

CRISIS IN COMMITMENT: CHRISTIAN BROTHERS TODAY

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In an atmosphere heavy with smoke and fear and hate, a grim president mourned the passing of a Peace Prize winner and appealed to nation: We must commit ourselves to maintaining law and order at this most perilous time, he pleaded. And even as he spoke, firebombs whirled through the air and cities called upon the Army for one division after another to keep the peace.

It is against this background that the Christian Brothers of the United States meet, first locally, then sectionally, then finally through their representatives at the American Regional Chapter, to plot the course of their order in the cities of America.

This great order, numbering two thousand men in this country alone, has a mandate. Its general chapter, in response to crises within and without, and under the legal constraint of Vatican II, met in Rome for six months in 1966 and 1967. Elected members from all over the world cleared away obstacles for the reform and rededication of all the widespread enterprises of the Brothers. The real work, however, is yet to be done.

Throughout the world, each region or nation is now free to examine itself and work toward becoming a more relevant, viable and dynamic force in the renewal of mankind. Each nation and district is free to move ahead with the work of adaptation, that in every sector the Brothers may do that

which is most necessary to create a truly Christian spirit in the world of education.

In this paper, I shall examine the dynamics of the world in which the American Brothers live, and suggest some thoughts which might be useful in plotting the course of the Order over the next few years.

reader, no doubt, is finding this sort of oratory somewhat such fascinating and dull. As the pitch of the lament increases to the margin of endurance, a strange narcotic effect takes place, and our senses become immune to the pain. One becomes used to living with crisis after crisis, an assassination after assassination, and tends to say, "It's all so confusing, I just don't know what to think." And if one stops thinking, one can dwellly be satisfied and peaceful.

But this is not the time for peace. This is not the time for satisfaction. This is a time for courage, and courage means change, and change entails risk, and risks do not guarantee peace. Risks break down peace. And it is this frightening aspect of today that, I fear, may spell doom for our Order.

Now? Because, as members of an order, we are accustomed to living more securely than any other man on earth.

For American Brothers, even the inevitable tribulations of everyday are unreal things. We are exempt from the draft. We are even exempt for serving as chaplains. We are tax-exempt, and the more conservative we are,

Part One: A Nation in Crisis,  
An Order at Peace

If one wants to break into print, one need only howl loudly about the corruption, blight, and misery of America. Political candidates streak to prominence overnight by decrying the sad lot of our nation, both in foreign affairs and in internal operations. This writer agrees with his reader, no doubt, in finding this sort of oratory somehow both fascinating and dull. As the pitch of the lament increases to the margin of endurance, a strange narcotic effect takes place, and one becomes immune to the pain. One becomes used to living with crisis after crisis, assassination after assassination, and tends to say, "It's all so confusing, I just don't know what to think." And if one stops thinking, one can easily be satisfied and peaceful.

But this is not the time for peace. This is not the time for satisfaction. This is a time for renewal, and renewal means change, and change entails risk, and risks do not guarantee peace. Risks break down peace. And it is this frightening aspect of today that, I fear, may spell doom for our Order.

How? Because, as members of an order, we are accustomed to living more securely than any other men on earth.

For American Brothers, even the inevitable tribulations of Everyman are unreal chimera. War? We are exempt from the draft. We are even exempt for serving as chaplains. Taxes? We are tax exempt, and the more conservative we are,

the more conscious we seem of our rights in this regard. Death? We are assured that death, far from ending our effectiveness and cutting short our opportunity to make something significant of our lives, is instead a blessed entry into the only world that really counts, a beginning of true contemplation, true beauty, true accomplishment. This by its very nature tends to lessen the commitment of our lives to worthwhile and necessary temporal goals. Like the learned men ridiculed in the Imitation of Christ, while gazing at the stars, we run a severe risk of falling feet first into an abyss of irrelevance.

This privileged status, this Olympian immunity from the pressing problems of the moment, of the world, and of history, gives us an objectivity few others can afford. Real values accrue to us because of this peaceful way of life. However, its peacefulness can be seductive. As an order, there is a real danger of our being lulled into lingering far from the scene of Christ's perennial warfare with the Powers of Darkness, locked in the adulterous embrace of a most comforting and reassuring peace. Like the worst deserters, we may find ourselves disengaged from the fight for right and freedom and justice, not because we are "agin' fightin'," but because we, God's shocktroops, have been so long in the barracks of our citadel that we have become convinced that the day of Universal Peace is upon us.

