Robert Comte, fsc

Identity today

Presentation

Shortly after the General Chapter of 2000, the General Council and the different Services of the Mother House decided to have a general reflection on "the construction of identity today". In fact this theme finally underpinned the collection of texts produced by the General Chapter itself; it is sufficient to recall the debates concerning the life of the Brother, those dealing with the Lasallian membership of our collaborators or partners, the process of association affecting the body of Brothers just like the first associates… Each time preoccupation with "identity today" kept turning up.

There is nothing astonishing about this: the theme runs happily through contemporary philosophical reflections or in articles of any minor magazine priding itself on its applied psychology; "concern about identity" has become part of everyday conversation. But the subject deserves attention and respect because our societies are beginning to wonder in a new way about the old essential questions. Our mental universes are profoundly worked over from the inside and subject to original variations, to interior exile, to migrations and to psychological crossbreeding which destabilize and question identities. If the old question, "Who am I?" is still in current use, the answer is no longer unequivocal and definitive but fragmentary, plural, unstable, and changing depending on context and experience. The answer is constructed, de-constructed, redeveloped, re-negotiated in a constant effort coming from inspiration and imagination but also from fatigue and weariness because it is usually alone that the 21st Century person confronts the "concern about identity", in a gigantic effort.

The General Council and the Services decided to work on this great question which affects the accompanying of persons - Brothers and Lay Lasallians - in the Lasallian Family.

In 2001 the study focused on the *philosophical identity*. The work was directed by Fr. Alain Thomasset, S. J., who introduced us to the 'narrative identity' of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. The following year attention was focused on *psycho-social identity*; this study was directed by Br. Sean Sammon, Superior-General of the Marist Brothers. Finally in 2003, Bros. Carmelo Bueno of the Saint

Pius X Institute in Madrid and Robert Comte of the District of France helped us to reflect on *Christian identity*.

All this collected work allowed the members of the General Council and the different Services to draw up a common method of thought and to coin an appropriate vocabulary in order to take on in a renewed way reflection on "the construction of identity" in our contemporary society.

All through the course of this study we profited from the presence of Br. Robert Comte, a French theologian, who has been particularly expert in these areas for several years and who has just completed a book on this subject. At the end of our reflection on the theme we asked him to write a MEL booklet for us, incorporating the main ideas from our common study but also - at the request of the Superior General - offering an expert reflection to all the members of the Lasallian Family on this construction of new identities which today affects our society but also the Church, as well as all those who feel themselves concerned with the Lasallian charism and who remain open to the interior call which it arouses in their lives.

Here then is the text which Br. Robert Comte has prepared for us. It offers us a text which is accessible and simple but perfectly supported by philosophical reflection and contemporary theology. Furthermore, as a good teacher of adults, he suggests to us little instruments of reflection and evaluation for advancing along our personal path of construction and development. This text is a little philosophical and spiritual gem: it should be read alone and with others and we should make it a moment of meditation, of sharing, of taking another look at ourselves and our life community; and of letting ourselves be penetrated by the atmosphere of confidence, peace and optimism which emerges from it.

A big thank you to Br. Robert Comte.

Br. Nicolas Capelle

Introduction

If we are to judge by the number of publications devoted to it, the question of identity is of great concern to western society. It is of concern as much to individuals as to different social groups or peoples; and it is not a question ignored by Churches. Various manifestations of identity crisis can be seen all around us. This can take two opposing forms: either a person has great difficulty in discovering his own identity; or he may suffer internal anguish regarding his identity, which sometimes leads to violence.

Our intention in these few pages is not to offer an exhaustive analysis of such a vast subject. Rather, it is simply to suggest a few pointers regarding the construction of personal identity. This will be treated from an anthropological, theological and a Lasallian point of view, even if this latter aspect will not be treated as such, given that other publications are devoted to it.

Before beginning this analysis, it might be useful to provide some background to explain the present-day problem concerning identity[1].

Why has the question of identity come to the fore ?

This is not the place to recall how this question originated. Instead we shall consider various sociological factors which can help us understand why this question has taken on such importance today. Basing ourselves on the sociologist Claude Dubar[2], we shall consider three of these and add one of our own.

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[1] This dossier does not claim to be universal in scope. As the bibliography shows, the information and thinking from which it draws inspiration come from two main sources: French publications and English or American works. Works in Spanish have not been consulted.

[2] Claude Dubar, *La crise des identités. L'interprétation d'une mutation*, Puf, Le Lien social series, 2000.

A major upheaval in family life.

The changes that have come about in family life are well known. The increase in the divorce rate and the various forms of family recomposition are the most obvious signs. This fragility is due in part to the fact that the identity of the family today is based less on the institution than on the quality of the ties that bind its members together.

This institutional weakening is accompanied by a transformation of family relations - consisting principally in the equalisation of roles - between the father and mother, and between parents and children. Relations which were formerly hierarchical tend now to be more or less democratic.

These changes reflect others which deserve a special mention. First of all, there is the emancipation of women which occurred in the second half of the 20th century, giving them access to financial independence by earning salaries, and to sexual independence by controlling procreation (we know the symbolic role played in this connection by the invention and legalisation of the contraceptive pill). Even if it has had ambivalent effects, the emancipation of women was no doubt one of the major upheavals of the last century. One result of this is that masculine identity has been challenged. As some observers have noted, an excessively ostentatious virility - machismo or phallocentricity - is no longer highly regarded in society. These changes in male and female identity alter profoundly the way in which bonds are established between men and women.

At a deeper level, the combination of these changes has repercussions on the structural supports of human identity. As C. Dubar says: "Not only does one not really know what is meant by being a father, mother, husband, wife, father-in-law, mother-in-law; nor does one really know what the norm is (to marry or not, dissociate or not feelings of love and the role of parents, be or not be a father or mother for one's stepchildren...), but one is no longer sure basically what is male and female, and what has happened, and what is going to happen, to sexual social relations, which have remained more or less unchanged for such a long time... Being a man or a woman is becoming a question of history, plan-

ning, a biographical journey, of 'building identity throughout one's life'"[3].

And thus the essential components of human identity are no longer evident. They can no longer be taken for granted. This causes a certain degree of destabilisation in the various contributors to family life.

The precarious nature of employment.

For a long time, work was one of the essential factors in the construction of adult identity, especially in the case of men. In practice, the answer given to the question "who are you?", was the answer to the question "what do you do?". If we look at the question more closely, we can identify four sources of identification in work, sources which vary in importance according to the nature of the profession. The first is that of sharing a common outlook based on one's work place; the second comes from the awareness of creating something (this is true for craftsmen, but also for other workers: we just have to think of the pride of a construction-team on the completion of a long-term project such as the construction of a tunnel, a bridge or a ship); the third is simply the promotion at work of a person who has worked all his life in the same firm and has progressively taken on added responsibility; the fourth comes from sharing in the difficulties of a firm in a time of crisis, or facing daily dangers inherent in certain professions, such as mining, or example.

The economic crisis and deregulation of employment have gradually eroded these sources of identity based on work: the time when people were employed full time, for all their working lives in the same firm, with the prospect of steady promotion, has mostly gone. This development has had a corrosive effect on identity: how can a person share in the common outlook of a firm when he is not sure how long he will be able to stay?; how can he have

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[3] Id, *op.cit.* P.93. It is interesting to note a similar observation made by the French bishops in their *Lettre aux catholiques de France*: "the combined impact of the spread of the critical spirit, the clash of cultures and technical advances has shaken the fundamental values which transmit great traditions. What is now lacking is the elementary grammar of human life, whether it concerns accepting sexual differences, becoming a father or mother, giving a meaning to everything concerning life and death" (p. 24).

time to enjoy seeing something completed when his work is always urgent?; how can he consolidate his position over a long period of time when he constantly faces the prospect of unemployment?; how can he share in a common struggle when the future is uncertain?

This development has human repercussions well beyond the workplace, as is shown by an investigation carried out by R.Sennett who asked himself th following question: "How can one pursue long-term objectives in a society which knows only the short-term? How can one maintain long-lasting social relations? How can a human being forge an identity and plan a life in a society made up of episodes and fragments?... Short-term capitalism threatens to corrode character, in particular, character traits which binds human beings together and give each person an awareness of an enduring self."[4] As we see, these effects do not concern only the people concerned: they affect also the social fabric itself.

Religious belief tailored to personal taste.

One of the major tendencies in this field is that belief is escaping from the control of religious institutions. This is true of the Catholic Church, but also of others. This means that belief is becoming more and more a personal and subjective matter: personal, in the sense that the individual establishes his own criteria for belief and practice (he picks and chooses); subjective, in the sense that he is guided above all by his feelings when he makes decisions regarding religious matters (as he does regarding others). A survey carried out in 1994 shows that 71% of French people (44% of whom attended church regularly!) believed that "nowadays, each person ought to define his own religion for himself, independently of the Church". Many felt free to work out their own system of belief, and some were not afraid to borrow elements from outside the Christian faith. This relativisation of Catholicism shows that "the possibility to have recourse to other religions is seen as enriching in an individualised world, in which each one wishes to construct his own

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[4] Richard Sennett, *Le travail sans qualités. Les conséquences humaines de la flexibilité*, Albin Michel, 1998, p. 31.

identity and terms of reference without having to look for them in a ready-made tradition"[5].

From the point of view of transmission, we can speak of "the end of inherited identities"[6], to use the words of D. Hervieu-Léger. In a society which devalues the past, it has become more difficult to accept the faith received from preceding generations, as transmission is less likely to occur vertically (from one generation to the next), than horizontally (between peers). However, we should not conclude that transmission has stopped: the situation is slightly more complex. In this connection, we can usefully refer to the following analysis by D. Hervieu-Léger who distinguishes four dimensions of religious identity: the community dimension (it designates boundaries for the religious group and indicates membership); the ethical dimension (shared values within the group); the cultural dimension (the knowledge and skills constituting the collective memory of the group); the emotional dimension (the shared feeling of forming a group).

