The Choice to Begin Anew:
Anatomy of a Provincial Merger

by Thomas Johnson, FSC

"If religious life is to continue as a vital force in the Church and the world, changes must occur in most religious congregations in the United States" (Nygren-Ukeritis, FORUS Study). Not since the time of the French Revolution has there been such rapid change and transformation in religious life. These changes have affected how religious view their ministry, their congregations, and themselves. If true transformation is to take place, it is only natural that it is reflected in the organizational structure of the congregations themselves. Religious organizational structures must reflect the reality of the times in which we live.

One organizational response to the rapid change in religious life has been the merger of three provinces of the De La Salle Christian Brothers (FSC) into the newly formed Midwest Province. This new province, officially established July 1, 1995, is the fruit of several years of planning and decision-making. The purpose of this article is to examine the ideas, process, and results of the restructuring the St. Paul and Minneapolis, Chicago, and St. Louis Provinces into one.
Historical Background

From the 1850s until the 1960s, these three provinces were one. This fact resulted in its own set of positives and negatives when creating the new province. The Greater St. Louis Province was established from the New York Province, just as the population in the area was expanding in pre-Civil War days. In the 1950s and '60s, during the great vocation boom, the province had more than 750 vowed members, ministering in forty-nine high schools and three colleges in eleven states across the Midwest, from Minnesota to Tennessee and from Ohio to Kansas. Besides the vowed religious, there were another 150 or more in formation.

Because of its immense size, the province was divided in the mid-sixties into three smaller provinces of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Chicago, and St. Louis. The belief at the time was that the rapid growth would continue unabated. Unfortunately, the division of the larger province was acrimonious due to disagreements over property and personnel. The St. Louis Province was awarded the lion's share of financial resources since it was believed that the two northern provinces, being in heavily Catholic areas, would have a better chance to raise funds and recruit vocations. This division of resources proved to be a source of controversy for years after the division of the provinces.

In the early 1970s, all three provinces began to experience a decline in membership. Each withdrew from schools because of the lack of manpower. Yet, while they all experienced diminishment, there was little formal communication or cooperation between the provinces. Each developed its own identity, customs, policies, and procedures.

During the 1980s, the three provincial teams began to meet to discuss mutual concerns. These discussions led to cooperation in areas of vocation ministry, personnel, and publications. Eventually, this cooperation became the source of the reunification of the three provinces. The fact that the three provinces had once been one province was a two-edged sword. Because many of the men knew each other and had worked all over the Midwest, none of the three provinces was a complete mystery to any of the others. However, the acrimonious split and the fear of going back to a nostalgic "good old days" were obstacles that had to be overcome in the unification process.

General Principles of the Merger

Grass Roots Movement. The process that resulted in this merger came about gradually. However, several principles guided the entire process. First, it was essentially a grass roots movement. While the provincial teams worked to make it happen, the groundwork was laid by several years of cooperation.

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fraternal gatherings, sharing of personnel, and communications. The idea itself was born among the members of the provinces. It is unlikely that any successful merger could have been accomplished without this kind of grass roots support.

**A New Province.** Secondly, the merger was seen as the creation of a new province rather than a return to the former Greater St. Louis Province, even though the geographic area was the same and a large number of the brothers had been members of the former province.

Leadership agreed that this was the time to create a new entity that would reflect and respond to our present situation and the needs of the times. To come back together without a new philosophy and new view of our vocation and ministry would be non-life-giving. It would simply have been a retrenchment. Our aim was to re-formulate our mission as De La Salle Christian Brothers in the Midwestern region of the United States.

**Decision on Vision, Not on Details.** Third, throughout our thinking and discerning on the process of uniting, we decided that the issues for decision would be based on the general goal of creating a new province rather than on any of the particular details of reorganization. The brothers ultimately voted on whether or not they favored creating the province without knowing what the structure, finances, or effect on their ministries would be.

Like Abraham and Sarah, the brothers were invited to begin a new journey in faith, not knowing where it would lead them. We felt that the "devil was in the details" and that excessive discussion of details would take the focus away from the key issues of creating a new, post-Vatican II province. Thus, the organizational decisions were made after the vote and are still in process.

**The Process: How It Happened**

During the mid-1980s, the three provincial teams began to meet to share mutual concerns. At this time, there was no formal talk of merging. However, the meetings offered a chance to explore ways to collaborate in areas of mutual interest. During this period, a gathering of present and former brothers of the three provinces was held at one college during the summer.

