

Being a Lasallian University Today

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A Story

There is a story told about a young man who entered a monastery. Very soon afterward, he began to notice and to be dismayed by the fact that monks, especially ones older than he, were leaving the monastery. Troubled and confused, he went to the abbot. Why, he asked, did some men, after having committed themselves to a way of life, forsake it for something else? The abbot responded with a story:

Once upon a time, a dog lay sleeping in the warm sun of the village square. All of a sudden, out of the corner of his half-opened eyes, he spied a rabbit darting across the road. He took off immediately in hot pursuit. He ran up and down the streets and through the countryside, keeping up the chase day and night and seeming never to tire. Eventually, other dogs saw him and joined the run. But, one by one, they grew tired and stopped running. They were running only because they had seen the first dog doing so. They had never caught sight of the rabbit in the first place. So, the abbot concluded, the one who has never glimpsed the vision grows easily tired of running. He gives up the chase because he cannot remember why he had begun to run in the first place.³

So as you are about to begin this year's chase – or have begun already – it is important, I believe, to keep in view a vision which can sustain us and motivate us as educators.

The Lasallian Vision

So the question we might ask ourselves is: what is your vision, or what is your passion? Or what brings you here today, or back here again? Although as individuals, you may have a variety of reasons you are here, we are reminded from Scripture: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."⁴ Vision and motivation is essential to any worthwhile endeavor.

Today in this short time we have together I wish to say something about the nature of the Lasallian heritage that we share. Secondly, I will reflect on this vision in terms of Lasallian higher education in a way that I hope will have some meaning within the reality of Christian Brothers University and, thirdly, how we are linked to a worldwide network of Lasallian institutions including universities.

The Lasallian Heritage

The Christian Brother University (CBU) Mission Statement begins with the words: "Christian Brothers University is a Catholic university founded on the heritage of Lasallian education." This heritage includes a worldwide network based on the inspiration, work, and writings of John

Baptist de La Salle. Of course, you have your own personal vision of your educational work; but the hope is that you can incorporate the Lasallian vision within it.

To begin with, we had better be clear about the meaning of that elusive word Lasallian. It is unfortunate that sometimes it is stretched to mean almost anything. That term makes sense only if it derives from and refers to the seventeenth-century French priest whose name is John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. De La Salle was a man of vision in that he could see clearly the world in which he lived. He was not a man who could foresee the future but a man of the present who could see present problems and find creative but practical solutions. Creativity and practicality are important aspects of De La Salle's life and the way his vision is carried out.

John Baptist de La Salle was a priest and kind of a reluctant Founder, who around 1680 found himself "helping" to stabilize schools for poor boys in Rheims, France. Some of his ideas are the following.

(1) Boundary breaking: personally, spiritually and geographically, moving beyond what was comfortable and known. De La Salle lived a good but comfortable life. But through his engagement in the foundation of the schools, he moved beyond his town and experience to start a movement.

(2) Forming an educational faith-based community: De La Salle saw the school as a community, believing that education best happens in a community. I quote from your Mission statement:

Christian Brothers University is large enough to provide significant educational opportunities but the University is small enough to promote teaching as ministry to provide challenging student-centered learning and personal growth.

I noticed the opening words on your website mentioned community.

(3) Teaching as charism: this theological word is related to the idea of a gift or a power. It is something akin to a vocation.

Educator and writer, Quaker Parker Palmer describes it this way:

Vocation at its deepest level is, "Something I can't not do, for reasons I'm unable to explain to anyone else and don't fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling."⁵

For the grammarians, this double negative is intentional. Teaching and educating, to those who are called, is something they cannot avoid; they have to do it.

(4) Therefore, our teaching is a ministry more than a job or occupation; it is a vocation, a call and a ministry regardless of one's own religious preference.

(5) Seeing students as disciples: sharing oneself with them, more than information delivery. Years ago, I used to change De La Salle's word "disciple" to "student" until I came to understand teaching is sharing one's life, one's values, and motivation with our students. I remember at a board meeting of another university when someone said that a university is an information delivery system. I thought "no;" it is more than that; it is a community of learners in relationship.

(6) Lastly, being Lasallian means having special concern for the marginalized and poor in our society and in those who come to us. It is why we work so hard to find scholarship aid.

A Lasallian University

In the CBU Mission statement, it states unequivocally that the university is Catholic; but it also says: "Students of diverse cultures and religious traditions are encouraged to grow in their own faith." In Asia and in the Mideast, we have schools where the vast majority of students are Buddhists, Hindu, or Muslim. So what does it mean then to be Catholic? The question, then, is how can we be Lasallians together and by association in a world and on our local campuses that are so pluralist in belief and culture? This leads me first to a personal observation on our society today.