Normally, religious identity is made up of these four elements. At present, each of these elements tends to be independent, that is, all four are no longer transmitted together. Sometimes, religious identity is based on only one of them, can be either cultural, ethical, emotional or community. Sometimes, two of these dimensions are combined. D. Herviu-Léger has identified six types of religious identity among young people, each consisting of a combination of two of the four dimensions: *affective* Christianity combining the emotional and community dimensions: *patrimonial* Christianity combining the awareness of belonging to a community with the possession of a cultural heritage; *humanitarian* Christianity combing the emotional and ethical dimensions; *political* Christianity combining the community and ethical dimensions; *esthetic* Christianity combining the emotional and the cultural dimensions. No doubt this analysis is not exhaustive (in par-

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[5] Pierre Bréchon, "Les attitudes religieuses en France: quelles recompositions en cours?", in *Archives des sciences sociales des religions*, January-March 2000. Even if the recomposition of religious belief is taking place more or less everywhere, situations vary from country to country, some having undergone a process of secularisation over a long period of time, while others have experienced it only recently, and sometimes quite suddenly. The reader can check what the situation is where he lives.

[6] Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti*, Flammarion, 1999, p. 61 ff.

ticular, the cultural dimension includes many elements which could be treated separately), but it does have the merit of sharpening our understanding of the various types of transmission taking place at the present time.

If we went by what has just been said, we might think that religious changes consisted simply in re-arrangements within the confines of Christianity (from which one dissociates onself in varying degrees). But these changes doubtlessly occur on a much greater scale, as we can gather from a survey of "the beliefs of the inhabitants of Quebec"[7]. This survey identified four different kinds of belief: properly so-called *religious* beliefs connected with an identifiable religious tradition; *cosmic*-type beliefs (which can be concerned with the influence of planets, extra-terrestrials...); belief centred on *self* (a self considered capable of solving problems encountered by the individual thanks to an internal source of power he has); *social* types of beliefs (centred on values seen as absolutes and endowed with their own force, such as peace, justice, equality). All which goes to show that the choice of possible beliefs (and therefore, of religious identity) goes well beyond what was normally considered usual.

In the final analysis, we can say with a sociologist that "Catholicism no longer appears as a unified block, but as a sort of cultural archipelago characterised by extreme diversity, and as an open heritage of meanings and values on which one can freely draw in order to construct one's own vision of the world, without sanction or obligation"[8]. The result of all this, adds the author, is "a plurality of identity models most of which are formed in total disregard of institutional conformity".

The difficulty of accepting adulthood.

This phenomenon is not entirely new, but it has become so widespread that it has come to the notice of observers: sociologists have come to speak of the immaturity of adult life or of a blocked

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[7] R. Lemieux & M. Milot (dir), *Les croyances des Québécois*, Laval University, 1992.

[8] Jean Marie Donegani, *La vie religieuse entre sécularisation et inculturation*, paper read at the General Assembly of the Conference of Major Superiors and the Major Superiors of France (Lourdes, December 2004).

access to adult life[9]. Briefly, one can distinguish two types of situations in this connection: some people recognise that they have not become adults and regret it; others do not feel they are adults and have no desire to become one. In other words, for some of our contemporaries, being an adult is no longer an ideal: they prefer to remain in the indeterminateness of youth.

What is the explanation of this reluctance to become an adult? J.P. Boutinet gives four reasons why access to maturity is not straightforward: destructive situations encountered by some adults (unemployment, chaotic personal history); the complexity of a society where one feels out of one's depth; the blurring of distinction (lack of differentiation between the sexes, age, options); a retreat to the here and now and the inability to make long-term plans.

The difficulty of accepting adulthood is, by its very nature, a difficulty to find a stable identity; it is to be trapped by indecision, a state which is either wanted or deplored, but one which is often long-lasting.

Personal identity today.

What we have said so far suggests, in more ways than one, that there are problems regarding personal identity. We shall conclude this introduction with two sets of remarks.

The process of individualisation.

Without going into its history, let us mention a lengthy process which lies behind the recent changes we have referred to: it is what historians call the process of individualisation. What does it consist in?

As N. Elias says, the history of the last few centuries has given rise to an "I without a We"[10]: while in traditional societies people consider themselves first and foremost as a part of a social body, in

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[9] See, for example, Jean Pierre Boutinet, *L'immaturité de la vie adulte*, PUF, Le sociologue series, 1998, and James Cote, *Arrested adulthood*, New York University Press, 2000.

[10] Norbert Elias, *La société des individus*, Pocket, Agora series, 1997 (1st German edition: 1987).

modern society they consider themselves first and foremost as individuals without constitutive links.

This tendency has grown stronger with time and has become widespread in western society. But the price for this has been a greater psychological precariousness, because the "envelopes", which protected individuals in traditional societies, have gradually disappeared. This has led to a certain fragility among people. For example, some of our contemporaries feel isolated psychically: the systems that enfolded them (ideology, religion) have become weakened, and they have to face the great issues of life alone; they find themselves more and more thrown back on their own responsibility and sometimes this causes great anguish.

This situation is ambivalent in two ways. From the moral point of view, it can lead people to be concerned solely about themselves, to retreat into their own little world, and to look no further than their own problems. For some, this is a new form of narcissism. In this sense, it can also be called individualism. But this situation is also an invitation to become fully responsible for one's own life and not be simply the product of one's environment. From the psychological point of view, it can produce two opposing types of person: on the one hand, the person may become an "excessive individual", characterised by the all-conquering individualism of those who pursue relentlessly their own interests; on the other, it produces "individuals by default", who lack a sense of direction and fail to mature as a person to the extent that sometimes they remain on the threshold of adult life, without being able or really wanting to cross it (hence, the immature adults we meet today, not that this implies that the all-conquering individualists are always mature).

The identity crisis.

Also, as our first observations suggested, all the institutions which served to structure personal identity (family, work, religion) are in great turmoil. That is why there is more and more talk of an identity crisis. Identity is no longer as clearly defined as it was in traditional societies, where it was assigned by birth. Nowadays, identity is the result of personal effort: it has become "a reflexive project"[11], as is borne out by the multiplication of works on psy-

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[11] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and self identity*, Stanford University Press, 1991.

chology and offers of therapy aimed at improving self-management. From now on, people have to shape their own identity and construct it. This self-construction is all the more difficult as our societies have lost their traditional anthropological models (see the corroborative observations of C. Dubar and of French bishops).

In addition, personal identity no longer has the stability it used to have formerly. The increase in life-expectancy, widespread social mobility, multiple and constant social changes, all this brings about numerous transformations in the course of one's life. From now on, identity is something which continues to be formed over a period of time; it is a process which lasts all our life. This can affect the way one is a Christian or a religious. Not only has the world in which our oldest people made their commitment changed, but they also have changed profoundly. This raises some new questions regarding fidelity.

Chapter 1 – Psychological approach

The question of identity brings us back to the question: "Who am I?" If we are not satisfied with what is said on our identity card (name, date and place of birth, finger print) we discover that it is not easy to answer this question.

In any case, we need to be careful lest the "definition" we choose completely boxes us in and makes a thing of us. This is an easy temptation to give in to, if we are to judge by the definition we find in a good number of French language dictionaries, which characterises it as "*what* remains identical with itself". This definition stresses two things: first of all, identity is something permanent; secondly, it is of the order of things - *what* remains (and yet this definition refers to psychology). This is probably what we spontaneously understand by identity: we see it as some unchanging substance. But our identity is not a thing which we have to keep intact all our life long: it is a living reality. This, at least, is the idea which we shall develop in what follows.

Factors affecting our identity.

We shall consider our identity first of all from the standpoint of two complementary factors which affect it: the temporal dimension and the spatial dimension, both of which are influenced by the relational dimension.

The temporal dimension.

We shall begin with a simple observation: we are historical beings; our lives are lived out in time. This means three things: (1) our life is lived out in a specific historical period: it would have been different if it had been lived out in a different one; (2) it is over a period of time that we build up our identity: it is not formed in one go; it is the fruit of our whole life; (3) in order to know ourselves, we need to study our lives (to know who we are, we need to make a detour and look at what we have experienced and what we would like to experience).

These remarks are valid for all times and cultures, but we have become more aware of their significance in modern times. Traditional societies were more conscious of continuity than of mobility: identity came from status, linked with sex (male or female) and from one's relative position in successive generations (son, father or grandfather; daughter, mother or grandmother - this clearly indicated one's status). This is no longer true in modern societies, in which each of these elements has lost its stability. Nowadays, identity is not given at the start, it has to be constructed, and so its temporal dimension takes on a new importance, especially in a society in which change is widespread.

To understand the way in which identity can be constructed over a period of time, several authors have come up with the idea of narrative identity. We shall return to this later.

The spatial dimension.

We are influenced not only by the period we live in, but also by the places we have lived in, beginning with our place of birth. More specifically, this is the little corner of the world where we spent our first years. It could be a rural area, with its typical countryside (mountains, sea, cultivated fields or empty plains, forests, streams and rivers... or a town with all its different neighbourhoods. We all carry within us these familiar places which make us say: here, I feel at home. We are put out when these familiar places are transformed by human action (the forestation or the deforestation of an area, the reconstruction of a neighbourhood), or by the elements (fire, drought, floods). And we know the drama experienced by people who, for economic or political reasons, have to leave their country (and even sometimes flee suddenly) and experience what is rightly called uprooting. That is why the verb "to remain" has a special meaning for each of us.

We know also that certain places have a special meaning for us because they are associated with some powerful experience (there are certain smells also which carry us back many years and we experience once again long forgotten feelings).

The relational dimension.

I alluded to this earlier. Time and space are peopled with individuals or social groups. What we are has been strongly influenced

by the people we have encountered throughout our lives, beginning with our parents and relatives, and then by our social background and our various circles of acquaintances.

We should really mention all the ways in which we belong because they help to shape our identity. As A. Clair wrote: "Every human being, as far as his identity is concerned, is dependent on a whole network of belonging, already in place, which he has to assume in order to establish his identity. There cannot even be a moral person, free and responsible, except in a relationship of belonging to a community. Belonging, of course, does not give a person his identity. In one sense even, belonging, by uniting and making people equal as members of the same community, prevents them from being different from one another. However, without belonging, a person has no identity, there is not even a person. These ways of belonging are the substance on the basis of which a person forges his own identity. There are no singular individuals, no man who really exists, or even a person, except in a relationship of critical and thought-out adaptation to a previously existing community"[12].

As this author says so well, there is no identity without belonging, but it is not simply a product of belonging. What counts also is the manner in which we react to what it brings us. There is always a time in our lives when we have to examine our position regarding what has been transmitted to us. As Jean Paul Sartre said: "What is important is not what people make of us, but what we shall do with what they make of us". Our identity is never based on nothing, even if we do not remember everything we have received.