The gathering generated a certain amount of talk among the rank and file about reunifying the provinces. After this, an extensive survey on cooperation among the three was taken. One final question on the survey asked if there was an interest in merging the provinces. The response to the survey was generally positive, but not uniformly so. However, the idea was planted and discussed informally from time to time.

Cooperation continued, and over a three-year period, the provinces opened a joint formation house, cooperated in vocation programs, established local youth groups in the schools, cooperated on overseas missions, held several workshops, celebrated jubilees together, and held an annual joint retreat. These experiences allowed the brothers to mix and become familiar with one another. This interaction strengthened the possibility for formally coming together.

In 1990, the three administrations asked their councils if they wished to meet to discuss areas of mutual concern. (In our institute, a provincial council is an elected board of eight to ten members who meet periodically to decide policy and advise the provincial. The administration is the full-time provincial team.) This was the first such meeting of all three councils. Additionally, representatives of the Provinces of New Orleans-Santa Fe and Toronto were present since there had been some mutual cooperation with these provinces on a volunteer program.

Over three days in the summer, the three councils talked in an atmosphere of cooperation and community. Because of the meetings, the councils decided to form one vocation and formation team, to increase communication by creating a *Tri-Province Personnel Directory and Newsletter*, to share ministry openings and personnel, to jointly fund a Lasallian Family Coordinator to develop lay formation programs and to explore new models of cooperation. This last agreement came after a motion from the floor to begin the process of a
merger was defeated. Most council members felt that it was premature to make such a decision. The more general—
explore new models of cooperation—was passed to keep the idea open, acknowledging that enough ground work had not been done to push the issue.

It would be two years before the councils met again. During this time, the administrations met three times a year. Publications were jointly sent, formation programs continued together, and some personnel was shared. In 1992, one of the provincials proposed that the councils meet again and this time deal directly with the issue of merging. This request came from a feeling that many of the men were getting anxious for a decision, one way or another. To prepare for this important meeting, the service of a facilitator was obtained. Additionally, we asked for input from two groups who had just completed restructuring: Sister Janet Roesener of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, and Brother Jean-Marc Cantin of the De La Salle Christian Brothers of Canada.

Before the meeting, the facilitator, Elaine Gaston, asked for each council member's impressions of the other provinces and of his own. The purpose was to surface fears, myths, and impressions about the process. The three-day meeting began with some uncertainty since there were apparently fears about making the move. The fears—such as loss of identity, loss of autonomy, change in ministry focus and financial concerns—were surfaced. After several group discussions, each council met on its own to discuss what they had heard.

When the groups reconvened, the province that seemed the most uncertain early on about the merger proposed that a merger be put to a vote by the three provinces. This would include a study by the administrations and others of:

- goals for a merger,
- ways of greater collaboration in ministry,
- a report of the financial situation of each province,
- a report of the history and creation of each of the three provinces,
- two to four models of governance for a new province,
- a time-line that would call for another tri-province council meeting, a vote on the issue, and an assembly of all the brothers by 1994.

After considerable discussion, the issue passed unani-
mously. The six items listed were attempts to answer issues raised by the councils. Goals for the merger and ways of collaboration in ministry were badly needed because there still had been no clearly articulated reason for coming together. Some felt it was an administrative reorganization, others felt it was a chance to circle the wagons in the face of numerical decline and financial difficulties, and still others felt it was a chance to recreate our vision in a new age. The administrations felt that there could be no vote without a clear vision on the reason for the merger.

A report on the finances was needed to give a picture of the finances of the three provinces before the vote. The financial situation was not equal since one province had significantly more assets than the others. Some felt this would make a difference in how the groups voted. A history of the creation of the three provinces was asked for to deal with whatever feelings some members had about the acrimonious division of the provinces thirty years before. There were still negative feelings about the division with which to contend. Lastly, some models of governance were asked for so that the brothers would have a sense of what the new province would look like.

The three administrations had the task of preparing the study. The first issue was to dispel some myths, both positive and negative, about the merger.

The merger would not mean more brothers in the apostolates, it would not mean a consolidation of our ministries, it would not mean more vocations or a return to the nostalgic notion of “the good old days.” After serious discussion and prayer, the three administrations issued some goals for the merger for consideration by the brothers. They were:

- A merger would provide us with a critical moment to create a new province that can respond to the call of the Institute at the present time.

