valuable support, that distinctive to educators inspired by the Gospel

Conclusion

This long reflection of the General Council on the responses of the Institute to proposition #14 of the 40th General Chapter is a work of analysis, and, at the same time, a meditation of the life of the Institute itself; on its life, such as it was defined and willed by the Founder, and on the actual life of our religious family in what concerns an aspect that without doubt is quite important.

We entrust these reflections to each community and each District, so that, everywhere they will become more meaningful and more effective. It is fortunate that these reflections are being diffused during the Tercentenary, while we are seeking to assure a unity which will draw its values from our approach to the truth. And the real essence of our vocation is presented to us in the examples and the doctrine of our Founder which we have recalled in these pages. At the same time, the truth and the sincerity of our life today are best examined and defined in light of these events and these principles.

Giving first priority to caring for the poor, a concept which comes to us from our Father, is truly what characterizes us. But not only us, it belongs also the Church which received it from Jesus

Christ himself as its mission and as a pressing invitation. Coming as a repeated and clear echo of the voice of the Savior, we have the words of his present Vicar on earth, Pope John Paul II. As proof of this, for example, we have what he said in New York's Yankee Stadium before 80,000 people on 2 November 1979:

The social thought and practice inspired by the Gospel should be characterized by a very definite sensitivity toward those who find themselves in the most painful situation, for the poorest, for those who suffer as a result of the physical, psychic, and moral evils which afflict mankind: those who hunger, those who are fallen into despair. These are the people who are found in profusion in this world.¹²

Sensitivity and action must go together. Regarding the programmatic encyclical of this same Pope, *Redemptor Hominis*, it is said that no one could have written some of its paragraphs – above all #13 to #16 – if a series of sorrowful historical experiences had not preceded the document.

. . . Since this man is the way for the Church . . . the Church of today must be aware in an always new manner of man's "situation" . . .¹³

The man of today seems ever to be under threat from what he produces . . . All too soon, and often in an unforeseeable way, what this manifold activity of man yields is . . . subjected to "alienation," it is simply taken away from the person who produces it . . . the exploitation of the earth, the planet on which we are living, demands a rational and honest planning . . . The development of technology and the development of contemporary civilization . . . demand a proportional development of morals and ethics . . . These are the essential questions that the Church is bound to ask herself, since they are being asked with greater or less explicitness by the thousands of millions of people now living in the world.¹⁴

In face of these considerations of the Supreme Pastor of the Church, who would dare to organize his social and apostolic action as if he ignored these problems?

We who are called to continue the work undertaken by De La Salle know that our service must not neglect what has happened in the course of history. Like all responsible Christians, we must understand correctly what the theologian Juan Alfaro wrote at the time of the Synod of 1971:

There are Christians today who have not perceived yet that the *signs of the times* demand a profound change of mind and attitude. We must, in effect, pass from an *individualistic* Christianity, a stranger to the enormous human problem . . . to a Christianity seriously involved in the liberation of all men, because all – especially the poor and those on the fringes of society – make Christ incarnate for us.¹⁵

Let us reflect, analyze, and pray together. This is the means to become more aware of these human truths and realities. Let us do this so as to overcome the polarizations and tensions that arise when certain things are studied or become a field for our activity. Let us strive to achieve that profound unity – mentioned above – which can only be achieved in response to a profound

need, that of fidelity to our origins, and also, that which comes from the urgent appeals of the human situation in which we are working.

We strongly hope it will be thus, and, in this hope, we once more extend to you our fraternal greetings in De La Salle.

Endnotes

1. This is a portion of *Circular 412: Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice* by Brother Superior and General Council (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1980), pages 5-6, 7, 9-10, 57, 61-68, and 149-151.
2. Cf. *Pastoral Letter of 15 May 1979* (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1979), pages 20-46.
3. Cf. *Circular 403: The Acts of the 40th General Chapter* (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1976), page 78.
4. The tercentenary celebration here referenced (1680-1980) is that of the foundation of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools by John Baptist de La Salle and his first Brother teachers.
5. *Circular 403*, page 78.
6. *Pastoral Letter of 15 May 1979*, page 41.
7. The whole fourth part of *Circular 412* (pages 69 to 104) concerns itself with this question of sensitization: “the role of the Founder in this sensitization” and “the principal elements involved in acquiring a social consciousness.”
8. *Pastoral Letter of 15 May 1979*, page 41.
9. *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1967), #30.3.
10. *Declaration*, #32.1.
11. *The Rule and Constitutions* (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1978), #9a.
12. “Homily of His Holiness John Paul II,” 2 October 1979, #3.
13. *Encyclical Letter: Redemptor Hominis* by Pope John Paul II (Vatican City, 1979), #14.
14. *Encyclical Letter: Redemptor Hominis*, #15.

15. *Cristianismo y Justicia* by Juan Alfaro, SJ (Madrid: PPC-Editorial, 1973), page 42.