Another observation: if it is our belonging to a close circle (such as our family, or our social background) which makes the greatest contribution to the construction of our identity, it is the diversity of our areas of belonging (and the way we react to them) which prevents our identity from closing in on itself. This closing-in consists precisely in preferring membership of a group of people similar to ourselves, forgetting that we share a common identity with all our human brothers. We know that certain human groups have taken a name which means "men", letting it be understood that others do not quite have the same dignity. History, however,

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[12] André Clair, *Sens de l'existence*, Armand Colin, 2002, p. 212.

teaches us that this kind of ethnocentricity is not restricted to traditional civilisations.

To summarise, a person's identity is the product of three equally important dimensions: the singular dimension (what is unique about a person); the particular dimension (the culture which shaped it); and the universal dimension (membership of the human race). Without the first, one is simply the product of the groups one belongs to (with the risk of community-centricity); without the second, one lacks a concrete basis for belonging (one joins the human race inside a culture); without the third, each identity is inevitably at odds with other identities (leading to ideological conflict).

The various facets of our identity.

If we look a little more closely at the various facets of our identity, we shall see how diverse they are.

Its various possible components.

If we look at ourselves as we are now, we find we can define ourselves in various ways and from several points of view. We can define ourselves on the basis of our sexual identity (I am a man or a woman), generational identity (I am a son or a daughter, father or mother, grandparent...), social identity (I am working class, middle class, from a rural area), professional identity (I am a teacher, a farmer, a lawyer...), ethnic identity (I am white, black, Indian...), national identity (I am Italian, French, American, Burkinan...), political identity (I am a socialist, a liberal...), astrological identity (I am a Pisces, a Gemini...), religious identity (I am a Catholic, Muslim, atheist...).

These are so many facets of our identity, so many components which can occupy a place of greater or lesser importance in our overall identity.

How does our identity organise itself?

The question, in practice, is to know how we cope with these diverse identities. We can be happy to juxtapose them, running the risk of feeling we are being pulled this way and that way by diverse aspirations or different obligations, and of having the

impression that our personality is fragmented. Most often, we organise our identity around one or more specific areas (work, family...). These areas may change during the course of our lives (for example, retirement removes our professional identity with all that it entails).

And so, of all the identities we have, some are central and others are peripheral: for a feminist, what is important is her sexual identity; for an immigrant, it can be his ethnic belonging, which he feels is insufficiently recognised ; for a political militant, it is his partisan belonging which counts. One can also identify strongly with one's profession. It can happen that two identities are in competition: for example, certain Brothers feel that they are more teachers than religious (in which case, their professional identity overrides their community identity).

In a broader context, we might ask ourselves which of the identities organises all the others, which federates them, which is central, which is, so to say, the "ultimate" identity, and which are the identity-dimensions that are totally disregarded. Each time, the question is to know whether a satisfactory balance has been achieved: perhaps the "ultimate" identity absorbs the others and leaves them no space to function; perhaps it is healthy not to give to much importance to certain aspects of one's identity (by wishing to define oneself by one's ethnic belonging, one can fall into racism; giving too much importance to one's astrological identity could lead to a certain degree of fatalism).

The construction of our identity.

Let us now look at the way in which we construct our identity. It is not always easy today. And it is never done once and for all: if the beginning of adult life is the time when identity takes on consistency, this consistency may have to find a new balance when one reaches middle age, and be reconsidered when one retires (if one identifies with one's teaching profession).

Terms of reference.

To speak of constructing identity is to ask oneself how one passes from what one has received to what becomes ours. In other words, how one gradually becomes an adult in the manner of

managing one's identity. A simple analytical table (suggested by Marcia, who continues in this way the work of Erikson)[13] consists in asking oneself two kinds of questions, and to linking them: (1) has one taken the time to ask oneself certain questions, to think about what one wants to become? (2) has one made a firm decision? has one decided on the direction our life is to take? has one made one or more commitments?

On the basis of this, we have four possible situations, which are so many ways in which we can have resolved the question of our identity.

	Process	
Manner of resolution	*Questioning, crisis*	*Commitment, resolution*
Identity accomplished	YES	YES
Identity on hold	YES	NO
Inherited identity	NO	YES
Diffuse identity	NO	NO

Table 1: Identity and ways in which it is resolved

- Consolidated, matured or *accomplished* identity: this is the conclusion one has reached after examining possible alternatives and making one's choices. It is not an identity fixed once and for all (since it is the result of questioning). It can be reconsidered later (one then goes through a phase when the identity is on hold).

- Identity in waiting, *on hold*: one asks onself questions, but one has not yet chosen the direction to take. One can go through this phase again, for example, in the middle of one's life, when one comes to re-examine one's childhood dreams or one's commitments.

- Blocked, hasty or *inherited* identity: one made a commitment without examining certain questions; it is a ready-made iden-

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[13] A synthesis of this can be found in Dan McAdams, *The person: An introduction to personality psychology*, Harcourt Brace, 1994, p. 668-671.

tity as, for example, when one continues to endorse the positions transmitted by the family circle. If this poses no problems at the beginning of adult life, it is not good to prolong this situation, otherwise, one is locking oneself into a role (mask), one is giving oneself a rigid identity, one refuses to answer questions.

- A vague or *diffuse* identity: one has not asked oneself questions and made no commitments in any direction. This is normal in adolescence: "open to everything, committed to nothing". Later on, it is a sign of immaturity: one continues to sample everything.

Possible lines of development.

After looking at these four situations so as to define them, let us see how they can evolve. In fact, from each of these positions one can pass to another:

- From *mature* identity one can pass, for example
  – to an on-hold phase, because life has raised new questions;
  – to inherited identity, when one become inflexible, returning to the education received.

- From *inherited* identity, one can pass
  – to an on-hold phase, thanks to a pause for thought
  – to mature identity, thanks to a pause for thought followed by the taking of a decision.

- From the *on-hold stage*, one can pass
  – to inherited identity, by regression to education received;
  – to mature identity, by taking a decision.

- From *diffuse* identity, one can pass
  – to the on-hold stage, by asking oneself questions;
  – to inherited identity, by rejecting self-questioning;
  – to mature identity, via the on-hold stage and making a decision.

So, as we can see, there can be a positive evolution, but also regression. The transition from one of these situations to another depends on the capacity of the individual to clarify his own prob-

lems and to make decisions. It can happen that the capacity to take one or other of these two steps is either impaired or momentarily missing. For example, a survey made in France of young people in search of a vocation or already at the novitiate, showed that the greatest fear of the candidates was to make a mistake. Its author saw in this "the cry of a generation which can be at a loss in front of a supermarket full of possible choices". This fear engenders two opposing attitudes: "very rapid decisions which fail to be based on true freedom (this resembles hasty identity), or decisions which are not taken" (this is an on-hold phase indefinitely prolonged). It should be added that certain trends in contemporary society make decisions more difficult by encouraging the postponement of deadlines, or making people think that one can take several courses of action at the same time.

Various situations.

The preceding observations considered identity from a global point of view. We need to add that, depending on the type of identity we have, we can find ourselves in one or other of the four positions mentioned above. For example, we could have a mature identity on the professional level, and an identity on-hold regarding one's vocation (one cannot make up one's mind yet); a diffuse identity on the political level (I have never really thought much about politics and I have no real preference for any of the parties); an inherited identity regarding my faith (I was happy to accept what I received from my education). When one does not attain the same level of identity in a number of important areas, one finds oneself in a situation of conflicting identities. One has not yet achieved unity. Will one ever?

The outline we have given can help people to assess the various components of their identity, and to see how they have or have not solved certain problems. It can encourage them to ask themselves: which aspects of my identity are solid? which are still fluid? which ones do I not wish to confront? which ones do I pursue superficially? It can help people also to have a better understanding of the maturing process experienced by young people in search of a vocation or in formation.

In addition, we have noted that a family can influence in two ways the formation of a sense of identity: first of all, by helping a

young person to be himself by expressing his point of view or by saying how he sees things differently from others; and then by helping the young person to have a good relationship with others (by making him aware of the points of view of other people, and by inviting him to respect them; by encouraging openness to the points of view of others).

Finally, we can say that an institution (such as a congregation) can be analysed in this way: it can be in an on-hold situation (in a period of major overhaul of thinking: cf. Vatican II or the General Chapter of 1966-67), or its forward movement can be blocked (leading to a return to inherited identity, as in traditionalist movements), because there is a refusal to ask oneself certain questions. Depending on the image it chooses to project, it will facilitate or not the process of building up of an identity among the rising generations.

Chapter 2 – Narrative identity: A philosophical approach

The psychological approach describes, in concrete terms, how personal identity is built up: the philosophical approach considers the same question again, attempting to understand it in terms of certain unifying concepts. In this connection, no doubt one of the most rewarding approaches is that of the philosopher P. Ricoeur with his concept of narrative identity[14]. His point of departure is the following question: how can we understand personal identity, knowing that life has a temporal dimension? On the one hand, to speak of identity implies a certain permanence; on the other, living in a temporal dimension necessarily entails transformation. Ricoeur's solution consists in proposing the idea of narrative identity.

A distinction between two concepts of identity.

The first step P. Ricoeur takes is to distinguish two concepts of identity based on two Latin words: *idem* (the same) and *ipse* (self): there is therefore what he calls idem-identity (sameness) and what he calls ipse-identity (selfhood).

Identity considered as *sameness* is the "uninterrupted continuity" of a reality. Just as time is a factor in the process of change, so we have to suppose that under the appearance of change there is a principle of permanence, a hidden substance (a *what*) which guarantees stability. But this way of perceiving is suited more to things than to persons. That is why P. Ricoeur has recourse to a second concept of identity.

Considered as *selfhood*, the permanence of a person in time can be understood on the basis of two models. The first is character which can be defined as "the combination of lasting dispositions by *which* a person is recognised" (it belongs to the category of

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[14] See especially Paul Ricoeur, *Le temps et récit III, Le temps raconté*, Seuil, 1985; *Soi-même comme un autre*, Seuil, 1990.

substance). But these lasting dispositions have a history: they have been acquired with time (one has been educated in a certain way; one has acquired certain habits; one has been influenced by this or that person). Character, therefore, has a narrative component which has formed a deposit, as it were, in the traits of a person (that is why we recognise a person's reactions after an interval of many years: "Oh, it's you"). The second model is that of fidelity, or of keeping one's word. Whereas character is a *what* (it has become fixed like a thing), fidelity refers directly to the *who* of a person, who assumes responsibility for his commitments: it does not refer to a substance hidden in the depths of our being, but to an act (the way in which we assume our responsibilities by remaining faithful). Fidelity to a promise is a challenge to time ("whatever happens subsequently, I promise to fulfil my commitment; despite all the changes that I may experience in my feelings or moods, I shall keep my word"). According to Ricoeur, the idea of narrative identity lies at the meeting point of these two models which combine the quasi-substance of character with the ethical act of maintaining self.

