



**Brothers of  
the Christian  
Schools**

General Council

# **IN MEMORIAM**

## ***Br. Joachim Merian, FSC***



CIRCULAR  
**477**



**Circular 477**

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**Brother Joachim Mérian, FSC**

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BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

**General Council**

Rome, Italy



ROME, ITALY

FRATRES SCHOLARVM CHRISTIANARVM

THE GENERALATE

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# Introduction

*In imitation of Jesus Christ who serves his brothers, and following the example of their Founder, the Brothers consider the exercise of authority as a way of serving the community. Authority has for its purpose to promote communion among all the Brothers, the vitality of the Institute, the efficacy of the mission, and interdependence among the various units that compose it. (The Rule, 111).*

Brother Joachim Merian was the last surviving Brother Assistant. He faithfully and zealously served the Institute during a time of transition, turmoil and transformation. His mandate included responsibility for the overseas missions of the Districts of France. During the General Chapter of renewal (1966-1967), he was a member of the commission that drafted the Declaration.

This circular gives us a glimpse of this kind, caring and competent Brother; an extraordinary pastoral leader who inspired the Brothers with his witness to fraternity. Brother Joachim exemplifies the Brother as servant leader in imitation of Jesus Christ.

The Brothers of the General Council and I are grateful to Brother Fernand Becret for drafting the text, to Brother Claude Reinhardt who reviewed the text and to all those Brothers who enriched the circular with their memories of Brother Joachim.

Fraternally,

Brother Robert Schieler, FSC  
Brother Superior  
and the Brothers of the General Council

**Foreword:** *This short biography is based on the following sources: the autobiographical notes written by Brother Joachim Mérian in 2006, the testimonies of those Brothers (mostly former Visitors) who knew Brother Joachim well, and documents from the Lasallian Archives. In editing the material, personal interpretations and additions have been avoided.*

Joachim MÉRIAN was born on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1924 on the Island of Arz in Brittany, France. He was the eldest of seven children, of whom two died in infancy.

His father, whom he admired greatly and who had a profound influence on him, was a captain in the merchant navy. Initially his commitments at sea meant that he came home only rarely. After that he sailed on smaller ships doing shorter voyages, which led to frequent changes of location for the family. His mother was very much the homemaker, fully occupied with caring for her children. For generations, the Mérian family had been closely bound to the sea and to one another. As Brother Joachim writes<sup>1</sup>, “I think that played a big part in my formation. I always felt the influence of a family in which my father played a major role”.

Joachim’s parents were practising Christians. “My father’s religion was very sincere but rough and ready. My mother’s faith, on the other hand, was typical of the piety of the women

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are taken from the autobiographical notes left by Brother Joachim.

of the period, full of devotions assiduously practised”. But that did not stop her from becoming President of the *Action Catholique* in Pauillac.

The Island of Arz, Joachim’s native place, had a big influence on him. It is situated in the Gulf of Morbihan looking towards the Atlantic Ocean. It has a long tradition of sailors in the families, which accounts for its nickname, *Île aux capitaines*. Brother Joachim’s roots there were deep, and he was proud of them.

Just like his brothers and sisters, Joachim initially attended the state school. On one occasion that meant he was jeered at and humiliated by the whole class when he gave, as his excuse for being late, “Please Miss, we went to Mass”. He attended the parish church regularly, and among the choir boys he found one companion who remained a firm friend for life.

## Vocation

In 1938, the threat of war with Germany led the mother and children back to the Island of Arz, and because the local school did not offer classes at a suitable level for her son, his mother sent Joachim to the boarding school in the nearby town of Arradon.

Right from the start, Joachim liked the atmosphere of this educational centre, and he was “extremely happy” there. As he wrote: “I attribute my vocation to the extraordinary discovery I made that there existed on this earth a group of people called the Brothers of the Christian Schools”. The Brothers made a great impression on him by “their kindness, their competence and their constant presence. I saw how they lived together, prayed together, moved around together and were always there to teach us and be with us”. A priest suggested to him

that he should enter the seminary, but Joachim replied, “No, I want to be a sailor”. He adds that “Later I saw how the Brothers lived, prayed together and concerned themselves with young people, and in that I saw the meaning, the nucleus, and the proof of an authentic vocation. From that moment on (just turned fifteen), I immediately liked what I saw and said I wanted to be a Brother like these men who were totally dedicated as true men of God and who at the same time were there for young people. My vocation was born in that way”. When Joachim’s parents were informed, they were surprised. His mother asked him to think about it more and then agreed “If that is what you want...”.

## **Formation as a Brother**

For one year, Joachim lived with the Brothers acting as an educational monitor. It served as a kind of postulancy for him, and it led to his taking the Brothers’ habit in Quimper on October 7, 1941, when he became Brother Divitien-Bernard<sup>2</sup>.

After that came the novitiate, still in Brittany at Kerplouz. It was a happy year, in spite of a programme that was centred on the discipline of regularity and prayer, with a weak amount of Lasallian thought and theology. One of the main memories he retained of his time as a novice was that of the large amount of manual labour they had to do. It was a time for developing one’s personality: “I believe it was more a moral formation than a religious one”. At the end of the novitiate, Brother Divitien-Bernard pronounced his first vows on October 6, 1942.

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<sup>2</sup> Thus, he was known as Brother Bernard for a long time. In this short biography, the name Brother Joachim will be used for the sake of simplicity.



