

Message of Pope Francis to the Brothers of the Christian Schools and to the Lasallian Family

Pope Francis

I welcome you who represent the entire spiritual family founded by Saint John Baptist de La Salle, on the occasion of the third centenary of his death.

I greet and thank Brother Robert Schieler, Superior General.

I greet each and every one of you with fondness and I would like you to extend my greetings to all the Brothers of the Christian Schools who work in the Church with generosity, competence and faithful adherence to the Gospel. This important anniversary of your Founder is a positive occasion for your Institute to emphasize the person who was a pioneer in the field of education. He conceived the idea of an innovative educational system for his time. His example and testimony confirm how original and new his message for today's Christian community is, highlighting the way forward. He was brilliantly and creatively innovative in the vision of the school, in the concept of the teacher, in teaching methods.

His vision of the school led him to develop ever more clearly the belief that education is a right for everyone, including the poor. For this reason, he did not hesitate to give up his canonry and his rich family legacy, to devote himself entirely to the education of the lower social class. He created a community of only lay people to promote his ideal, as he was convinced that the Church could not remain indifferent to the social contradictions of the times, which it is called to face.

It was this principle that led him to establish an original experience of consecrated life: the presence of religious educators who, without being priests, could interpret the role of "lay monks" in a new way, throwing themselves completely into the reality of their time, and thus contributing to the progress of civil society.

Living in contact every day with the school environment matured in him the awareness of identifying a new understanding of the teacher. He was convinced, in fact, that school was a serious reality, for which people needed to be more adequately prepared; but he had before him all the structural and functional deficiencies of a precarious institution that needed order and form. It was then that he realized that teaching could not just be a job, rather it was a mission. He therefore surrounded himself with people suitable for a school of the people, inspired by Christianity, with attitudinal and natural qualities in favor of education. He devoted all his energy to their formation, he himself becoming an example and model for them, he who had to exercise a service that was at the same time ecclesial and social, and working hard to promote what he called the "dignity of the teacher."

In order to give concrete answers to the demands of his time in the field of education, John Baptist de La Salle embraced bold reforms of teaching methods. In this, he was moved by an extraordinary pedagogical realism.

He used French instead of Latin, which was normally used in teaching; he divided his pupils into homogeneous learning groups to work more effectively; he set up Seminaries for rural schoolteachers, that is, for young people who wanted to become teachers without becoming part of any religious institution; he founded Sunday Schools for adults and two shelters, one for young delinquents and the other for the rehabilitation of prisoners. He dreamed of a school open to everyone, so he did not hesitate to face difficult educational needs as well, introducing a method of rehabilitation through school and work. Through these educational situations he launched a corrective pedagogy which, in contrast with that used in those times, brought study and work to the young, who were in punishment, through vocational activities, rather than remaining in a dark cell or being whipped.

Dear spiritual children of John Baptist de La Salle, I urge you to develop and imitate his passion for the poorest of the poor and the rejected. In the wake of his apostolic witness, you are the protagonists of a “culture of resurrection,” especially in those existential contexts where a culture of death prevails. Do not ever tire of looking for those who are in the modern “sepulchers” of confusion, humiliation, distress and poverty, to offer a hope for new life. The impetus for the educational mission, which made your Founder a teacher and a witness for so many of his peers, and his teachings, can sustain your projects and actions still today.

His figure, always so current, constitutes a gift for the Church and a precious incentive for your Congregation, called to a renewed and enthusiastic devotion to Christ. Looking to the Divine Master, you can more generously work at the service of the new evangelization in which the entire Church is involved today.

The forms for proclaiming the Gospel must be adapted to the concrete situations of various contexts, but this also entails an effort of faithfulness to the origins, so that the apostolic style that is proper to your religious Family can continue to respond to people’s expectations. I know that this is the commitment that drives you, and I urge you to walk with courage in this direction.

May you carry out your mission among the younger generations with renewed vigor, with that reforming boldness that characterized John Baptist de La Salle: he announced to all the Gospel of hope and charity.

May the Holy Virgin always support you and obtain abundant apostolic fruits for you.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you for all that you do in the field of education. I convey to you my prayers and my blessing. And I ask that you please pray for me.

Thank you!

Endnotes

1. These remarks were offered by Pope Francis in the Sala Clementina in Vatican City on May 16, 2019, when he met in private audience with a few hundred Lasallians gathered from around the world as part of the Jubilee-Year Celebration of the 300th anniversary of the entrance into eternal life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. In the spirit of the Pope's request that his greetings be extended with others, the remarks are made available here by the editors for all Lasallian Brothers and Partners who read this journal.