Sameness	Hidden substance: a **what**	Identity of a thing
Selfhood	Character: **what** (lasting dispositions) Fidelity: **who** (word kept)	Narrative identity of a person

<div align="center">Table 2 : Two concepts of identity</div>

The idea of narrative identity makes it possible, then, to combine permanence and change: when we speak of the cohesion of a life, we are thinking of these two aspects at the same time. Our identity is not that of an immutable thing, but rather a dynamic reality which develops over the course of time: we construct ourselves during the course of our whole lives.

From daily actions to the cohesion of our lives.

When we speak of the cohesion of our life, we do so at a very general level. But how does this cohesion come about? To answer this question, we need to distinguish in our lives a succession of, as it were, plateaux, a succession of increasingly inclusive levels. We could say there are three of these.

- the most elementary level is that of our *practices*: those we have recourse to in the exercise of our profession, in our leisure time... (what we know how to do in concrete terms: teach mathematics, garden, cycle, work on a computer...).

- the intermediate level is the way we organise our life (family life, professional life, leisure time, etc). Each of these areas is self-contained with its own set of principles and history, even if these areas encroach upon one another. For example:
  – professional life is punctuated by the stages of a career, and we know also that it shapes a person (a teacher reacts differently from a brick-layer);
  – family life is moulded by the different stages in the life of a couple, by the growth of children, by the evolution of relations between the generations;
  – religious life also has its own history, with its stages of initiation, and important moments in the life of an Institute.

The life-planning stage is intermediate or medium term between the overall orientation of a life and the implementation of practices.

- the highest level is that of *the narrative unity of a life.* This level is of capital importance. "Life needs to be integrated if it is to be called a true life. If I do not see my life as an integrated whole, I will never be able to wish it to be successful and accomplished"[15]. It is on this level that one can speak of cohesion of a life. This is characterised at the same time by coherence and dynamism: coherence means that the life of the person is not simply a chaotic succession of episodes; dynamism means that this coherence evolves. Moreover, there can be various degrees of coherence: some lives have been anything but smooth and their continuity is hard to discern; others have proceeded along a straight line to the extent that they give the impression of a life without surprises; and there is a whole gamut of variations between these two extremes. Making judgments regarding these things calls for great sensitivity.

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[15] P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 190.

Considering life as a narrative.

Let us examine now how this narrative identity can develop and take on substance. In his analysis, P. Ricoeur borrows the idea of *mimesis* from the Greek philosopher Aristotle. This word literally means "imitation", and the French philosopher uses it to show how narration has the capacity to imitate (or transpose) human action by giving it a form.

Mimesis 1 or pre-figuration.

The term "narrative identity" suggests that it has something to do with a story or with history: a story which is told and history which unfolds. Our life is first of all history which unfolds, consisting of events, encounters, phases, crises. But, as it simply unfolds, it has no form yet (it is simply a mass of events without any links between them). At this point, we are at the level of what Ricoeur calls *mimesis 1* or pre-figuration (our history/story has not yet really taken shape). At this stage, our life has a pre-narrative structure: as a story, it has not yet been told; it is waiting to be told.

We should add that our spontaneous life, which has not yet been given story-form, has always been from its very beginning entwined with a mass of other histories/stories. There are all the histories heard at home (history of daily life, the history of the family itself and of its members); there are also the histories learned at school (history of our country, literary works, religious history...); in a wider context, there are the histories recounted in the various groups we belong to. In other words, our life is marked by recounting. We know that things in life are recounted, and we have learned also how they can be recounted. This will help us to move on to the next stage, which consists in our recounting in our turn, including recounting our own lives.

Mimesis 2 or configuration.

It is by recounting our life-story, by putting it into the form of a narrative, that we give it a form.

In this connection, Ricoeur speaks of "introducing a plot" (a term borrowed from literature: we speak of the plot of a novel).

What are the effects of putting our life-history into narrative form?

- the introduction of a plot transforms a diversity of successive events or incidents into a story which forms a whole: what was once a collection of diverse events is now organised in the form of a plot; multiple existence becomes *one* story. This is actually something we learn as we grow up. When a small child recounts something, he is still not able to establish causal links between events: he will say "this happened, and that happened, and then that happened". Later, he becomes capable of saying that because some particular thing occurred, something else happened (for example: it was because I met a marvellous community, or I was greatly impressed by a Brother, that I wanted to become like him).

- the introduction of a plot *gives direction* to a story: it has a beginning and an end; it comes to a conclusion. In other words, the connection between the events we have mentioned becomes a causal one: each event is recounted in a way that one can perceive its contribution to the completion of the story being recounted.

To do this, we sift through the events we have encountered in our life and choose only those we consider significant: we do not attach equal value to these events (we skim over entire periods and spend time on events which are brief but which count in our eyes).

It is therefore by assuming the form of a narrative that our life discovers its own coherence. These narratives can be partial: they can concern only one period of our life or one of its aspects (for example, our professional career); they can also include the whole of our life. But it is rare to give a complete account of our life; normally, we narrate it from a specific angle: profession, spiritual growth, family background...

Most often, our life is made up of a multiplicity of minor events which make up the substance of most of our conversations: we narrate what has just happened to us, experiences we shared in the past, or some event we recently witnessed. The events we are concerned with here are more significant and more intentional: they are those which build us up when we study our past life. They are events which have the power to shape our life and thus

construct our identity in the full sense of the term, while minor events give coherence to our daily lives. When the narrative embraces a large part of our life, it can say at one and the same time what is permanent in us ("that is really me in all the stages of this narrative"), and what has changed in our life ("things have happened in my life which have changed me").

We should add that the coherence provided by the narrative is not only a discovery (as if it had lain hidden in the depths of our being without our knowing about it), it is also a construction (my identity takes shape as it is narrated); narration underpins this construction. In other words, by narrating my life-story, I give it a coherence it did not have before. Before narrating it, I had not yet established certain links. Once these were established, I saw my life in a different light, rather like the young women who wrote at the end of a 30-page narrative: "I see now that my life is not simply the sum total of twists and turns as I had surmised". That is why, studying our life builds us up. Spiritual tradition has been aware of this for a long time. If we never look back on our lives, we run the risk of always being strangers to ourselves.

From this point of view, we know that the life of our Founder is punctuated by moments when he reassessed his life, and writings which expressed its provisional meaning. Because he did this periodically, he was able to write one day: "God who conducts all things with wisdom and gentleness and is not in the habit of imposing his will upon men, wishing to persuade me to take full responsibility for the schools, did so in a most imperceptible way and over a long period of time; in such a manner that one commitment led me to another, without my foreseeing it initially".

By giving our life a narrative form, we moved on from *mimesis 1* (pre-figuration) to *mimesis 2* (configuration). By configuration, we mean that our life-story takes form, that it finds a sort of coherence by being expressed in a narrative form.

Mimesis 3 or re-figuration.

According to P. Ricoeur, the idea of narrative identity does not end when we give our life a form by narrating it. He says that we fully understand ourselves only by comparing our narrative with others, in particular, with those in fiction (he speaks of novels, but

one could equally include films or traditional stories)[16]. As I read these narratives, I enter worlds unfamiliar to me, I lay myself open to other worlds. When I read a novel, when I watch a film, I can recognise myself in them (there are characters I can identify with), but I can discover also aspects of life I would never have thought of, or come across characters whose behaviour is very different from mine. All this helps me to understand myself better (how many New Yorkers said: "it was like in the film 'The Towering Infernal'", to describe what they experienced during the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11th!); but it helps me also to broaden or transform the way in which I understand myself, for example, by meeting characters very different from myself.

As we read in an author inspired to a great extent by Ricoeur, "narrative literature (for example, biblical stories, novels) is really a means to investigate and portray a variety of practices or activities, and describe their possible effects on the characters. It enables us to experience and judge the value of certain lifestyles and certain ideologies from a distance, without our having to experience them directly. We are exposed in this way, perhaps for the first time, to the whole gamut of values of a society, an exposure which broadens the way in which we perceive and interpret moral issues"[17].

This leads us to what P. Ricoeur calls *mimesis 3* or re-figuration. Narrative identity includes this also: not only does our identity take on form by being narrated, but it also becomes transformed by contact with other narratives, which enrich it and open up for it new horizons (it can take on a different form or figure; it can be "re-figured"). In order to construct our identity, we need to make it react with other narratives so that it can be enriched by them. Our Christian identity is constructed in this way, by reacting with

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[16] Two quotations to illustrate this. The first taken from a French novelist from the beginning of the 20th century: "(my readers, one could say)... are not my readers, but their own readers of themselves, my book being merely a sort of magnifying glass, my book, thanks to which I furnish them with the means of reading in themselves" (M. Proust). The other, from a recent article in a newspaper on short films: "a good story does not simply invite you to escape from your life: it is also a metaphor of it. The need to hear (read, see) good stories, reveals a quest for an order in things, a search for a meaning for our approximate lives" (*La Croix*, February 5th 2003).

[17] Anthony Kerby, *Narrative and the self*, Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 62.

narratives (the founding narratives in the Bible, the Gospels, the lives of the saints); our memory, as believers, is peopled by a multiplicity of characters we have met in the course of our education and even later.

Narration at the juncture of the past and the future.

Fictional narrative places us at the juncture of the past and the future. Of the past, because it brings us the wealth of culture which precedes us. Narratives we have read or heard have fashioned our imagination to the point that one can say that "our present evaluations and judgments have their roots in our cultural past" (Kerby). Seen from this angle, narrative identity makes us part of a tradition, and reflects what we said earlier about identity and belonging.

Inversely, fictional narratives offer us possible models of conduct. They are shot through with the aspirations of their characters; they are in search of something. They are therefore open to the future and offer us also a model of expectation. They help us to express what has not yet happened, and to look to the future. One can say that "the unity of a human life is that of a narrative quest" (A. McIntyre): it is the quest for what we aspire to in our life.