His formation continued for two years in the scholasticate, from October 1942 to October 1944. By then, young religious were supposed to possess an understanding of the religious life, but that was not the case. Brother Joachim says so quite clearly: “We had not been trained in mental prayer, but we continued to have great stretches of it. We had no introduction to the liturgy, but we always celebrated all the liturgical feasts. I felt very frustrated in my formation”. The scholasticate consisted mainly in preparing for the baccalaureate. Certainly, the programme approached that task very seriously, but it was directed more to the study of French than Mathematics. One person who influenced him very much was the teacher of Philosophy in the College Le Likès: “I loved writing, reading and reflection. I recall making a thorough study of *Matière et memoire* by Bergson, the double source of Morality and Religion.”

Brother Joachim remembered the novitiate and scholasticate as three years “without any real formation” but nevertheless as happy years, and indeed that was the common experience of all young Brothers of the period. He would later feel a great need for formation, but at the time, “I was easily excited by the idea of going out to teach”. He had sufficient admiration for the educational work of the Brothers to make him seriously want to commit himself to it. And indeed, in October 1944, the Brother Visitor gave him an obedience to go to the Saint Joseph school in Vannes. He was not unhappy to do so, since Vannes was for him like home ground.

## Teaching

At Saint Joseph, there were some 600 pupils aged seven to seventeen. The primary section offered supplementary

courses and a preparatory class for the *Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle* (CAP), which was the most elementary technology exam at the time. The school possessed a good teaching community, with Brothers taking all the classes, apart from a couple of lay monitors. On his first day of teaching, Brother Joachim found himself in front of a class of 66 boys, and he immediately felt totally at ease. This first year of teaching was for him a foundational experience which revealed his vocation. Throughout the seven years that Brother Joachim spent in Vannes, he controlled his classes very well and had no problems of discipline, and he also committed himself to extra-school activities which had a good educational impact. He retained excellent memories of his life there, and it was in the context of these decisive years that Brother Joachim pronounced his perpetual vows on July 26, 1949 in Quimper.

In 1951, Brother Joachim was sent to the Juniorate in Kerozer near Vannes, and then in 1952 to the large establishment of *Le Likès* in Quimper. In that well-known school, he would teach for five years and also act as head of division. Brother Joachim says that he was very happy in Quimper as in Vannes, and that he had excellent relations with the Brothers.

## **His first Headship**

In 1958, Brother Joachim was in his 34<sup>th</sup> year when suddenly he received “the first really big shock of my life”. It was during the course of the annual retreat when Brother Assistant Charles Edmond told him: “You will take over the headship of the Saint Joseph school in Vannes”. Brother Joachim remarks: “It was just as if someone had hit me with a club. I had no

preparation, no knowledge of administration or how the accounts worked". In addition, there was a community in which most of the Brothers were older than he was. In spite of the shock, Brother Joachim said 'Yes'. Without doubt, it was the first time he fully experienced the real meaning of his religious commitment. In pronouncing his vows, had he not promised to go "wherever I may be sent"? When we consider the weight in human terms of the break he was asked to make, we can feel the extent of the test which this act of faith meant for our Brother. And we shall see him having to repeat that same act of faith on other occasions during his life.

When he arrived in Vannes, Brother Joachim began exercising his responsibilities by asking to have a sub-Director. His instinct for contact showed itself successfully in relation to pupils and parents. When talking about these first steps in leadership, he said that he was greatly aided by the Brothers of the community, by the president of the Former Students Association (a skilful notary) and by the president of the Parents Association (head of the municipal *bureau social*). Brother Joachim quickly felt at ease with the students. In his search for unity in the establishment, he initiated an annual gathering of the whole school, not making any distinction between boarders and day pupils or according to age groups. In terms of management, the Brother Director and his assistants organised the finances, and undertook works for maintenance and security. Since the school buildings were very old and the town centre site was no longer suitable, the Brother Director, supported by the president of Former Students Association, planned the transfer of the school, following the example of the authorities of the Lasallian school in Lorient. He looked at possible locations and bought a site with the agreement of the Brother Visitor and Council. As he says himself, those first years as Brother Director of the

Saint Joseph school in Vannes were “extremely happy years”. Once again, we can note the characteristic positiveness and happiness of our subject’s personality.

## **A Student**

After a period of three years as headteacher, Brother Joachim had the joy of at last being able to realise his long-standing desire for further study and formation. In September 1961, he went to the Community of the Rue de Sèvres in Paris with a view to attending the *Institut Supérieur de Pastorale Catechétique* (ISPC) in the *Institut Catholique* of Paris. It was in the middle of a period of intense social change, and in order to fully understand the conditions in which Brother Joachim was developing, it is necessary to call to mind the context that prevailed in society and the Church at the time. The cultural excitement of the era was not just a question of renewal or of the usual intergenerational conflict. It involved a profound change in what people were experiencing and the things that they were pursuing.

The three currents of Marxism, nihilism and psychoanalysis (all characterised by suspicion) had led to increased scepticism and a generalised questioning of the religious world which was seen as mystification. Globalisation and the immediacy of media communication had fostered a breakdown of the reliable but restrictive framework of the traditional universe of human and religious values. In terms of Christian faith and at the level of the Church, whole areas of tradition were in the process of collapsing, and cries were being heard for a more personalised faith. For many people of the time, the convictions and practices inherited through Christianity no longer held good. The period saw the start of a radical decline in religious practice and a massive “exodus” of religious and priests.

For the first few weeks, as he exchanged the vibrant life of a headteacher in Vannes for that of a student's room, Brother Joachim found the solitude painful. But then he discovered the inspiring world of the Catechetical Institute (ISPC). There were sixty students, mostly priests, of whom many on graduation would move on to episcopal responsibilities or similar roles. He also discovered professors of great quality such as Father Gélinau (for Liturgy), the future Cardinal Daniélou (for Patristics), Father Liégé O.P., a remarkable man who answered students' questions with enthusiasm and insight and who directed Brother Joachim's final thesis on *The Religious Life as a Sacrament*. A spirit of openness and research characterised those years prior to the Second Vatican Council.