This goal suggested two important concepts. First, we were creating a new province not simply combining three. This meant that we were beginning with a new spirit and operating in a way that reflected our present Church. Secondly, we would form a province by answering our Institute’s call to share our ministry with our lay colleagues and respond more effectively to the poor.

- A merger would provide a redirecting of talents and resources for mission and leadership in a new province.

Essentially, we felt that we would create a kind of critical mass of talents and energy that could refocus our efforts in Catholic educational ministry. This was not to say that there would be any more brothers in the Midwest, but there would be a chance for brothers and colleagues alike to reevaluate and

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redirect energies to the realities of the urban poor, the problems of youth, and the Catholicity of our high schools and universities.

- **A merger would strengthen association and the Lasallian family for the mission of the province.**

  We believed that this new critical mass would provide the resources needed to continue to form lay colleagues in our mission and give them further opportunities for leadership in our ministries. There would be improved resources to reformulate our mission.

- **A merger would provide for the sharing of material, financial, organizational, and program resources.**

  In the face of unfunded retirement resources, the merger would reallocate resources and provide financial development opportunities on a larger scale. A new provincial organization would be able to draw more effectively on personnel resources to create formational, educational, and renewal opportunities better than any of the smaller existing provinces could manage.

  Finances were a big concern for many of the brothers, but the administration felt that it could not be the deciding factor in the decision, one way or another. Each province did an actuarial study projecting retirements for the next twenty years; then together, we completed a combined study. The study found that each province individually and the three together would be underfunded for retirement. Part of the study included an understanding of what apostolates and properties were owned by the provinces. Financial operations were studied and we found that the three provinces operated quite differently financially. This would be a hurdle that a potential new province would have to overcome.

  The issue of the history of the division of the provinces was explored and the administrations decided not to accept the councils’ recommendation to write the history. While there were and are some hard feelings about the breakup and a sense that some injustice was done in the past, the administrations felt there was little interest in going back to this. Increasingly, the feeling among the brothers was to look to the future. They dropped revisiting the past issues in response to the grass roots feeling that it was not necessary.

  The administrations grappled with models of governance for the new province and came up with three models. As part of this process, the administrations came to realize that in creating something new, the province could not be geographically divided. Such a division would simply keep the old provinces intact. Additionally, the administration felt that the brothers could not vote on the model of governance or finances as part of the package. Instead, these decisions needed to be...
made after the vote.

The idea of the merger itself was the issue. It had to be an issue of faith and vision, not one of details. We believed this for two reasons. First, any presentation of details would generate opposition in some quarters over some detail, with the result that the decision would not be made on the idea of creating something new, but on the politics of governance and finance that were not at the core of who we are. Secondly, we felt that the issue had to be presented in the context of the goals listed above. In voting to come together, we were responding to a call to journey together and recreate a province in today’s Church. That was the key issue, the details were ancillary to that.

These were the ideas presented to each group. The three administrations met in the fall of 1993 with each of the provinces in a series of assemblies to discuss the goals, get ideas and feedback from the group, and to discuss any issues that individuals might have. These meetings provided ways for the brothers to look at the issues the councils discussed, ask questions, and debate the ideas of the mergers. The presence of the three administrations at each gathering allowed questions to be asked about the status and spirit of all the provinces.

The Fears of Merging

The meetings with the three provinces provided the administrations with a chance to get a feel of the reactions of the brothers to these ideas and to the merger itself. There was not a great deal of opposition to the idea, but we listened carefully to those who expressed fears about the merger. Some feared the loss of the closeness of the smaller provinces while others feared the loss of the particular gifts that each of the three provinces felt made them unique. Others wanted more details about the organization of the merger. How would the district be governed? What financial arrangements would be made? What would become of present provincial sites?

These issues were taken to the final combined meeting of the three provincial councils. The councils created a statement called The Choice to Begin Anew. This statement recapped the collaboration of the three provinces over the years and called the brothers to look toward the future. The statement repeated the need for close collaboration and inclusion of our lay
colleagues in our work, and it called for the creation of a new province rather than a merger as a response to the times.

The Choice to Begin Again statement also focused on ministry rather than internal or congregational issues, showing that we must not look in on ourselves but outward to the work we are called to do. Lastly, the document reinforced the idea that we would ask the brothers to vote on the broad idea of a new province and leave decisions about the details of organization to a process after the vote. By doing so, we were asking the brothers to make a leap of faith and begin a new journey together, not fully knowing how it would affect us.