In other words, the narrative unity of a life lies at the juncture of two elements: the area of past experience and the horizon of aspiration[18]. The area of past experience, which is our memory, does not refer us to a past fixed once and for all: periodically, it takes on new significance (our past itself is transformed). The horizon of aspiration is our capacity to imagine, and opens us up to new experiences. It also changes over the course of time. A correct balance needs to be maintained between these two elements: we must neither diminish the area of past experience (the past has to be always there for consultation), nor extend too much the horizon of aspiration (excessively utopian aspirations make action impossible); but it can happen also that the future appears too restricted.

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[18] P. Ricoeur borrows these expressions from the German author, R. Koselleck.

Two limitations of the narrative.

To conclude this philosophical approach, we shall mention two limitations of narrative identity, one expressed by Ricoeur himself, the other originating in the culture of the Far East.

Beyond the narrative, the ethical dimension.

If we accept what was said above, identity appears to be an unstable reality: we can rewrite the narrative of our life periodically and invest it with new meaning. It is only at the moment of our death that our identity will become definitive and will be revealed such as it is. Also, fictional narratives are open to indefinite variations by presenting us constantly with new worlds and by exercising our imagination.

And yet, we should not forget that the *ipse* identity is characterised by keeping one's word. Keeping one's word means: here I stand! In the words of Kierkegaard, one might say that narrative derives from the esthetic stage, the esthete being a person whose life is dispersed and characterised by discontinuity because he does not make a choice in order to be able to sample everything. The opposite is true, however: the transition to the ethical stage gives unity to the self by making a decision and a choice: it is the act of choosing, of determining oneself, which constitutes self and gives it unity: the ethical self keeps its word, it is coherent in its actions, it makes a commitment to the future. We have to go beyond narrative in the ethical dimension.

One could also say that by moving into the ethical (and religious) stage, we choose the narratives which will be our preferred references. To recognise the Bible as the Word of God, is to set it above other possible texts; to find inspiration in Lasallian tradition means we attach much greater importance to it than to Ignatian or Franciscan tradition.

Time and space.

The second limitation of the narrative model is quite different: it is cultural. I shall mention it briefly, basing myself on an author who is Indian in origin (Ajit Maan) who lives in the USA[19]. The

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[19] Ajit Maan, *Internarrative identity*, University Press of America, 1999.

criticism this author makes of the narrative model reflects in part the position of postmodern thinkers who favour a self which is not unified, but dispersed. Her analysis appears to be borne out when applied to people influenced by the culture of the Far East, in its broadest sense. The author adds that she believes that this view can be enlightening also for the West.

Her first observation is that the concept of self is not the same in the West as it is in the Far East. In the West, what is stressed is the individual considered in himself, apart from his context: in the Far East, he can be understood only in his relational context[20]. As a consequence, in the West, attention is given to the temporal dimension of a person's life, while in the Far East the spatial dimension is also important, that is, the diversity of places where a life is lived. As she says, "a person does not live in non-spa-tialised time" and therefore "the way one lives is strongly linked to places". For example, she tells the story of a woman who does not like to go back to the house where she grew up because, when she is there, she feels she is a little girl again (not only in her memory, but also in the way she behaves now when she is there).

The presentation of identity from a psychological point of view included the spatial dimension. We see what conclusions can be drawn from it. We should add, however, that despite what Maan leaves us to understand, Ricoeur does not forget the relational dimension of our identity. In fact, he returns a number of times to the idea that our lives are not solitary, but they are "caught up" in those of others. We do not exist apart from our web of relations.

Let us return to A. Maan. She proposes a different way of under-standing the coherence of life. In the West, it is seen as the unifi-cation of a life in time (this is its narrative unity). In the Far East, it is linked to places: a person is different at work (the work can be highly westernised), or at home with his family (where he is thrust back into a traditional world). There is coherence, but it is spatial and not temporal. This reflects our own experience from time to time of being different according to the place where we are (fam-ily reunion, professional life, leisure activity group...). To return to

[20] This is true not only of the Far East, but of all traditional societies. Unlike mod-ern societies, which stress the independent individual, they consider that the indi-vidual is first of all a member of a whole, such as a family or a tribe. These are called holistic societies.

what we said about areas of belonging, they all shape and reveal some aspect of our personality. What our author emphasises is the force exerted by such experiences. That is why she speaks of *inter-narrative identity* (this the title of her work) and not only of narrative identity: our identities are the result of the coming together of several personal histories.

According to Ricoeur, we need a total and unified narration to unify our identity: according to A. Maan, we do not have to identify exclusively with one narration; we have recourse to a number of narrations, each equally important, and each with its own context of pertinence.

Chapter 3 – Christian identity

We shall use the same approach to the question of Christian identity as we used with regard to P. Ricoeur's narrative identity. In fact, we can say of Christian identity what we have said up to now of human identity, considered globally.

Identity and vocation.

Up to now, we have spoken of identity, but we could also speak of vocation, understood as what each of us is called to, whatever our circumstances. Vocation means a call. From a Christian standpoint, this is equivalent to saying that we are all "respondents". It is by saying "here I am" that we construct our identity.

Go to yourself!

The meaning of vocation is very well expressed in the literal translation of the call made to Abraham: "Go to yourself!" (Gn 12, 1). Expressed in this way, vocation is not the execution of a plan conceived by God from all eternity, but the development by each person of what is uniquely his. F. Varillon once wrote something very enlightening regarding this: "we express ourselves badly when we say God has a plan for man. The truth is, not that God has a plan for man, but that man is God's plan. That is quite different. God wants us to be men, that is, responsible adults, constructing ourselves our own freedom, writing our own life story"[21]. This is the basis for our narrative identity: God wants us to write our own life story; in this way we shall be his plan.

We can think of vocation as what unifies the growth of a person. It unifies because vocation is not concerned solely with accomplishing tasks or fulfilling roles, but also with the unique spiritual character each person has. It stimulates from within our growth, a growth consisting of both permanence and change. This means that each stage of our life can open up new horizons, and that events in our lives demand from us openness and discernment so that we can perceive the calls they make to us.

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[21] François Varillon, *Joie de vivre*, Centurion, 1981, p. 103.

This implies we need to clarify our ideas about fidelity. It presupposes, of course, a commitment, without which we would drift aimlessly, open to all possibilities, without a point of anchorage. At the source of every vocation there is an original decision which is the compass governing our life. This decision may have been precocious or late, rapid or matured over a long period, but it has an essential role: it ensures the unity and continuity of our life. In fact, our self is unified to the extent that it is faithful to the word it has given, and coherent in its actions, because it keeps the promises it has made, and is prepared to make commitments for the future. On the other hand, a person who does not make such decisions and shirks his responsibility leads a fragmented life.

We know also that decisions about the direction our life should take are not made once and for all. In fact, all fundamental decisions are the result of a multiplicity of small decisions: "each decision opens the door to other decisions, and the more resolute and the more fundamental it is, the more it does so". Small daily decisions give consistency to the fundamental decision and illustrate its importance. Inversely, irresolution also has its effects: "I have every chance of remaining the same if I allow myself to be weighed down by my habits, and if I make no decisions about myself, but simply let them be made"[22]. Decisions are important because they provide a point of anchorage for our life so that it does not drift at the mercy of events.

We know that making decisions is difficult for the rising generations who are tempted either to make decisions without much thought, or to put off making decisions indefinitely. No doubt, one of the fundamental tasks of formators is to educate candidates regarding decision-making.

Fidelity and openness.

But, given all that, fidelity cannot be defined as "rigid constancy to oneself" (Ricoeur). Such rigidity would place us in an illusory position outside of time, as if we did not allow ourselves to be touched by anything in our lives. In practice, fidelity presupposes also openness, the capacity of allowing ourselves to be jostled by events, otherwise we will be a prey to ideological rigidity or sim-

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[22] Jean Louis Chrétien, *La voix nue: Phénoménologie de la promesse*, Minuit, 1990, p. 79.

ple inertia. This capacity to allow oneself to be jostled by events mirrors, one could say, the message of the parable of the Good Samaritan: Jesus' answer to the lawyer who asked him "Who is my neighbour ?" was "Whose neighbour do you make yourself?" In the same way, we could ask ourselves: by what events do we allow ourselves be touched?; by what do we allow ourselves to be jostled?[23]

If we look at the lives of the saints, we find that many of them, although already consecrated to God, struck out in an unforeseen direction: Mother Teresa spoke of a "call within a call" which led her to care for the poor and subsequently found a congregation (although she was already a religious); St John Baptist de La Salle would never have founded the Brothers of the Christian Schools if he had remained faithful to his vocation as a canon, and not heard the call to undertake the education of the poor youth of his day. Without going so far as these radical changes of direction, it may be that the direction of our own lives was changed at one point or another by our positive response to a call we heard.

Christian identity as a narrative identity.

Christian identity is a narrative identity, as we have seen, because it unfolds over the course of our life. It is narrative also because it is built up by contact with founding narratives.

A vital reference to the founding texts.

It is by recalling founding narratives that believers of the Bible build up their identity. The command "Remember!" occurs often in biblical texts as a way of stressing the importance of this reference to sources. Whether they are "historical" (Exodus, Samuel, Judges, Kings, Chronicles) or fictitious (Job, Esther), narratives occupy an important place in the Bible. The prayer of the psalms is permeated with the recall of God's actions: "our ancestors have told us" (44, 2; 78, 3), "tell over all his marvels" (105, 2; 145, 5); "we give thanks...as we recount your marvels" (75, 2). At the same time, past history points to a promising future full of accomplishments. For example, in the story of Moses' call (Ex 3), the God of

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[23] See in this connection Michel de Certeau, *L'étranger ou l'union dans la différence*, DDB, Foi vivante, chap. 8.

Fathers announces the deliverance of his people and the gift of the Promised Land. The Bible, therefore, maintains a tension between a recalled past and a future full of promises: it is not by chance that it begins with Genesis (the story of the beginning) and ends with the Apocalypse (the story of the end). And it is in the name of what God was in the past, that those who pray the psalms wait for God to act again: while the verbs at the beginning of psalms are often in the past tense, those at the end, most of the time, are in the future tense.

The narrative character of biblical faith is condensed in "historical credos", whether in the Old Testament (Dt 26, 5-9), or in the New (1 Co 15, 3-6). Our creeds (Apostles, Nicene) also have a quasi-narrative structure, containing a precise historical reference by the mention of a political figure (Pilate).