For the sake of our own value as men of God, I hope we haven't succumbed to this false sense of peace. Let us pray that the acrid stench of our burning cities is

not completely dissipated when our American chapter meets this summer. Let us hope a few delegates still see red because the smoke has not stopped smarting in their eyes. Let us hope that someone remembers that our Baptismal call to be at the service of our fellow Christians is not abrogated by our entry into religious vows. Let us not maintain structures and legalisms that would prevent us from following the demands of conscience. Let our chief fear be that we may be led into temptations, not by a world which challenges our generosity, but by a way of life which, by coddling us, and separating us from our most wretched of neighbors, leads us into sins of omission and smug neglect. Let us not, to remain "Christian Brothers," separate ourselves from the world which cries out to us, "Help me, for I am thirsty! Clothe me for I am naked! Feed me, for I am your least brother!" Let us not become so enamoured of our "peace" that we neglect the Prince of Peace.

Part Two: Defection: Who's Copping Out,  
The Man or the Order?

It is truly a shocking thing to learn that your best friend has just left the Order. We look upon these defections as tragic, and they are. The years of dedicated work, humble obedience, prayerful purity, careful and loving character formation at the hands of skilled, compassionate directors, all this is rendered instantaneously void and fruitless. And daily these tragedies go on. Rumors fly from city to city telling of Brother or Sister or Father quitting, giving up, running off and getting married. Why? What can the American Chapter do to stop this meaningless waste? How can we foresee and prevent this manpower drain? What can be done?

I have the answer. It is written in each man's heart. We all know what to do. Let me only try to articulate it.

First, we must ask why anyone is a Brother. What is his goal? Finally one asks, "What happened to make the defector change his mind? Was it the goal that became abhorrant, or the means? Then one can understand why one Brother perseveres and the other defects. Understanding these value judgments, one can understand defection and, hopefully, lessen its frequency.

Why is one a Brother? Traditionally, the teaching of the Church is that a person is a religious to 1) sanctify himself and 2) to be more effective in working out the salvation of his neighbor.

These reasons for belonging to an order are, thank God, fully applicable to our Order. One can come to resemble the person of Christ by being a Christian Brother. One can be much more effective in assisting his neighbor by being in the Order. However, due to circumstances, historical developments, social pressures, and human cussedness, the process is not infallible. What if, for instance, the Order itself were to defect from Christ? Were to cease resembling Jesus of Nazareth? All the Apostolic benedictions in the Western world would not be enough to put us back together again, were we as an Order, to apostacize from Christ, for it would then be incumbent upon each Brother to either force the Order to reform, or give up his ties with the Order. It would not do to bind oneself to an apostate order, no matter what vows of stability or obedience one may have. My fear is that a growing number of Brothers are reaching a conviction that they have, indeed, caught their Order in the arms of Madame Mammon. It is with this crushing conviction that they regretfully seek their divorce from a "Scarlet Woman" and, often enough, attach themselves to a much humbler, less alluring, but much more manageable female.

How can this terrible conviction--that one's order is in love with someone other than Christ--arise in one's heart? A defector will tell you. If he's honest, he'll tell you he first of all was not a hundred per cent faithful to Christ, and second, he was not a hundred per cent faithful to his rules and vows. But we are all in that same predicament! What makes him change his mind, or, as some put

it, "realize," that the Order is a "whore"? Evidence.

When you see a superior asking men to violate their consciences in order to build and pay for a monumental school, you wonder. When you meet men who are obtuse to the point of idiocy, men with degrees in theology and secular disciplines, who cannot understand what it is to be hungry or desperate or hopeless, who rejoice when "troublemakers" like Martin Luther King are murdered, cheer when body counts weigh heavily in our favor on the evening news, gain when several battalions trained in overseas combat crush a revolt and with bayonets force men of dark skin to submit to another summer and winter of oppression under unjust and obsolete laws, when "peace in our cities" means ever more repressive legions of paid gunmen patrolling festering slums, perpetuating a tranquillity based on fear and force, then you wonder if these fine brothers, dedicating their efforts to maintain schools supported by White Dollars in White Suburbia are really with Jesus or against him. You wonder if a command which comes from the Order and tells you to teach in an upper middle-class suburban high school really means more to you than your heart which tells you Jesus might be trying to get an education in the ghetto school a mile away, on the other side of Whitey's railroad, under Whitey's expressway, where the black public school teachers work against despair and ignorance day after day.