Preparing for the Vote

Other decisions to prepare for the vote had to be made, including a calendar for implementation if the vote was positive, what to do if only two of the three provinces voted favorably, how to put a chapter together assuring representation of all areas, how to incorporate our lay colleagues, and what canonical procedures should be followed. The councils decided the following procedures:

- The vote would be taken in simultaneous assemblies in each of the three provinces.
- A two-thirds majority of the brothers voting in each province was required for passage.
- If two provinces vote in favor and one did not, formation of a new province would not go on, formation of a new province from any two would be a separate issue.
- If the vote passed, a chapter of the new province would consist of thirty-six brothers, twelve from each of the present provinces, with no one going by right. Eight lay consultants would be chosen to be non-voting members of the chapter. All representation would be at-large rather than representing parts of the district. The three provincials would appoint a preparatory commission.
- A calendar for the creation of the province was included, allowing for election of chapter delegates; three, four-day sessions of the chapter in each of the three areas; a process for nomination of the provincial; election of a council; and the beginning of the province by July 1, 1995, a year-and-a-half after the vote.

The proposition was sent to each brother one month ahead of the vote to allow more time for discernment and discussion. On September 25, 1993, the voting took place simultaneously in St. Louis, Chicago, and Minneapolis. Eighty-five percent of the brothers voted in favor of creating the new province. The vote varied somewhat in each province, but not significantly. The brothers voted to begin a new journey together. Three days after the vote, the superior general and council in Rome approved the plan. The work to make the vision a reality would now begin.
The Creation of the Province

The chapter began in February 1994 at Christian Brothers University in Memphis with a presentation on the future of religious life by Sister Clare Fitzgerald and a facilitated day of discussions led by Bob Bimonte, FSC, of the New York Province. These discussions focused on what we needed to keep as we moved to a new province, and what we needed to discard from the old provinces. Again, in keeping with our objective, this exercise focused on the creation of something new rather than a simple administrative reorganization.

On subsequent days, committees were organized around topics of ministry, formation, governance, finance, and community. The thrust of the chapter was to create a vision of the province that defined itself as men and women, brothers and lay, who were united in carrying out Catholic education in the Lasallian tradition.

This was a major departure from the view that saw the province solely in terms of brothers. This chapter represented an inclusive view of our work, seeing our ministry as done by brothers and colleagues alike. The chapter also provided for representation on the council of all three former provinces for the first term, only to assure that there would be sufficient representation in all areas. Throughout the early stages of the creation of the province, care was taken to ensure that all areas were being represented equally.

At the third session of the chapter, all members of the province attended a joint assembly to celebrate the birth of the new province, to give input to chapter commissions, and to elect a provincial. This was the first gathering of the group, and it provided a link between the work of the chapter and the broader membership of the province.

A Year of Transition

A year remained until the official beginning of the province. There was some criticism of how long it was to take. East and West Germany united in less time. The reality was that a new administrative team needed to be chosen. A new provincial site had to be chosen since the chapter felt it was symbolically important to have a new place rather than one of the three existing provincial sites. The finance committee designed a budget based on the past experiences of the three provinces, understanding that this first year would be truly a guessestimate for the budget.

When the new team was in place, meetings were held frequently to plan for the future and how we would unify the province. While there was clear support for the new province, much work was needed to create a sense of unity and to break down old prejudices. The team issued a pastoral letter on the first day of the new province, outlining goals and calling for new ways to view ministry, community, and vocation.
Beginning Anew

As the province began, the provincial team spent a month making visits to eight areas of the province for a broad discussion of ideas and goals. This provided an opportunity for each brother to get to know the team and to give their ideas to the team. Additionally, we planned a program to call small groups of brothers and lay colleagues from all over the province to participate in "Weekends in Chicago." These meetings provided a chance for prayer, discussion, and recreation around particular topics: campus ministers and religion department heads, community directors, Lasallian youth group moderators, secondary school administrators, brothers in formation, and brothers living and working outside the province. Each of these meetings allowed individuals to get to know each other more personally, to get a sense of the various ministries of the province and to allow the provincial team to meet people and get a sense of the issues facing our ministries.

The Newly Emerging Province

We are slowly working toward developing a new financial policy for the province, a delicate issue. In that process, we are really operating three policies now, while a new one is developed. We are involving as many members of the province as possible in creating new policies and systems for opera-