Accounts which shape the lives of believers.

Biblical memory is not simply a question of remembering. What gives a structure to our identity as a believer is living out what is recounted by biblical narratives, so that our life is shaped by them[24]. Let us give three brief examples showing how faith is really structured by the encounter of two narratives, the life-story of a person and a biblical narrative:

• Anthony, the father of monasticism, realised that he was called to a life of radical detachment when he heard the Gospel story of the rich young man, after he himself had just received his inheritance. The story changed the direction of his life.

• When Augustine writes his **Confessions**, he constantly weaves biblical references into his life-story, which serve as a key to the interpretation of his life. This reflects the encounter between his life and these biblical narratives.

• As St John Baptist de La Salle was taking stock of his position as a canon - a position which provided him with a consider-

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[24] It is interesting in this regard that the narrative of the covenant at Sichem switches constantly from "your fathers" to "you" (cf. Jos 24). See in the same connection the profession of faith in Dt 24. The meaning of these transformations is that they suggest that it is not simply a question of recalling the experiences of past generations, but that present generations are involved in a history which they have to relive symbolically.

able income - he was struck by a text his spiritual director had given him to consider: "foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests..." (Mt 8, 20). It was following this that he gave up his canonry and distributed his wealth.

Closer to us, a woman who rediscovered her faith after a number of trials, tells how she began to read the Bible: "the feeling I had of being uprooted made me particularly receptive to the book of Exodus: I had the impression that I had been freed from slavery with the Hebrews, that I was crossing the Red Sea, that I was crossing the desert. My past life, what I was experiencing now, laid the foundation of a new identity. I was on my way to the Promised Land. And I reached it". No doubt, each one has his own founding texts: how did they influence his life?

The liturgical memorial.

It is impossible to speak of "memory" in the context of Christian identity without mentioning the liturgical memorial. We need to do so for three reasons:

– to recall first of all that the liturgy expresses strong links between the three moments in time, as mentioned in the anamnesis: "Christ has died (memorial of the past, Christ is risen (today) and Christ will come again (future)".

– to emphasise that, each year, liturgical time makes us go through the whole of salvation history. As it does so, it reshapes the lives of believers in the light of the whole of revelation. By inviting each one to renew contact regularly with the mysteries of salvation as a whole (Christmas, Easter, Pentecost...), it helps them also to put aside their own spiritual preferences in order to share the wealth of these mysteries.

– and finally, to note that liturgical time offers the experience of a variety of moments: a time of waiting (Advent), a time of failure (Good Friday), a time of mourning (Holy Saturday), a time of victory over evil (Easter), a time of precarity of life (Ascension), not to mention the alternance of liturgical times between special and ordinary times. These are so many ways liturgy can build up our Christian identity over the course of time[25].

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[25] See in this connection Xavier Thévenot, *Les ailes et le souffle*, Desclée de Brouwer/Cerf, 2000, chap. 6.

And so, to be a believer does not mean giving one's intellectual assent to theological ideas, but rather allowing oneself to be worked upon by the founding narratives of the Bible: that is why we are invited to ponder over them regularly so that they really become a part of us. The work of appropriation never ends: it can be restarted periodically by new events, bearing new calls or new questions. In a period of profound dereliction, it was the book of Job that kept John Baptist de La Salle company during his night of the soul. So it is not a linear process.

What we have said above shows that Christian identity is built up according to the general model we have presented of this idea of narration, in particular, in its re-figuration phase. It is no less original because of that, as I should now like to show.

Christian identity as a collision between narrative identities.[26]

A collision is a sudden encounter which can hurt. We can speak of collision between narrative identities when the life of a person is upset by an encounter with biblical narratives. This is exactly what happened to the persons we have mentioned: they understood their lives differently in the light of the Bible. What is more, their life took a different direction because they had allowed themselves to be challenged by it. The revealed text did not leave them unchanged.

To be more precise regarding the effect of biblical texts on their readers, let us look at their variety in greater detail. They act in different ways because they belong to different literary genres: narratives, legal texts, prophetic challenges, hymns... Each genre manifests a different face of God and stimulates a specific response. And so, the Exodus narratives show a God who has heard the distress of his people: they invite praise. Legal texts contain prescriptions: they invite obedience (by the observance of the law). Prophetic challenges pass on God's warnings following the shortcomings of the people (or of the king): they invite repentance. The psalms express a whole range of attitudes: praise, thanksgiving,

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[26] The idea of the collision of narrative identities comes from George Stroup, *The promise of narrative theology*, SCM Press, 1981, p. 171ff.

repentance, complaint, recalling. God appears in turn as the one who saves, who blesses, who punishes, who has mercy.

If we approach the texts in all their diversity, the God of the Bible cannot reflect our aspirations, hence the importance of the cycle of readings proposed by the liturgy: we do not choose the ones which "speak to us"; we accept the ones proposed to us. By assimilating them gradually, we allow ourselves to be shaped by them.

One can also look at the Bible in a different way by using the classification of the biblical texts into three big categories: torah, prophecy, wisdom. This classification, which derives from the Bible itself (cf. Si, Prologue 1, 8-9, 24-25), has recently been re-adopted by biblical scholars. My remarks will be based mostly on the works of P. Ricoeur, which show how these writings build up the identity of the believer in four ways[27].

The Torah or established identity.

The Torah consists of a combination of narratives and laws. First of all, it a collection of narratives (centred around the Exodus) which recall all that God had done for his people. It is also a collection of prescriptions which structure the way his people live. The Torah offers, therefore, in two ways, points of reference enabling Israel to affirm itself, to know its configuration. It establishes what P. Ricoeur calls the ethico-narrative identity of the people, an identity rooted in a history and governed by a set of laws. The result is an identity founded on the stability of a tradition.

Such an identity, however, runs the risk of imprisoning people in certainties, and making them forget that all identities must remain constantly alert in order to remain alive.

Prophecy or threatened identity.

While identity based on the Torah tells us how things are or ought to be, identity founded on prophecy says rather how things could or ought to change. Prophecy shows this identity at grips with the hazards of a difficult history: it comes into play at times when Israel finds itself in contact with foreign powers or civilisations, a

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[27] P. Ricoeur, *Lectures 3*, Seuil, 1994, p. 312-321.

contact which often is a source of infidelities. In this context, prophecy establishes a *threatened* or disturbed *identity*. It is disturbed by contact with what is foreign, which is a source of temptation; but it is just as much disturbed by the severe prophetical warnings addressed to those who have not remained faithful.

Prophecy recalls, therefore, that identity is fragile, in danger of sclerosis or deviation, and that it can be threatened or even destroyed. It leaves room for reconsideration.

But prophecy also has its own dangers. It can lead to perpetual dissatisfaction. It can become radical to the point of calling constantly for uncompromising purity. In the end, it can turn to fanaticism. One can imprison oneself in prophecy just as one can imprison oneself in the law, and hence the benefit of wisdom, the third category of writings.

Wisdom or individualised and universalised identity.

The wisdom writings have a double function. Their first characteristic is to take into account all that makes up daily life, and propose a "return to basics" regarding questions to do with life (relations between generations, between men and women, facing old age and death, etc)[28]. Wisdom teaches us to respect the complexity of life and leaves questions open. It is up to each one to face this kind of question and find the right attitude. From this point of view, we can say that wisdom *individualises*.

But these writings have a second characteristic, which is to establish communication between the particular identity of Israel and the human community. In fact, it is the nature of wisdom writings to adopt a literary genre practised outside Israel, and so be able to address those who do not share its faith. Wisdom enables Israel to "breathe fresh air" (Sg 7, 3) or, to use P. Beauchamp's image, it establishes an extensive "middle ground" with all peoples. In this way, its position is "not beside peoples but within peoples"; it is "immersed in heathendom"[29]. Through these writings, the Bible rejects the turning-in on itself of Israel's identity, and opens it up to the universal. The wisdom writings establish a universalised identity.

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[28] P. Beauchamp, *L'un et l'autre Testament*, Seuil, 1977, p. 107.

[29] Id, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

I should like to emphasise the importance of this wisdom dimension in the way in which we understand our identity. In practice, we usually insist more on the first two aspects which are identity based on tradition, and identity disturbed by prophetic sayings. But we forget sometimes the wisdom dimension which is, however, a familiar source for Christian tradition as a whole, which draws on both Greek thought and the Gospel. This omission can have two consequences.

In the first place, by ignoring the wisdom dimension, which draws our attention to the complexity of life without imposing a system, we run the risk of offering a moralistic education. But many young people and adults are in search of a knowledge of life, a greater understanding of themselves, or relations more in harmony with their peers. The search for such wisdom is much broader than searching for answers on the moral plane. In the context of formation, this reminds us also that it is not a question of making young men fit into a "mould", but rather of helping them to reach their full stature.

In the second place, ignoring the wisdom dimension, which opens the door to other cultures and other religions, can lead to the claim of being the sole possessor of the truth, to the integrism of a person who sees nothing but errors in other people. This means that Christians should not set aside the wisdom of their peoples (and this applies also to formation).

Wisdom also has its own risks, which consist basically in relativising truth (since one can find it everywhere). Hence the importance of balancing the three dimensions mentioned (even if this balance can vary from age to age).

Apocalypse or finalised identity.[30]

The presence of these three categories of writing raises the question of their unity. As P. Beauchamp says, it is not given by the wisdom writers, as if it could be available to thinkers, but it is

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[30] The expression "finalised identity" is a way of taking up what P. Ricoeur, following P. Beauchamp, developed regarding the Apocalypse as a "telos genre". P. Ricoeur speaks of this briefly in *Lectures 3*, but develops it further in "Comme si la Bible n'existait que lue" in P. Bovati and R. Meynet (dir), *Ouvrir les Écritures*, Cerf, 1995, p. 21-28.

"given with their end". In other words, it is a unity "turned towards the future". The end is "given as imminent and universal in the apocalypse". In it, "the risk has been taken to outline, but in the present time, the moment when the world ends, which will be followed by the beginning of a radically different one"[31].

The place occupied by the apocalypse is quite original. The image proposed by P. Beauchamp to describe it is striking: it is that of the "keystone". And so the apocalyptic genre is not included with the other three; it is their "point of junction"[32]. But it is external to them and ahead of them.