In the Rue de Sèvres, student Brothers from various countries were stimulated by Brothers of high quality such as Adrien Valour, Vincent Ayel and Didier Piveteau. In that Community, Brother Joachim became the person responsible for the student Brothers, who included in their number the Argentinian Brother, Genaro Sáenz de Ugarte, a future Vicar General of the Institute. All in all, these three years in Paris were for Brother Joachim, as he says himself, "happy years, where I learned to read in depth what was meant by an open Theology and Pastoral Ministry. It did me a world of good..."

## **Visitor of Brittany**

At the end of his time as a student in Paris, Brother Joachim thought he would be returning to his District of Brittany to take up a role in catechetics. Once more, his own expectations and the views of his Superiors did not coincide. The Brother Visitor, Donatien-Jules, had supported him closely during his

studies, and so Brother Joachim was not greatly surprised to be appointed Auxiliary Visitor during the annual retreat of 1964. Nevertheless, it was still something of another 'shock' for which he did not feel prepared. The fact was, he did indeed possess the qualities needed to take on the responsibilities of Visitor, namely good intuition about individuals, clear ideas about the actions to be taken and the reforms to be adopted, together with his personal convictions and acquired experience. Once Joachim was appointed, Brother Donatien-Jules was not slow to share with him his own experience as Visitor, supporting him with advice based on his knowledge of the District and the Brothers.

Brother Joachim spent the first year of office "getting to know the District better in my mind and my heart and in relation to my own capabilities", and he did not want to make any big changes. He invested a lot of effort in making personal contact with the Brothers, and he visited the thirty-three communities of the District. He was well liked by the Brothers and had good relationships with them. He received the obedience to become the Titular Visitor in 1966. Since he did not consider himself sufficiently competent in the area of schools and pedagogy, he called on two Brothers to undertake the inspection of schools, one for secondary and technical schools, the other for primary schools.

At the start of his term as Visitor, Brother Joachim was told by the Brother Assistant, Charles-Edmond, that he was to preside at the thirty days retreat in Notre-Dame du Rancher, near Le Mans, in the summer of 1965. He set about preparing the retreat and the fifty plus conferences he was expected to give and in which he concentrated especially on the drafts of the new *Rule* which were then being studied.

During the first session of the General Chapter of 1966/1967, the Brother Visitor of the District of Paris proposed that the District of Brittany should take charge of the school in Pantin, a working-class *banlieue* of Paris. It would involve setting up a community of older Brothers with no special qualifications, installing them in old school buildings that needed to be altered or rebuilt. It was a real challenge which the General Chapter discussed as part of the “return to the poor”. Brother Joachim was sensitive to the question being posed, and he contacted some Brothers with a view to forming a community of motivated people. The District Council of Brittany agreed to the project on condition that their District would assume total responsibility. It was decided that this generous missionary action would take place at the start of the school year in September 1967. Brother Joachim spared no pains in supporting the new community. One young Brother of the time, a future Visitor, wrote as follows: “His kindness and availability, his constant attention to individuals and situations, his sense of pastoral ministry, all made a profound impression on me as I was starting out on my active life as a Brother”.

When Brother Joachim followed Brother Donatien-Jules as Visitor, he promoted higher studies for the Brothers. At the time there were two Brothers deserving special mention who were working in that area with great zeal, namely Brother Vincent Ayel, in theological and catechetical studies, and Brother Didier Piveteau in secular studies and especially in education. In addition, there was Brother Honoré de Silvestri who was very influential in promoting the cause of the poor and the importance of committing the Brothers to it.

## Capitulant in the General Chapter of 1966/1967

Brother Joachim was elected as his District's delegate to the General Chapter of 1965 (as he would be to the following two Chapters). He needed to prepare himself for it, since this Chapter was a major event in his life and that of the whole Institute as an occasion of reform and renewal following on Vatican II. In the Chapter, they reflected on the basic principles for a new *Rule* and wrote *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration*. Brother Joachim was actively involved in all that.

Prior to that, we must mention Brother Joachim's participation as Visitor in the Conferences of the Brother Visitors of France. At the beginning of the 1960s, there were twelve Visitors in France. Three times a year they were called to a meeting by their national secretary, Brother Adrien Valour. "I was the youngest of them and the most recently appointed. I immediately began to perceive the complex set of problems which I had never had to tackle until then". They were problems which concerned especially the Brothers, their fidelity, formation and recruitment. Among the members of these Conferences, there were two main trends. The majority trend was in favour of openness. It was led by Brother Peyer of Lyons and included the Brother Visitors of Lille, Reims, Besançon, Le Puy and Clermont-Ferrand. Thanks to this trend, the Centre for Apostolic Preparation had been created for the young Brothers. The second trend was rather conservative. It included the Brother Visitors of Nantes, Brittany, Bordeaux and some elements in the Districts of Rodez, Toulouse and Béziers. Indeed, not only were there many differences between them, but the Districts were able



to insist on their autonomy: “the unity of France was in pieces”. We must add that Joachim points out how the three French Brother Assistants “had practically forbidden us to meet in order to prepare for the General Chapter”, while the Brother Capitulants from Spain on the one hand, and the United States on the other, were organising themselves thoroughly. As a result, at the beginning of May 1966, the French Brother Capitulants, arrived for an international assembly of 118 Capitulants without any joint preparation.

## **The First Session of the General Chapter (May-June 1966)**

Right from the start of the Chapter, the Assembly showed that it was determined to be autonomous and in control of itself, even when it came to the draft text of the *Rule* which had been prepared beforehand: “we decided to set it aside and determine our own rhythm for our programme”. The decision was taken to elect a committee with a commissioner and moderators. That had never been done before. On the one hand, the Spanish capitulants had a common understanding as did those from America, while no such common accord existed among the French or among the Europeans in general.