You wonder if an hour spent kneeling among men who are secure and happy teaching in racist schools, turning out pious bigots, is really that much more sanctifying than

an hour spent in bed making love with a woman who loves all men and helps her neighbor in the voter registration drive. You wonder, and eventually you take the means to find out. And you are willing to bear the disapproval of your comrades and the tears of your sweet old mother and the bewilderment of your students and you leave your racist school. Your choice? Keep your vow, and talk justice, or abandon your vow and practice justice!

Let us all, like our venerable founder, bend every effort to be just men. Honest men. Generous men. May God give us, and our delegates at the Chapter in Illinois this summer, the grace to really reach deep into our souls and summon all our Baptismal courage, all the courage of valiant Christian adults, and reform our lives after the model of Christ. Let us grant, through wise and prudent legislation, that those who must follow their consciences and really do something about re-ordering American life, have the freedom to act on their convictions within the order. For I am convinced that many Brothers feel as I do: that the real world has advanced beyond the age of parochialism, and the parochial school. The real world is not improved by adding to the number of buildings that stand on our private campuses, but by the compassion of those who have much and selflessly give it away; who go forth from their rich living and taste the dizzy insecurity of travelling with Jesus among the halt, the lame, and the leperous.

In abandoning our contradictory obsession with White schools for Those Who Can Pay, while preaching of love for

those who have nothing, we can make ourselves whole again. We can walk like adults in a responsible world. We can act like men of conviction once again, and not like pusillanimous sheep hiding our feelings under Papal rescripts which sanctify our usury and nullify our vow of service to God's lowliest.

If the Institute makes a radical break with its noble and laudable past, for the sake of an equally noble and laudable present and future, I am sure many will suffer. Many will see their life works destroyed. Many will feel as though they have built on sand.

Yet to survive, we must carry on life functions. And these imply growth, and growth is change. We are at a most crucial juncture. Dozens, scores, hundreds and hundreds of vocations are at stake. Thousands of young minds are at stake. Millions of dollars in property and buildings, and years and years of highly specialized, carefully planned training are at our disposal, to invest wherever our hearts lie.

Shall we answer the challenge of awakened conscience, still smarting from the putrid smoke of our burning cities, or shall we remain asleep in the bosom of our beloved harlot, Security? Shall we walk the rebuilt streets of a New America, a yet-to-be-obtained America, with freedom and justice for Black and White, dissenter and doctrinizer, big and small, or shall we, like so many of our Brothers who supported the corrupt, decadent, anachronistic monarchies of an earlier Europe, find ourselves declared "enemies of the people" and condemned by the very poor we are vowed to serve?

Part Three: Which Way, My Brother?

The answers lie in the hands of our delegates at the American chapter. Two paths lie open to them.

Consensus is based on compromise, leading to half-way measures. Consensus doesn't work.

It fails because of the nature of human society.

Especially at a time of violent and radical social change, such as we in America experience day by day, consensus yields only the stalest, sterilest fruit that grows in the void between the Old and the New and the New and the Old. Neither the radical nor the liberal, neither the hawk nor the dove can live on this fruit nor build securely in the void. What is needed instead of a compromise based on compromise is a daring openness to all points of view, leading not to leadership, but to a responsible self-government by the various factions within the Order. The Order must prove itself catholic enough to allow this latitude of life-styles among its members.

Our Brothers are gifted with an authentic vocation. We all agree on that. The Holy Spirit, however, would not agree we be irreparably torn by the divisions between leadership and the faithful in doing the work of God.

### Part Three: Which Way, My Brothers?

To the man elected by history's largest majority, rule by consensus seemed a prudent and politically plausible solution to the question of leadership, but early in the fourth year of his first elected term, he was forced to withdraw from American politics. This trusted consensus created a war without adequate support at home and without victory in the field. Consensus incubated urban problems which a presidential commission on riots warned could spell the end to the American way of life. Consensus is based on compromise, leading to half-way measures. Consensus doesn't work.