As we presented identity based on the torah, the prophets and the wisdom writers, we highlighted the possible risks associated with each of them. This is because the identity of a believer does not consist in any one of them, nor in their connections. It lies in the tension of these three forms of identity towards a future indicated by the apocalypse, a future which, moreover, does not lead to a synthesis, but to a radical renewal, which escapes the human grasp. That is why the basic structure of the identity of a believer is an identity under tension. It cannot be monolithic unless what constitutes it is forgotten. Needless to say, there is a constant temptation to reduce it to one of its constituents. Of course, it would also be open to discussion were one to settle solely for the apocalyptic dimension of Christian identity, as some groups do. This identity cannot be properly understood except in its links with the others, because it is their "point of junction". Otherwise, there would be a risk of ending up with an identity cut off from history.

The re-figuration of self by means of biblical texts is then quite original. The tensional character of the Scriptures ought to prevent its use ideologically or for self-justification.

A model to imitate or a source of inspiration ?

Let us conclude this presentation with two observations.

First of all, let us stress that the biblical characters whose life is proposed for our meditation are characterised by their complexi-

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[31] P. Beauchamp, "Théologie biblique", in *Initiation à la pratique de la théologie*, Cerf, 1982, vol. 1, p. 220-221.

[32] Id., *L'une et l'autre Testament*, p. 172.

ty and psychological wealth. R. Alter writes that they are "a source of surprise" and "unpredictable and changing by nature"[33]. In other words, they are not stereotyped, as characters often are in traditional stories (myths and tales). The biblical text values their complexity. Far from being inaccessible models, they are very much human, with their strengths and their weaknesses. From this point of view, they can accompany us in our lives which also have their weaknesses. One could say the same thing about the saints the Church offers for our imitation: they led a real life and are not only stained-glass saints. It can also happen that we cannot stand their human nature as it was, to the point that we censor or correct their writings, as in the case of St Teresa of Lisieux.

Next, if we consider the very heart of the Christian faith, which consists in following Christ, we know that it is not a question of reproducing the words and actions of Jesus: each one is called to become a disciple who is unique in form (Urs von Balthasar loved to say that no saint was like any other, each one was unique). We should not, therefore, consider Christ as an external model to be literally imitated, but as an inspirational force which affects us in the most intimate depths of our being. Moreover, the figure of Christ we find in the Gospels is too complex to be imitable literally.

Finally, one could say that Christian identity is shaped by the intimate encounter with God, an encounter which transforms.We remember the story about Jacob's struggle with the angel (Gn 32, 23-33). As they struggled through the night - a struggle that left Jacob lame (the encounter with God did not leave him unscathed) - each of the opponents asked the other's name: God asked Jacob what his name was and changed his name to Israel, which was another way of changing his destiny. But Jacob also asked his mysterious visitor his name. We know that names in the Bible are very significant: they express the identity of the person named. This narrative tells us that the relation with God engages our identity at its most profound level.

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Christian identity is built up in the same way as human identity: the same processes are at work.

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[33] See Robert Alter, L'art du récit biblique, Lessius, 1999.

Its originality comes from the wealth of sources it draws upon. Above all, it seeks to build up the individual in all his uniqueness: to be a Christian means, of course, to share a common faith, but it means also to respond to a unique vocation: "I become aware of who I am, not in response to a general invitation such as 'know yourself' (Greek wisdom), or 'that I may know myself' (St Augustine), but as a result of God's action which says two things simultaneously to me: how important I am to God, and how lost I was away from him....My 'I', then, is God's 'you', and cannot be a 'you' unless God wants to become 'you' for me" (Hans Urs von Balthasar). The unwieldiness we inevitably encounter in institutions (whether in the Church in general or in the Institute) should not make us forget this.

Chapter 4 – The identity of members of a congregation

Let us finish our reflection by a few observations about the identity of the members of a congregation without going into the specificity of Lasallian identity, which would demand a study of its own. We shall consider this question from two angles: an analysis of the components of this identity, and a reflection on its dynamics[34].

A plural identity.

First of all, let us emphasise the use of "plural" in this heading. As in the case of everybody else, the identity of a religious is not all of one piece: it is the result of a more or less fortunate combination of various elements. As we explained in the first chapter when speaking of the different facets of an identity, it is up to each individual to work out how to harmonise or unify its various components.

Identity and spheres of belonging.

Let us recall what we said about the relational dimension of our identity. We spoke of the various levels of a system of relations to which each one of us belongs. In other words, our belonging to the congregation is only one area of belonging among several others, even if we consider it special. In psychological terms, the congregation serves as a reference group.

It can happen that this belonging enters into competition, if not conflict, with others, be they professional, religious or others. For example, we have seen religious involved with a trade union giving preference to this reference group over their membership of a community in their relations with their Brother Director, who is also the headmaster of a school. Or other religious, no doubt dissatisfied with the spirituality of their congregation, join spiritual

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[34] Even if most of the examples given in this chapter are taken from the Lasallian family, what we say has a much broader application.

movements foreign to their own religious family. Such tensions between identities are understandable in periods of change, but they cannot last indefinitely, otherwise they put in jeopardy membership of the congregation.

This problem is inevitable, however, in our increasingly complex societies, in which spheres of belonging tend to multiply. Moreover, this is as true of each of us as of our communities. Each of our communities is a crossroads of relations; it is no longer all-inclusive as it was able to be in the past, and consequently now plays its role in tandem with other spheres of influence which affect us.

In other words, even if belonging to a congregation or to a community occupies a privileged position in our lives, it is nonetheless only one area of belonging among several others, and this results in our identity having diverse facets.

In addition, not only has the objective situation changed, as we said earlier, but the way it is understood has changed also. For centuries, religious had learned that their life was objectively superior to that of lay people; they alone lived in a "state of perfection". They were very conscious of the qualitative difference between these two lifestyles. But the *Constitution on the Church* of Vatican II recalled that all are called to sanctity, even if consecrated life is a special way of responding to this call (cf. Chapters 5 and 6 of the Council document). Religious rediscovered their belonging to the one same people of God founded on the sacraments of Christian initiation. This changed profoundly the way they perceived their identity, which could no longer be understood as being different because of its superiority. For some, this so relativised what before they had made absolute, that they had difficulty in coping with this transition. Research which is being pursued in the Church regarding association is radicalising the question, since now we speak of "evangelical families" composed of religious and lay people taking their inspiration from the same evangelical source, interpreted by a founder[35]: the idea of what a religious family is has been extended.

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[35] Bernadette Delizy, *Vers des "familles évangéliques"*. The renewal of relations between Christians and congregations, Éditions de l'Atelier, 2004.

Community identity and narrative identity.

After having stressed the fact that religious take the elements of their identity from a mutiplicity of sources, let us concentrate on what is for them a privileged point of reference, the Institute. At this point, we can return to the idea of narrative identity which has been our guide up to now. What does this mean?

It means first of all that this identity has its source in the founding narratives, the expression of the Lasallian charism, in our case. We know how important for us is the history of John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers. It is on the basis of these narratives that we interpret our own life-history and our collective history as Brothers. Our own life-history first of all, since it is from them that we draw the meaning of our vocation, if not clearly initially, at least whenever we wish to see our way forward. Our collective history also, since it is to them that we return at important points of our history: at Chapters, when critical decisions are made... To return to the language of Ricoeur, these founding narratives re-figure our own history. From this point of view, we can fully apply to a religious community or congregation the definition of a community proposed by G. Stroup: "a group of persons who have come together to share a common past, who understand certain events in the past as being of decisive importance in the interpretation of the present, who look to the future with a hope they share, and who express their identity by a common narration"[36].

There are several interesting points in this definition. First of all, a community has a common memory which, by itself, creates links between its members. Then, the history transmitted by the common memory is understood as the key to the interpretation of what is experienced today: it is not neutral knowledge, but serves as a point of reference for understanding what are the issues facing us today. And then, a community is carried along by a common project, a shared hope. Finally, a community needs to recall periodically and explicitly the history that carries it along and which the community itself carries. One could evaluate the state of health of our Lasallian identity on the basis of these elements which constitute a community, to see which elements are there and which are missing.

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[36] George Stroup, *The promise of narrative theology*, SCM Press, 1984, p. 132-133.

In a more general way, this quotation recalls that narrative identity is not confined to the past, but combines memory and a future vision. But it highlights also that the identity of a community is made up of a *shared* memory and *shared* hope. To affirm that does not mean that we can never discuss our founding narratives, or that they are always interpreted in a unanimous fashion. Such discussions take place at certain critical moments, in particular when society is undergoing major upheavals which change significantly the context in which the congregation pursues its mission. At such moments, discussion is even necessary, otherwise one runs the risk of not evaluating certain issues of vital importance. But even when a congregation holds such a discussion, it would tear itself apart if its members diverged fundamentally in their interpretation of its founding inspiration. It is precisely the role of bodies such as Chapters to bring up to date periodically this common interpretation at the level which we traditionally call the "body of the Institute". In fact, the identity of a congregation (called also, fidelity to the founding charism) is not passed on to individuals, but to the community as such: it is the community, as the "body" which has charge of it. The "body", however, is made up of all its members, each of whom contributes his part.

The identity of a congregation is likewise narrative in the sense that it never ceases to become a part of history that is itself mobile. Moreover, it is not only the founding events which nourish the common memory: the history of the congregation itself is shared, just as families share their history, with its anecdotes about prominent members of the community, but also with its crucial moments (coping with a political crisis, a Chapter which proves to be decisive, etc.). This also is part of this "common narration" which contributes to the construction of the identity of a community.

The dynamics of our identity.

I should like now to turn to the question of identity from the point of view of dynamics.

Between memory and project.

When we recalled the definition of a community, we saw how its identity combines its relation to the past, present and future. Using

other categories, we can say our present is always linked with an area of experience and a future horizon.

In other words, the identity of the Institute does not consist in its reference to a memory addicted to the past: it has a rich experience which nourishes the present, and draws dynamism from the hope we have, namely, that the tradition we have inherited can bear new fruit in a new context. What is important is the right combination of these two factors: without memory, our identity would drift (it would have no points of reference); without hope, we would lack the dynamism necessary for all life. And our present is not the result only of a force field (memory and hope), but also of our capacity for initiative, in other words, for making a responsible commitment. According to Ricoeur, it is the force of the present, as it takes on consistency in our commitments, which "gives our plans for the future the power to reactivate the unfulfilled potential of the transmitted past"[37].