With regard to the work of the Chapter, Brother Joachim comments as follows: “We said straight away that what is needed to be done is not a Rule but a text which would provide inspiration”. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Commission, to which Brother Joachim belonged, made no delay in getting to work with the aim of producing a text which was to be called *A Declaration* with the subtitle *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today*. There were three leaders in the commission: a Spanish

Brother, Saturnino Miguel, an American Brother, Luke Salm, and a French Brother, Michel Sauvage. There was also one expert, Brother Vincent Ayel, and Brother Joachim was appointed as secretary.

Towards the end of May, the Chapter received a message from the Congregation for Religious ordering them to suspend work on their programme and to focus on article 10 of the Decree of the Vatican Council *Perfectae Caritatis* which concerned the adapted renewal of the religious life. The point referred to concerned the question of the priesthood in Lay Institutes of Religious Life.

Soon afterwards, Cardinal Antoniutti arrived one day “to tell us that this order was the will of the Pope. We did not agree, either with an order coming from outside, or with the stipulation made by the Cardinal who said to Brother Nicet Joseph, Superior General: “It is time for you to cease being Superior, for I have the impression that I have not been properly welcomed”. As a result, Brother Nicet Joseph declared his intention to withdraw and asked that his successor be elected.

In their preparations for the Chapter, the American and Spanish capitulants had come to an agreement that the Superior would be an American and the Vicar a Spaniard. When the time came for voting, there were no official sounding votes but there were contacts between the groups. Brother Joachim, with three other Brothers, was mandated by the French group. In the end, the American Brother Charles Henry was elected in the first round of voting for the Superior General and the Spanish Brother, José Pablo Basterrechea, was elected as Vicar General.

The Chapter then turned to consider the question of the priesthood. Lengthy discussions took place among the capitulants, largely because of the opposition of two Brothers. Finally, however, the majority of the capitulants voted in favour of the lay character of the Institute.

After that, the Chapter proceeded to elect the Brother Assistants. When it came to France, “we were determined to have no more than one Brother Assistant”. But it was not easy to find that one Assistant. It was Brother Adrien Valour who proposed the candidature of Brother Patrice Marey, who was not a capitulant. He was elected. There then remained the question of a Brother Assistant for the French-speaking missionary countries.

## **The Second Session of the General Chapter (October-November 1967)**

Preparations for this second session were made between June 1966 and October 1967 by inter-capitular groups. Meetings were organised among the French capitulants plus others from Spain and Belgium. There was no shortage of things to discuss, and notably the question of the planned *Declaration*.

At the start of the second session, and after some digressions, the Chapter set to work on drawing up the *Declaration* piece by piece. In his role as secretary/reporter for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commission, Brother Joachim did a lot of work on the proposed text, and he made a lot of interventions when presenting the text to the assembly. The following seven constitutive elements in the vocation of the Brother of the Christian Schools were identified, and for Brother Joachim “that was the main thing”.

- *“The Brother of the Christian Schools is a lay baptised person.*
- *who consecrates himself*
- *for a mission*
- *primarily, but not exclusively, in schools*
- *in order to bring the word of God (by catechesis)*
- *especially to the poor*
- *and to do all this in community.*
- *The aim of this statement was to define the identity of the Brother”.*

The *Declaration* was well received by the Assembly. It was a very motivating text, even if there was no need to make it sacred. After being voted on section by section, “the whole text was voted on at the end of the Chapter and approved almost unanimously”.

In the meantime, attention was given to the appointment of a Brother Assistant for the French-speaking missionary countries. Brother Patrice Marey, the Assistant for the whole of France, had said that he would not be able to take on the additional responsibility of the missions. Brother Joachim had spent two years preparing himself to become Titular Visitor of the District of Brittany and that was something planned for some time, so he did not see himself being Assistant for the French-speaking missions. Brother Donatien-Jules, who was still the Visitor of Brittany, intervened with a proposal which led to the election of Brother Felicien-Marie, the then Visitor of the Near East, as Assistant for the French-speaking missions. However, after just three months in office, Brother Felicien, who previously had no relationship with France, realised that he would be unable to fulfil the role and, in consequence, presented his resignation. Since the proposal to assign Brother François Kerdoncuf to the

post was not accepted, the Brother Superior General, with the agreement of the Brother Assistants, asked Brother Joachim to accept the appointment. Finally, Brother Joachim Mérian was appointed Assistant for the French-speaking missionary countries on November 27, 1967. One more “shock” and one more act illustrating his readiness to be available.

The Chapter ended on a very happy note, with votes overwhelmingly in favour of dealing especially with the lay character of the Brother, the *Declaration* and the *Rule* (still in an embryonic state). It was agreed that the new *Rule* would be drawn up in proper form. Modifications were made to just a few articles of the existing text, and the production of the definitive text was left to the next Chapter. The work was finished in effect at the Chapter of 1986.

## **Member of the General Council**

At Christmas time in 1967, Brother Joachim returned to his District to settle a few questions linked to his departure and to say his ‘Goodbyes’ to Brittany, which were no doubt emotional. In early January 1968, he reached Rome.