It fails because of the nature of human society. Especially at a time of violent and radical social change, such as we in America experience day by day, consensus yields only the tasteless, sterile fruit that grows in the void between the Old-and-cherished and the New-and-long-awaited. Neither the progressive nor the liberal, neither the hawk nor the dove can live on this fruit nor build securely in the void. What is needed instead of a compromise based on consensus is a daring openness to all points of view, leading not to lawlessness, but to a responsible self-government by the various factions within the Order. The Order must prove itself catholic enough to allow this latitude of life-styles among its members.

Our Brothers are gifted with an authentic vocation. We all agree on that. The Holy Spirit, however, would not move us so inexorably toward catholicity and breadth of vision were it not for the good of mankind.

Do our delegates dare doubt this? Have they not heard, have they not believed in the genuineness of Christ's call from the heart of our cities, from the hearts of innumerable Brothers, asking them, for God's sake, to make allowances for each man to follow his Christian-Brother-trained conscience?

To allow this would mean sacrifice. Building programs would doubtless have to stop in many cities. Some schools we own or work in would not be able to maintain themselves were the Brothers in them allowed to choose their own place of employment. Provincials would have to trust their men's charismatic insights when considering personnel management problems. If the Spirit moves men to sign up with the Teacher Corps, Vista, Neighborhood Youth Corps, Job Corps Centers, Extension Volunteers, the Peace Corps, what will become of those fine schools where all our fine White Young Americans expect to have a Brother teach them? Who will be willing to work in these diocesan monuments at the same low salary we Brothers work for? I don't know. On the other hand, I don't know just what necessity prompts us to work in these White schools. I don't know how John La Salle would feel about competing with the Schools for the Masses by erecting centers where White Catholics can seek shelter from the Not-so-nice. I doubt if he would go to the trouble of creating an Order of men in order to staff the Bishop's Schools for the Fortunate when there is such a crying need for someone saintly enough to vow his life to working in deprived surroundings among those whose parents provide little training in the skills necessary for this world or the next. I believe today's

Jack LaSalle would be hard put to impress the Brothers of the White American Suburban Schools with the fact that their existence is narcissistic, their efforts are self-serving, and their continued support of these schools perpetuates the ethos of White Supremacy which has brought America across the threshold of anarchy to a quasi-fascist intolerance of anyone "different." I think today's Father Jack would be attacked by priests as an agitator and a radical, frowned upon by bishops as a dangerous innovator, and, after a brilliant series of achievements, stripped of his priestly powers and placed under interdict by a metropolitan cardinal. Just like the old days! All this would happen all over again. But his new group of followers would glow with pride despite the bruises and epithets, despite the opposition of established schoolmasters like us. For they would know they are under attack because they are where the conflict is. They would not feel like Vatican Guards parading in picturesque costumes, carrying weapons of another age for the pleasure of tourists and curiosity seekers, safe from seige and far from the beachheads of Christ's personal war on misery. Yes, Father La Salle would be a radical, like he was in 1680, appealing to the Pope for approval, and dying under censure from the local hierarchy. But relevant; yes, by gosh, relevant! Full of life, vigor, and even a bit of holy cunning.

And our delegates to the American Chapter--how do they feel? Do they feel corporately like some kind of Super LaSalle? They should. I pray God they do! I pray God they act the part, too.

I pray God they don't settle for some mediocre compromise, but allow the radically progressive visionaries full scope to generate new programs to educate our American people better. I hope they allow the staunch, cautious, stable Brothers, the sage men who are young enough to practice God-fearing prudence, or old enough to have a wise, faithful and devoted prudence, to live their religious lives in the traditions and schools they have grown to love. I hope those who wish to wear the hallowed habit of St. LaSalle will feel privileged to continue wearing it in honor and integrity. I hope those whose modern, secular dress symbolizes a commitment to a post-Christian, secular City of God with Man, have the virtue and humility to resist selling out to cheap worldliness and selfish egotism. And most of all, I hope the American Chapter pleases God so much that He gives to every one of us the grace and joy that make a good Brother such a happy, powerful, delighted man to know.

God willing, this will be a great Chapter. Let us humbly pray that we may be worthy of it!

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