The past of our foundation has not yet revealed all its potential: our tradition can still reveal things that are new. This is borne out by various innovations which may have appeared in our Districts. But it is up to us to make this potential a part of our history through our capacity for initiative.

A creative fidelity.

Our identity, then, is not something inert bequeathed to us, but rather something to be reactivated throughout the course of our lives. Let us now try to explain in greater detail how we can be faithful and creative at the same time with regard to our tradition.

We must avoid, in this matter as in others, both the literalism of repetition (reproducing the origins) and the drift of invention without points of reference. One way of understanding this creative connection with the foundation is to set aside a simple comparison between what the Founder did and what we ought to do today, and to put each of these elements - the origins and today - into their own context. In fact, in the same way as there is no "chemically pure" Gospel outside its historical context (otherwise we would have a Koranic concept of the Word of God, where historical context plays no part) so, the founding work of John Baptist

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[37] Paul Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*, Seuil, Esprit series, 1986, p. 277.

de La Salle and of the first Brothers is rooted in a given historical context, both on the social and the ecclesial plane. It is, therefore, not to a Lasallian set of teachings "in itself" that we should be faithful, but to the way in which the Founder and the first Brothers responded to the calls of their time. And in their response we find, at the same time, the inevitable inclusion of certain characteristics typical of their time (we could mention prejudices), as well as an original reaction sometimes going against certain prejudices of this time. To understand the real significance of the original Lasallian message, we need to put it into the historical context from which it is inseparable. In our turn, we need to understand our own historical context in order to bring the Lasallian initiative up to date. To use a learned term, we need to undertake some real hermeneutical work.

Theological hermeneutics is based on the premise that our founding texts (biblical texts) as also our texts which transmit tradition (including dogma, but also spiritual doctrine) are the interpretation of an experience which can be expressed only by language and in a culture. The second premise is that we interpret texts from the past (such as those of the Founder) only on the basis of our present situation, our culture, our issues.

In the final analysis, the hermeneutical process consists in correlating the founding experience of the first Christian communities (or, in our case, of the time of our foundation) and our present experience, in such a way that the Word of God (or the founding documents) become "interpretive" for us today. This correlation, therefore, works in two directions: present experience questions the founding experience, and the founding experience questions present experience. That is why we have to speak of "critical correlation". Otherwise, there would be a risk that present experience would become the benchmark for the acceptance of the founding documents, or that these documents would remain foreign to us. What is essential is that the aim of the hermeneutical process is to ensure that "revelation remains always a contemporary event": it does not refer to "a dead past, but to a living word"[38] (p. 8). Tradition which equally has to be interpreted in a critical

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[38] Claude Geffré, *Croire et interpréter. Le tournant herméneutique de la théologie*, Cerf, 2001, p. 8. It is from this work that we have taken our observations on hermeneutics.

manner, has a regulatory function in the process of correlating founding experience and present experience.

One can express this process of correlation by a simple algebraic formula: $a/x = b/y$, which can be explained as follows[39]:

a = the founding initiative in the form it took originally.
x = the historical situation in which this initiative took place.
b = the initiatives we need to take today.
y = the present historical situation.

What this formula shows is this: the founding initiative is linked to a given world and has to be understood in terms of that world. We are in a different world and, in order to be faithful to the founding initiative, we have to establish a similar relationship with our present world, and this can lead us to do things that are different, or to do things differently. This is what can be called creative fidelity. It supposes the interpretation of our history, and the matching up of initiatives with the world in which they occurred, both that of the origins and that of the present time. This is the only way of avoiding both literalism and drift without points of reference. We can say, then, that to be faithful, it is sometimes necessary to be creative, in particular, when passing into different historical or geographic contexts[40].

This process of interpretation is based on our tradition (it covers the whole of our history), tradition which can be understood as the sum total of the experiences of those who preceded us, and the sum total of the interpretation they gave of them. With M. de

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[39] This line of thought was suggested to us by the Protestant theologian Pierre Gisel in his study on the exegete Käsemann. His question was: How should we understand the response of the Christian community to the preaching of Jesus? In other word, how should we understand the fidelity of the Christian community to the message of Jesus? It is easy to transpose this to the Lasallian context.See Pierre Gisel, *Vérité et histoire. La théologie dans la modernité. ErnstKäsemann*, Beauchesne, Théologie historique series, 1977, p. 269-274 and 603-603.

[40] What this algebraic formula leaves aside, when it is applied to the hermeneutics of the Word of God, is tradition and its regulatory function. Is this because of its Protestant origin? In the work quoted previously, the Catholic theologian C. Geffré proposes an approach which correlates three elements: the founding Christian experience, theological and dogmatic tradition and present-day Christian experience. What he proposes can be applied also to our own tradition: as we shall see now, it is a necessary element if we are to understand our identity.

Certeau, we can say that reference to tradition offers us three possibilities[41]:

- it provides us with criteria by showing *incompatibilities*, limits that are crossed only at the price of denaturing our tradition (the question of the priesthood seems to be one of these limits that the Institute has never wanted to cross, refusing it at least twice at the General Chapters of 1966-67 and 1976);

- it reveals *possibilities* by showing all that it was possible to do in the course of history (history is often more inventive than one thinks, both pedagogically and institutionally);

- it leads us to recognise *limits*, non-resolved problems, avenues blocked prematurely, excessive timidity, opportunities not seized (for example, during the political crisis of 1904[42], or the 1946 Chapter), so many things that have hindered the course of our history at a given time, or which can still continue to do so now.

So, what is involved is making a precise diagnosis of our tradition so that it can give us greater insight through both its weaknesses or its blind-spots, and its successes and its daring ventures.

That is how our collective identity can preserve its motive force in creative fidelity. This motive force can go so far as to envisage what Br Michel Sauvage called "a prospect of refoundation"[43]. What enabled him to envisage this prospect was the motive force

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[41] See Michel de Certeau, *Le christianisme éclaté*, Seuil, 1974, p. 45-46. This work is a dialogue between Michel de Certeau and Jean Marie Domenach.

[42] In his interpretation of the events of this time, Br Pedro Gil remarks that, judging from the results of the 1901 General Chapter, "one has the impression that what was essential was missing". He adds that the official guidelines given to the Institute in this period proved to be incapable of "recognising a significant new element in what was happening". In particular, what was not seen was that "the mission of the Institute did not respond to the society of the day". See Pedro Gil, *Three centuries of Lasallian identity*, Lasallian Studies no 4, 1999, p. 254.

[43] See "Perspectives de refondation" in *Jean Baptiste de la Salle et la fondation de son Institut*, Cahiers lasalliens nº 55, 2001, p. 246ff. This theme did not originate with him: the Union of Superiors General took it as its theme for its assembly in 1998. During it, refoundation, which has to be distinguished from restoration, was defined as follows: refoundation does not consist in repeating or doing what the Founder did (this is restoration), but doing what he would do today through fidelity to the Spirit".

of the Declaration of the 1967 Chapter which "considered the Institute less as an established structure than as a living community being permanently created and renewed". Let us quote what Br Michel wrote in this connection: "a number of characteristics of the Lasallian foundations can re-emerge for today and serve as prophetic sources of inspiration". It is for us to make these prophetic sources emerge.

Living out together our common identity.

To conclude these reflections on identity, let us ask ourselves how we can live it out together. The remarks that follow are freely inspired by the observations made by J. M. Donegani on the evolution of the way of living out our various areas of belonging[44].

Regarding religious areas of belonging, J. M. Donegani observes that we have moved from a Christianity of belonging to a Christianity of identity. What does this mean? Christianity of belonging is based on the fact that one belongs to the Church, which defines the objective criteria making it possible to know who is in the Church and who is not. In other words, it is the institution which holds all the keys. In a Christianity of identity, the primary consideration is the structuring of each one, and therefore the construction of his identity. Each one draws from all around him the various elements will serve for this construction: the key remains with the individual.

One can apply this observation to the way one relates to a congregation. In this area too, we have moved from the concept of belonging to one of identity. In the concept of belonging, the unity of the congregation has precedence over the expression of its members. What is asked of them, is to become part of an already existing reality, and to adopt a form of life according to a model established without them. In the concept of identity, this unity is the result of the expression of the members. The Institute clearly has precedence over its members, but it is no longer a one-way relationship, in which members accept a pre-existing model: each one can make his contribution to the construction of the edifice, and very rapidly too. The fact that Brother novices wrote a long note to the Chapter of the District of France to "share their

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[44] He treated this question a number of times. Refer to the address already quoted.

vision for the future, their hopes and their doubts" and even "their angry complaints" is a very significant example of this. The time has gone when major superiors of the Institute found it abnormal for young Brothers to express their views regarding a draft copy of the Rule. In the time between these two episodes, we have moved from one concept to another.

Subscribing to this concept, Br Michel Sauvage indicated, in the text already mentioned, a number of conditions for a refoundation. One of them stressed the need for pluralism in the activities of the Brothers who will have to respond with creativity to the new needs of society. But he said that this presupposed discussion or sharing, and added: "community will be built up more and more on the basis of sharing". This has consequences for the Institute itself which "no longer exists as a uniform structure, dependent on its Centre, but as a communion", one of the roles of the Centre being to "facilitate this communion" and to "stimulate inspiration"[45]. All this is the challenge facing the leadership of the Institute at all levels. From this point of view, Chapters, colloquia, assemblies and all kinds of study groups are very important.

Such suggestions fit in well with the concept of identity. In the background, there are objective transformations which make this change of model possible: in the past, belonging to a community was much more significant than now; the outside world filtered in quite sparingly (both persons and the media). This totalising world had a levelling effect on individuals, even if there were always strong personalities and eccentrics. At the present time, individuality is able to affirm itself more. What is more, in the case of most young Brothers, the Institute was not the environment in which their personality was formed (they lived their adolescence and sometimes their early manhood somewhere else, unlike their elders), and their initial formation no longer takes place under a dominant or even single influence. All this leads to a concept of identity much more than to a concept of belonging.

These final remarks highlight the fact that the identity of institutions is evolving just as persons are evolving. Even if the intention

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[45] These remarks are completely consonant with those of J. M. Donegani when he says that the concept of identity supposes that one creates "places and the possibility of discernment and reciprocity".

of this dossier was to treat the question of personal identity, it is important to point out this correspondence between the evolution of persons and that of institutions, all the more so, despite the prejudices of our individualistic culture, since no one builds himself up in isolation from others.

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