In view of the profound changes in society and the Church, the new General Council of the Institute had important work to do as it responded to some delicate problems. There was for example the situation created by the position adopted by the French fundamentalist and traditionalist, Brother Étienne d’Alès. The Council also had some difficulties in its own internal operation. The atmosphere was often a troubled one. The Brother Assistants had different responsibilities which sometimes clashed. There were too many Assistants, and they were “far from being of one mind”. Moreover, “Brother Charles

Henry, the Superior General, was a good man, but he did not assert his authority sufficiently and often found himself isolated”. That was all the more so because of some imprudent expressions he made in his conferences which he included without prior consultation. These were criticised even in some high places. Cardinal Garonne of the Curia is reported to have said to some Brother Assistants: “nowadays, it is not acceptable for a Superior General to talk about a post-Christian era”. It became necessary to defend the Superior by means of a *Communication to the Brothers* drawn up by four Brother Assistants, in the form of a presentation of the conferences, of around one hundred pages in length, with dense supporting notes of a theological, anthropological and a sociological nature. But this was not sufficient, and “Brother Charles Henry never got over it”.

## **Assistant for the French-speaking Missionary Countries (1968-1976)**

The Assistancy of the French-speaking Missionary Countries at that time included 463 Brothers among whom 184 were local Brothers, 173 were from Metropolitan France, 35 were Réunion French and 71 Brothers were of other nationalities. These Brothers lived in 13 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, in Madagascar, and in the eastern Mediterranean. Their situations differed greatly in their histories, cultures, political regimes, school programmes and religious contexts. They were organised into 4 Districts with 80 Communities. As Brother Joachim says, “I inherited an Assistancy which was entirely under construction and did not really exist. It comprised bits and pieces from the three former French Assistancies”.

In the Maghreb, there were two schools in Algeria, two in Morocco, and one in Tunisia. The nationalist movements and other complications meant that these establishments were very insecure.

In three countries, Brother Joachim was led to create a new Institute structure termed 'Delegation', and he did this with the help of Brother Maurice Auguste Hermans, Procurator General and canon lawyer. A Delegation consists in a small but homogenous group of Brothers who are given a certain autonomy under the authority of a 'Delegate' who is appointed by the Brother Superior General and supported by a President and a Council. Thus for example, the Brothers in Greece, whose links with Turkey were problematic, were pleased to have their own Delegation. The Brothers in Turkey were also interested in the possibility of forming a Delegation, but the limitations in their numbers and their ages meant they were attached to France. In addition, Brother Joachim combined the Brothers in Réunion with the few Brothers in Djibouti. Previous to that, in principle, they had belonged to the District of Egypt but were, in fact, very isolated.

Brother Joachim met with special difficulties in the District of Madagascar, in which there were around 75 Brothers (7 or 8 of them French) and a Madagascan Brother Visitor. At that time, the country was experiencing two revolutions. One was a political revolution involving the downfall of the old President Tsiranana, and his replacement by one of the generals, before Ratsiraka became head of state. Then there was a nationalist revolution among the students, which affected the student Brothers who were quite numerous. Brother Joachim asked them to be «100% Madagascan and 100% Lasallian». Unfortunately, the young Brothers had not received a strong Lasallian formation, so they found it difficult

to decide where they stood personally and several of them left the Institute. Against that background, Brother Joachim told the Brother Visitor to organise greater access to the riches of Lasallian spirituality by inviting speakers such as Brothers Michel Sauvage, Léon Lauraire, Brother Assistant Patrice Marey and some other Brother Assistants.

The District of Haute-Volta (which became Burkina-Faso in the 1980s) was flourishing and was the cause of great joy to Brother Assistant Joachim. Unfortunately, towards the end of his mandate, the local Brother Visitor was finding it difficult to communicate with people around him, including the members of the District Council whom he no longer called to meetings. Brother Joachim spent some time living in the District in an effort to restore some dialogue. The plan he designed did not get implemented, but at least the District Council started to meet again on a regular basis.

The District of Egypt was once very prestigious. It boasted the rich Colleges of Saint Marc in Alexandria and Daher in Cairo as well as popular schools. When Brother Joachim arrived, the situation was starting to get tense. The French Brother Visitor was nearing the end of his mandate, and he told Brother Joachim: “You will have to find someone from outside, since internally we are too divided”. The District was unable to decide on which aims it should set itself. Should they concentrate on the big Colleges or invest in the service of the poor? The Brothers were not of one mind. In order to respond to the challenge, Brother Joachim called on Brother Louis Baron who agreed to become the Visitor of Egypt. Fairly quickly, Brother Louis joined the side of the Brothers who favoured commitment to the poor. The reaction was not slow in coming. Some Brothers wrote to the Brother Assistant: “They demanded the removal of the Brother Visitor”. Brother



Joachim did not accept their proposal, but he did come to an arrangement whereby Brother Louis would offer his resignation which Brother Joachim accepted in the name of the Brother Superior General. He then summoned the Brothers to meet in Chapter in order to propose a successor to Brother Louis. At the end of the first and second rounds of voting, there remained three groups of five capitulants, and they supported different individuals as candidates. Consequently, Brother Joachim took the decision to propose as Visitor to the Brother Superior General the only Brother who was an Egyptian and who spoke Arabic. The Brother Superior accepted the proposal.

As Assistant for the French-speaking mission countries, Brother Joachim had a heavy load to carry. It was a difficult period for him, and he was “glad to reach the end of my mandate”. In the harsh conditions of travel and visits, he showed a good sense of pastoral openness and fraternity, which contributed greatly to a reconciliation among the Brothers. His understanding of administration meant he was able to set up new structures in the form of Delegations. In general terms, however, the years 1968-1976 were hard years for Brother Joachim because of the difficulties connected with the functioning of the General Council mentioned above.

## **A Capitulant at the General Chapter of 1976**

During the process of elections for the Superior General and General Councillors, Brother Joachim had, at one stage, been considered for the position of Superior only to then be dropped. It was a time of many emotions. According to him, however, the international spirit of the Chapter was, in general,

much calmer than previously although, viewed overall, the promotion of a responsible lay status was not yet a reality.