Sometimes I have been asked, that after living seven years in Italy, what have I noticed that has changed in the United States. What I notice, is the pervading sense of fear in our country. I see that in so many personal conversations and news stories the emphasis is fear. We seem to be less the "home of the brave" and more the "home of the afraid." I came across this quote from John Chapman:

People get so in the habit of worry that if you save them from drowning and put them on a bank to dry in the sun with hot chocolate and muffins they wonder whether they are catching cold.⁶

It is not very recent, but it expresses a common attitude.

Of course, sometimes we have to act on well-founded fears, but fear can be deadly when it governs our lives; when we fear ideas different from ours, and people different from us. Yet, it is said that the most common expression in the Scripture is "Do not be afraid."⁷

I believe that one of the roles of the university in this Lasallian tradition is to be counter to this culture of fear, to be universal, to open up minds, to provide new ways of looking at old and new problems, to challenge our notions and even our ideals, so that we can have well-integrated individuals who see themselves not only as citizens of the nation and the world but agents in its development. We boast, and with good reason, of the material and career success of graduates; but we also must encourage in them a sense of responsibility for the common good if we are to live up to our Lasallian heritage.

CBU is a very diverse place with students from 26 states, 21 countries, and a population that is 42% minority and 10% international. This kind of atmosphere opens the eyes of students and provides for opportunities to go beyond the culture of fear.

One of the changes we experience in all Lasallian universities is the religious diversity of our students and staff and the uncertainty about the role and place of belief in a Catholic and Lasallian university today. Of course, religious diversity is not new at CBU or in Memphis; but we do proclaim ourselves to be Catholic. What does this mean for us now? Are we Catholic, and in what way? Are we Catholic and Lasallian, and how? Or are we either Catholic or Lasallian?

In the Core Values in your Mission Statement you mention: faith [our belief in God permeates every facet of the university's life; this statement is extremely challenging and very difficult given the many situations encountered each day]; service [reaching out to serve one another and those beyond our campus]; and we work to build better communities on campus and in society.⁸

This statement emphasizes the community building and sense of association that I am speaking about. I have met Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists who can call themselves Lasallian because they can accept elements of the holistic Lasallian education: the notion of touching hearts and student centeredness and apply it as teachers and educators. While Lasallian education is always based in Catholic teaching and belief, elements of it apply to people who are not Christian. Father John Haughey, SJ, speaking at Saint Mary's College in California, was very clear that a Catholic university is not a parish; it is not a Church.⁹ The point is that the university has to be a place where ideas are respected but also respectfully disagreed with. The development of critical thinking is the key to maturity, as is courage in the face of fear; and it can be a source of spiritual growth.

Some years ago, the late Archbishop Pietro Sambi, Papal Nuncio or Ambassador to the Holy Land, gave his insights on Catholic identity to reporter John Allen:

When you are a minority, as Catholics are in this culture, you need three strong principles. The first is a clear identity, a clear sense of what you are and what you want to be. As a minority, if you lack a clear identity, you're like a drop of wine in a glass of water . . . you'll disappear. The second thing is a strong sense of belonging. I would express it in this way: you need a community, and the community needs you. Whoever walks alone sooner or later will be lost in the desert. Third, when you are a minority, you need a deep commitment to excellence. You must excel in human qualities, in family qualities, in professional qualities, in the qualities of Christian life, in order to be a light for others. If you don't have a sense of excellence, you will be submerged by the majority.¹⁰

A Catholic university must be strong in its identity but open to dialogue, as in the story of Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well.¹¹ He sat with her and talked with her; he did not change his message but listened to her. Being Lasallian provides a great opportunity for listening and dialoguing.

There is no easy answer to this issue of Catholic identity, and there will continue to be tensions around the issue of Catholic and Lasallian identity. While some Catholics may say they identify more with the Lasallian charism than with the Church, we have to remember that De La Salle's values were rooted in Catholic Christianity. He called his schools Christian schools. I think when we Catholics feel disaffected at times from the Church, it is sometimes because Church representatives sometimes are not perceived as acting with Gospel values. How then do we deal with this on the university level? We must remember that we are sometimes the representatives of the Catholic faith to our students and co-workers. I think that we may have to look back to the nature of the Lasallian university itself and to our Gospel values as our guide and vision.