Two areas in particular occupied the attention of the capitulants. They were the large number of Brothers leaving the Institute and the new structures required for organisation and governance. The suppression of the old Assistancies meant that priority was now given to the Districts. When the number of General Councillors changed from 17 to 7, the regional aspect of the role of the Councillors meant them having to represent vast sectors. In France, that became possible in the end by the fusion of the eight Districts to create the District of France.

## **Brother Joachim in Monaco – 1976-1982 and 1985-1989<sup>3</sup>**

In the Principality of that time, there was a Priest Inspector of schools, but the post of Diocesan Director of Religious Education did not exist. As a result, there was a lack of unity in diocesan leadership. Brother Joachim was appointed to the post through a ‘sovereign ordinance’ of the Prince and a commission from the Bishop, and he proceeded to carry out the duties of the role to general satisfaction.

After scarcely seven months, however, the Brother Director of the *Annonciade* lycée died. The Brother Visitor had nobody he could call on to take on the work of managing the school and was obliged to ask Brother Joachim to do it. It was a

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<sup>3</sup> The Principality of Monaco, on the Mediterranean coast of France, is a sovereign state with its own religious administration agreed by Concordat.

responsibility in addition to his position of Diocesan Director of Religious Education. The *Annonciade* had in fact a critical management problem. There was no unity in the Institution, and it did not have a good reputation. Brother Joachim courageously set about rekindling the spirit and dynamism of the educational community and he sought, with diplomacy and perseverance, to bring unity to the establishment. After just a short time, the Minister of State said to him: “it is unrecognisable. All the talk that I hear is unanimous in saying the *Annonciade* is a very good establishment and that the parents are very satisfied”.

While Brother Joachim was working wonders in the Principality, the ensemble of Districts in France were moving towards a regrouping. In the *Midi*, it was not easy to bring cohesion to what were once five Districts recently united into two. In the course of a District Chapter, the Brothers of the *Midi* were of the opinion that Brother Joachim possessed the experience and authority needed to bring about the planned regrouping. So, our Brother accepted once again a new responsibility, as Visitor of the new District of *Midi-Méditerranée*.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the absence of Brother Joachim was soon felt in Monaco. He was no longer around to encourage the ageing Brothers “to accept willingly the demands of pedagogical renewal” and to ensure the continuation of the recently established unity. The Minister of State did not wait long before complaining to the Brother Superior General and, after just three years as Visitor, Brother Joachim had to resume his successful management of the work in Monaco. In the end, he was able to negotiate the withdrawal of the Brothers under favourable conditions.

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<sup>4</sup> Pour la suite du District « Midi-Méditerranée », voir ci-après.

In the light of his many fruitful years of work in the Principality, it was not surprising to see the distinctions awarded to Brother Joachim Mérian. They included the *Palmes Académiques*, the *Ordre National du Mérite* and the *Légion d'honneur monégasque*.

## **Visitor of the District Midi-Méditerranée (1982-1985)**

We have seen above how Brother Joachim was appointed Visitor when, in his own words, he “did not know anything about the District”. When the five Districts of the *Midi* of France were first united, there were lots of differences between them. The new District comprised around 200 Brothers in 22 Communities. Brother Joachim began by appointing the members of the District Council to whom he gave specific responsibilities (the schools, the elderly Brothers, finances, animation of young people and vocations). In this way, he enabled subsidiarity to be put into practice, and he was able to devote himself to visiting the communities. He was a man for personal contacts, with a good pastoral sense, and his visits enabled him to gain a personal knowledge of the Brothers in their different school and community settings. They also gave the Brothers the chance to appreciate their Brother Visitor.

Brother Joachim quickly came to realise two things. He was well received by the Brothers but, since the Brothers were what you might call ‘autonomists’, he remained for them an outsider. The District Community still needed to be constructed. He considered his role transitional, so he was happy to look round for some Brother from the Region who, after the right period of preparation, would be better able to engage the District in the process of unity.

According to one Brother who knew him well, Brother Joachim, as Visitor, breathed new dynamism into the District. He improved the living conditions of the Brothers in the retirement house. He promoted associations with the lay heads of schools. He renewed the fraternal links between the Provincial and the Brothers of the District. The same Brother also said: “we have lost a great Brother”.

## **Capitulant at the General Chapter of 1986**

For the third time, Brother Joachim participated in a Chapter “as an old hand”, and he notes that the thing that struck him most was the increase in the numbers and quality of representatives from the Third World, with their different angles and cultural approaches, the deeper understanding of the Founder, the enhanced authenticity, the concern for the education of the poor and the call to conversion. As he later wrote: “there are unforgettable moments when the Spirit is very close”.

## **Director of the Rue de Sèvres in Paris**

After the Brothers had left Monaco, Brother Joachim found himself available again at the age of 65. He would have loved to become involved in catechetics, but Brother Jean-Marie Thouard, Regional Visitor of France, appointed him as Director of the Rue de Sèvres, the central house in Paris for the Brothers and Lay Lasallians of France. It was also the residence of the Brother Regional and his team, a centre for Lasallian Formation and a house of hospitality for Brothers from France or from other countries. The community numbered some 25 Brothers.

Brother Joachim's first action as Director was to call in a firm of builders. The next seven or more years were spent in bringing the building up to the required standards and modernising the individual rooms, while ensuring that the lengthy works did not interfere too much with the various activities of the house and the ability to receive guests. Fortunately, Brother Joachim had the services of a good architect (a former student) and a Brother to act as a fearless clerk of works.

The former Assistant, Brother Patrice Marey, was the initiator and highly appreciated director of the French *Centre Lasallien de Formation* (CLF). From time to time he asked Brother Joachim to give presentations on prayer for educators. The sudden death of Brother Patrice was a shock to all who knew him, and once again Brother Joachim was obliged to step in for a while in order to ensure the direction of the CLF.

To all this, we can add one more exceptional service rendered by Brother Joachim in replacing temporarily, but with the utmost delicacy, the head of a Catholic *lycée* which was in crisis in Brittany. Once again, Brother Joachim rescued a very difficult situation by his commitment, his skill in relationships, his clear insight into individuals and his experience in administration.

In the opinion of Brothers who knew him in the Rue de Sèvres, Brother Joachim was very welcoming to the many people who passed through, Brothers and lay people. He was very fraternal in his approach and showed an attentiveness which put them at ease and made them feel at home. However, that did entail making demands on those working in the house that could sometimes be excessive.

As Director of the community, Brother Joachim was at pains to ensure that the life of the Brothers was fraternal, active and

prayerful. He considered the witness of community life to be an integral part of the mission of the community. Brother André Jacq was Visitor of the District of France during those years, and he gives us the following appreciation regarding Brother Joachim: “As Visitor, I was happy to take advantage of the benefit of his judicious advice and his fraternal judgments. I am profoundly indebted to him for the great support he gave me in my work”.

## **Director of the Community in Rouen**

After eight years as Director in the Rue de Sèvres, Brother Joachim was tired and, as he said, he also felt “a keen desire to be with children again”. He was assigned to the Rouen community which was part of the big school complex, Jean-Baptiste de La Salle. He arrived there at the start of the school year in September 1997, and took charge of religious education in the lycée. After three years, he was appointed as Director of the community.

At the age of 73, he still succeeded in arousing the interest and even the enthusiasm of the older students. He presented them with key themes, involving the participation of the students themselves in the process. One pupil says how Joachim’s presentations had a high content of reflection and argumentation, backed up by the fact that they were “key statements of a Brother”. To supplement the religious classes, Brother Joachim led those who wanted to go on spiritual weekends in a local abbey, and he invited them to form a group of “Young Lasallians” linked to a similar group in Reims. A number of vocations to the priesthood resulted from this apostolic activity. The only difficulty was down to the teachers who, though not hostile, were indifferent.

The Brothers in positions of responsibility who knew Brother Joachim in Rouen, were very appreciative of his presence and his activity there. Besides giving religious education lessons, he welcomed into his office the pupils who wanted to meet 'the older brother' who listened to them and showed an interest in them. The lay heads went to him for advice and support. He reminded the Brothers of the community that the responsibility for education and pastoral ministry in the schools was now in the hands of lay heads and not in those of the community. His presence was esteemed by those in administration and organisation, and among the teaching staff he built up a network of friendships and sympathy. When the Brothers' community was asked to withdraw, Brother Joachim no doubt experienced some sadness, but he faced it with faith and courage, persuaded that the Lasallian educational mission would continue in other forms and with other actors. For him, that was the essential thing.

## **In the Retirement Community**

With the passing years, Brother Joachim felt the increased fragility of old age. In particular, he began to experience a loss of vision. In 2006 at the age of eighty-two, he joined the retirement community in Kerozer, near Vannes. He was glad to be back in Brittany where he used to be Visitor, and the closeness to the Island of Arz, with its links to his family roots, was a cause of special joy. He knew all the retired Brothers, and was always ready to accompany them on a walk around the grounds. For his part, he appreciated receiving visits from other Brothers, and was always available to be of service. He was sensitive to the need for quality in the recitation of the office and in the homilies, and he made contributions to them



himself on the Feast of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. He maintained his freedom to speak his mind and was not averse to expressing his criticism of certain ecclesiastical options.

As Brother Joachim's sight became gradually worse, his Brothers used to read items from the newspaper La Croix to him, and he loved to comment on them. He maintained a very open mind and was interested in politics. He followed the media broadcasts and listened to selected audiobooks.

After a short while, he lost his sight completely and needed assistance. The staff took great care of him, and the Brothers took it in turns to help him move about and to talk to him. The restrictions of the Covid pandemic brought the hardship of obligatory isolation and a gradual loss of familiar points of reference. As a result, Brother Joachim began to call for help all the time and to become rather demanding. His health declined seriously, and he left this world in the presence of the nurse on February 16, 2021, in his 97<sup>th</sup> year and in the 79<sup>th</sup> year of religious life, leaving behind the darkness of this life to have, we may be sure, a meeting with his Lord.

His funeral service took place on Saturday, February 20, 2021, in the chapel of the retirement community in Kerozer. The words of farewell were pronounced by Brother Claude Reinhardt, Auxiliary Visitor, before a congregation limited by the pandemic to the community of Brothers, close family members and a few friends. Burial followed in the cemetery of the commune of Saint-Avé.

The words of the hymn for the departed which he had used in praying for others could rightly be now his own.

*The light will not now be hidden for much longer.*

*Winter can only give way to spring.*

*You know my name O Lord, and You are waiting for me.*

*You know my name my Lord, the living God!*

## Brother Joachim Mérian as a Person

After the above biographical survey, it is time now to focus on Brother Joachim as a person. Unless otherwise indicated, the following quotations all come from Brothers who knew him well.

One thing that stands out clearly is the number and great diversity of his missions and responsibilities between the ages of 34 and 82. One wonders just how Brother Joachim was able to move from a Breton *lycée* and District to the missions in the Near East and Africa, from the Principality of Monaco to the position of Visitor in the *Midi* of France, from the central community of the Rue de Sèvres, in Paris, to religious education for *lycée* students in Normandy, not to mention the rescue of a Breton establishment that was unfamiliar to him. This remarkable adaptability was, without any doubt, the sign of a strong personality.