A Worldwide Network

We often use the phrase “together and by association” to describe the Lasallian mission. The words “together and by association” come from the vow of De La Salle and his first Brothers in 1691, when they made a vow of association just as we Brothers vow today “to remain in society, with the Brothers of the Christian Schools who are associated to conduct together and by association, schools for the service of the poor.”¹²

The purpose was not only to create a community with one another for their own sake but also to join together for the sake of the young people. It was a vow that expanded the horizons of the small group beyond the first schools in Rheims when they were called to open other schools in Paris. The gratuitous Christian school was no longer a local project in one city. It was becoming a movement pushing geographic and personal boundaries. The late theologian and Lasallian scholar Brother Luke Salm once pointedly told a group of Lasallian university professors that “together and by association” is not simply working together. The military works together, corporations work together, plumbers work together. You get the idea. The notion of together and by association implies being together, in a local community where life and values are shared, but also being associated across the borders for the sake of a human and Christian education.

It is always together, locally with our fellow educators and with our own students, and by association, with the larger Lasallian world, that our mission is carried out.

To be in association, in the sense we speak, is to understand that the Lasallian mission is greater than any one ministry or institution. Therefore, we are challenged by this notion to look beyond the confines of our campuses to see how we can cooperate and share this mission.

The point is that we are part of an international network of diverse schools, universities, colleges, and educational centers. We share one mission that is lived in diverse educational works and agencies. When we talk about the Lasallian mission in one part of the world, we always need to have an eye on the larger or global picture. We value both the diversity of our ministries and the balance and unity within a District, Region, or the Institute.

Yet, Lasallian colleges and universities are not cookie-cutter copies of one another. We are not McDonald's or Starbuck's. Each work is designed to meet local needs and has a unique culture and way of being Lasallian, but we also share a common worldwide mission. The way you carry out this Lasallian mission in Memphis at CBU is unique to meet the need here.

The Lasallian worldwide Institute has over 900 institutions in 77 countries of the world. There are over 90,000 teachers and staff members and over 900,000 students. These schools range from primary schools made of bamboo in Cambodia to well-respected secondary schools in most of the major world capitals, and in over 70 tertiary institutions (including over 50 universities).

I want to mention only one example. In Jaffa, Israel, there is a unique Lasallian school, kindergarten to grade 12, that has Christian, Jewish, and Muslim teachers and students witnessing to the hope that these groups in the Mideast can live and work together. Quite openly they express that it is the common Lasallian approach to education that unifies them as a school. I keep as a precious reminder: a small handmade paper cutout of the peace dove with the flags of Israel and Palestine and with the word Peace [in Hebrew, Arabic, and English]. It was given to me by the first-graders in this school, which is the living example of how we can learn to live and learn from each other in an educational faith community that respects differences. If we do not teach the values of living and learning together in peace, we cannot expect our society to have those values.

Conclusion

Once again, we journey together as one local community and in association with a great international network for the sake of all those students and fellow educators entrusted to us. Let us all be open to the challenges and blessings of our common Lasallian mission. Let us realize that this mission of Lasallian education is a privilege. It is a privilege to be a Lasallian educator and touch hearts and a privilege to be a student in a Lasallian school. Therefore, let us take care of our younger hearts' desire and passion that called us to education and nourish the passion and desire of the young people entrusted to us.

I am grateful for the invitation to be here and for your attention to my few comments. I wish you success in your commitment and efforts to journey together and by association with the students to new horizons so that our world may somehow be a better place.

Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered during the course of a convocation at Christian Brothers University in Memphis on August 18, 2016.

2. Brother Thomas Johnson, who earned MA and MEd degrees from De Paul University, is a former Vicar General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (2007-2014). He currently serves as director of novices for the Lasallian Region of North America in Chicago, IL.

3. Douglas Fisher (editor), *Why We Serve: Personal Stories of Catholic Lay Ministers* (Paulist Press, 1984).

4. *Proverbs* 29:18.

5. Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (Jossey-Bass, 1999).

6. *The Collected Works of John Jay Chapman* (M&S Press, 1970).

7. For example, see: *Matthew* 14:27, 17:7, 28:10; *John* 6:20; *Isaiah* 35:4, 41:10, 43:1; *Joshua* 1:9; *Deuteronomy* 31:6.

8. Cf. *Circular 447: The Documents of the 43rd General Chapter* (Rome, 2000), page 24. Recommendation #9 of the Evangelization Commission stated “that each Lasallian, each Lasallian group, and each Lasallian program of renewal or formation adopt the following guiding principles: *faith* sharing (this makes possible inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue), *service* of the poor through education, and *community* building.

9. Cf. John Haughey, SJ, “Cum Laude: The Reason for a Catholic College.” Unpublished address delivered in April 2010.

10. Quoted in *Aggie Catholic Blog* of Saint Mary’s Catholic Center at Texas A & M University, April 7, 2008.

11. Cf. *John* 4:1-42.

12. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 2015), #25.