Brother Joachim had a solid grounding in Humanities and Theology as a result of his years of higher studies and copious reading. It was especially due to his intellectual vitality, which he retained right up to an advanced age. “He was always keen to keep up to date on the most diverse subjects including questions of health, the life of the Institute, theology and the life of the Church. One was dealing with a man who was totally open-minded, gifted with a critical mentality and a fine sense of discernment. He knew how to combine convictions with tolerance”.

Brother Joachim was a man of relationships. He had a real physical presence and standing. He showed a quite remarkable eloquence with an ability to improvise a word of welcome or to deliver a well-prepared speech for an occasion or a brilliant and profound homily.

“Brother Joachim was, in the first place, an affable man who was easy to approach”. But that did not prevent him from being uncompromising when it came to services that needed to be rendered for the house. “Amiability, elegance and courtesy were his characteristics, and he showed them in his relations with Brothers and lay people”, and also with the authorities and high-ranking persons in Monaco. He knew how to welcome people. “He was pleasant company on social occasions, and his judgement was always sound, though sometimes critical and excessive, but when his excessiveness was corrected, he accepted it”.

Brother Joachim carried out, with competence and dedication, the responsibilities of the positions of Superior which were entrusted to him. He managed the items of work in an orderly way and with the appropriate respectful discretion. He had a feeling for organisation and for managing the reforms and restructuring that were necessary. He had good relationships with the Brothers, and he knew them well. For example, one Brother says about Joachim’s visit to Djibouti: “As soon as he arrived, he came to see me without any fuss, although I was digging a trench at the time. He allowed me great freedom to go about my everyday business”. As a Visitor, he knew how to give people renewed energy.

Brother Joachim was very attached to Saint John Baptist de La Salle, to the Institute and to the vocation of Brother of the Christian Schools. He would deliver the homily on the occasion of the Feast of Saint John Baptist de La Salle with great conviction. As a conclusion to his autobiographical notes under the heading ‘Future Perspectives’, he refers to John Baptist de La Salle as the Founder and guide of every Lasallian enterprise.

Brother Joachim showed his love for the Institute in many ways. He cared about the life of the District and of the Congregation. In the words of Brother Andre Jacq, Visitor of France: “Many were the times when he called my attention, discretely and always respectfully, to events and situations which he found challenging. I looked on him as a kind of ‘watchman’”. Another Brother says: “When I was surrounded by difficulties as a young Visitor, he was always there to reassure me”.

Brother Joachim was very committed to supporting and promoting association between Brothers and lay partners. “Right up to the end, he showed an interest in the Lasallian mission in France, especially regarding the setting up and the development of the La Salle Educational Fraternity”. And he was always ready to make his contributions to the meetings of local Fraternities.

Brother Joachim was dominated by a concern for vocations to the Brothers, as we can see from his own words in 1974. “ For me, the essential thing is what takes place in the senior classes, speaking to the older students from the heart, expressing one’s passion for the salvation of young people, showing one’s pride in being Lasallian. I cannot be satisfied with the thought that the Lord no longer calls people to be with us. I believe he is calling, and I pray that I may not be someone who tries to control His call and presumes to interpret his ways”.

In his ‘Future Perspectives’, Brother Joachim expressed his strongest convictions regarding the future of the Institute. He was in favour of redefining the vocation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the world as decided in the Chapter as something simple and permanently held by everyone. He called this a ‘charter’ and he explained it as follows. “If we

continue to dilute ourselves, we will not survive. We are people with a mission. Association is the most solid and central of our vows. We are associated in order to maintain, together and by association, schools for the service of the poor. Our association with lay people must not be a mercenary affair, looking for people to support or replace us. Our association with them should be a mission from God, who wants us to be clay for him to fashion. It is the Holy Spirit who does the work”.

Brother Joachim’s long and ardent life can only be understood as coming from an intense faith and as a gift to the Lord by being the religious that he was. Even if his modesty and discreteness restricted his expression of his spiritual life, he still allowed some aspects of it to show through. He saw apostolic zeal as being conditional on “our own life of faith, our interiority, the depth and duration of our prayer. My life as a Brother should make manifest in me as an individual and in my actions the absoluteness of God, through a certain prophetism without grand rhetoric or affectation, by my being a man who is conscientious in his profession, moved by an ideal, and obeying a call which transcends him, and to which he places no boundaries in a life directed towards God as a man of prayer and a man of God”.

His work with the older students led Brother Joachim to share with them his missionary enthusiasm, and it inspired the methods he put into place. Several Brother Visitors have underlined this point, and one of his former students put into writing the impression made on him by his former teacher: “Spirituality is not a question of devotions. It is something that makes us live according to the movement of the Holy Spirit in different areas:

- in a patient but ardent hope in God, in expectation of eternal life face to face with Him,

- in the giving of oneself to one's Brothers, not only by serving them every day, but also by gestures and warm words".

Brother Joachim affirmed his conviction of the relevance of the Brother's vocation of consecration to God in the work of education and the service of the poor carried out in community. "I believe in our vocation as Brothers; I believe in our role and our place among young people. I know that if we were to disappear, something would be missing for them".

To conclude, let us recall the remarkable readiness shown by Brother Joachim to be available for anything the Superiors asked of him. There were at least three key turning points in his life (becoming Director, Visitor, Assistant), when after the 'shock' of something that he was not expecting, and for which he was not prepared, Brother Joachim said 'Yes': "To go wherever I may be sent and to do whatever I shall be assigned".

Brother Joachim Merian "was a good servant of the gospel, of the Institute, of young people and of the Brothers". His presence was reassuring. While commanding respect, he radiated peace. He was, as he often said himself, a happy man.





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