

Gómez-Restrepo, Carlos G. "Fighting Together for a More Just and More Humane World." Presentation at Saint Mary's College of California, April 2010. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 3, no. 2 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota: 2012).

© Carlos G. Gómez-Restrepo, FSC, Ed.D. Readers of this article have the copyright owner's permission to reproduce it for educational, not-for-profit purposes, if the author and publisher are acknowledged in the copy.

Fighting Together for a More Just and More Humane World¹

Carlos G. Gómez-Restrepo, FSC, Ed.D., *Universidad de La Salle, Bogotá, D.C. Colombia*

Václav Havel, Prime Minister of the Czech Republic precisely during the time that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall – 20 years ago – and one of the greatest inspirers of men and women who stand up for freedom; he himself persecuted and imprisoned, poet and politician, a man of great ethical character, once said:

I do not cease to find new proofs of a grand potential of goodwill within us. It is only disintegrated, intimidated, entrapped, paralyzed, and out of commission, as though it knew not where to find support, how to begin, or how to assert itself . . . In this state of things, it is the duty of politicians to bring back to life this potential, timid and lethargic, to show it a way, to clear a passage for it, to render it assurance, a chance to come forth.²

His profound conviction in the innate goodness of the human being allowed him to govern without hate, to help reconstruct his country, and to give the world lessons of integrity and moral strength.

If I have taken the liberty of making this historical allusion which is related to a person of our time, it is because I am convinced that the educator who assumes his vocation with integrity and dedication must also do it from the conviction that there is goodness, potential, and the ability to fight for a better world in every young person, in every child, in every adult with whom we share our lives as teachers. In fact, although Havel referred to politicians, I have never ceased to believe that education is also a political practice. John Baptist de La Salle did so over three centuries ago, in the certainty that, while educating children, he was helping to build a better world. That is why he invited the Brothers to touch people's hearts through education, and to be able, at the same time, to discover Jesus Christ even under the poor dress of the children at their schools. Nevertheless, he never ignored the reality of his time or forgot that he was educating the children of the artisans and the poor, so that they became better citizens and Christians committed to the Church and to society.

There is, besides, another important element to which I would like to refer. As he founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, De La Salle wanted for this Society that the spirit that encouraged them should be the "spirit of faith" and the "spirit of zeal." The first has been very present in our literature, but regarding the second one we have been shy in

¹ Carlos G. Gómez-Restrepo, FSC, Ed.D., Rector of Universidad de La Salle-Bogotá and President of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU), delivered this address in April 2010 at Saint Mary's College of California on the occasion of the conferral of a doctorate *honoris causa*.

² Vaclav Havel. "Summer Meditations." *Sunrise: Theosophic Perspectives*, April / May 1992. Accessed at <http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sunrise/41-91-2/gl-hav4.htm>.

proclaiming it. I suppose, because the word is not commonly used, either in English, in French or in Spanish. However, the Webster Dictionary defines *zeal* as “eagerness and ardent interest in pursuit of something”; and it offers a synonym: “passion.”

I think, therefore, that these are two fundamental principles that help to understand the educational mission in the world of today: profound Faith in the goodness of the human being and Passion for cooperating, so that young people discover the importance of believing in themselves, of believing that another world is possible, and of believing in God, who is mercy, justice and love. These elements, I am sure, unite all of us who are here and join us into a common mission which fills us with enthusiasm and which gives a meaning to our lives. Every time I have the chance of sharing with Lasallians anywhere in the world, I have seen the certainty that we are men and women who tremble with passion for the construction of a better world, firmly believing in the goodness of young people and their ability of commitment, and in the power of education to achieve it.

With these ideas as a backdrop, I believe that I can now explain with humility the excitement that I feel at this moment, as well as my appeal to you all to keep fighting for the education of children and young people based on Lasallian spirituality.

The day I heard the news that the Board of Trustees of Saint Mary’s College of California had decided to confer this Honorary Degree on me, I asked myself the question which I haven’t been able to answer yet: Why me? What achievements did they find in me that I should receive such a distinction? As I told Brother President, I accept this recognition with gratitude, humility and responsibility. *Gratitude* for your generosity, benevolence, big heart, and for the blessings that I receive from the good Lord at this moment. *Humility*, because it is a great honor which I thankfully receive, but acknowledging that many people with whom I have worked are part of this award: in the Lasallian tradition we always work “together and by association” to serve the poor. And *Responsibility*, as it is also an incentive to keep fighting with passion and creativity in the search and consolidation of new projects, so that young people may find quality educational spaces in which to become good citizens and better people.

Then again, I come from a country struck by violence, poverty and underdevelopment, but full of life, of dreams and of human warmth, of beauty and possibilities, of good people and of young people searching for new horizons. Tragedy hasn’t been able to subjugate our spirit, and the goodness of most Colombians is capable of keeping our hope alive. Believe me, it is not difficult to be creative in Colombia, and the Lasallian mission proves to be more relevant every day as we attend to the country’s social transformation and the fight for justice and peace. Perhaps we Lasallians have lacked sufficient enough commitment and enough ability to act proactively to the urgent demands that the political and social situations present to us; but in any case, we have worked sowing hope and faith.

At Universidad de La Salle in Bogotá, we have made an effort to be part of the solution and not only passive spectators of such reality. Today, we are recognized as one of the country’s best universities. Precisely as the government and the accrediting agency bestowed such recognition upon us, we have also understood that quality only exists if we can share it with the poor. Hence, we have desired to take the University to those who have most dramatically suffered from our

conflict and who have been the victims of violence and social exclusion. In two weeks, we will welcome the first cohort of our new Agronomical Engineering program, which will take place in the eastern part of the country, in a rural area strongly affected by the conflict. The admission requirement for this program is “to be a young person from a rural area affected by violence and poverty.” We will each year admit 100 young people, men and women, who want to fulfill their life plan in the agricultural sector, in order to try to restore the social network together with them, and to give them the possibility of working on productive projects for a sustainable agriculture and for the substitution of illegal crops.

In fact, we pursue two main goals: the first one, to turn those young people into Agronomic Engineers with the best possible education and with the “learning by doing” and “teaching by showing” approach; the second one, to turn them into political leaders for the social transformation of the regions from which they come. You may imagine the challenge that this project represents for us: the students will live on campus, they are poor and have suffered violence; they come from a lower strata in Colombia, where opportunities are practically nonexistent, and where they have felt the pressure from guerilla and paramilitary groups attempting to enlist them in their ranks. We shall help them find the faith and hope of which they are capable, we shall do the impossible to touch their hearts in order to awaken their goodness and solidarity, and we shall provide them with the best technical and scientific education for them to become engineers who will contribute to the construction of a new country. The challenges are enormous: facing these youngsters’ psychological and social conditions and the urgency of finding national and international funding to support the program in the forthcoming years. In fact, we have named the whole project “Utopia” which is made up of three components: the Agricultural Engineering Program, an Agricultural Research Center, and a Socio-Political Leadership Program.

What makes it different? From the very name, we can see that this is an educational response to a political problem. Utopia is not only a literary work but the way Thomas More found to denounce and criticize English society of the 16th century and the manner in which it came to despise the poor and those who were fighting for justice and peace. Our Utopia is also a way to show that in order to solve problems it is possible to attempt another kind of response. Many people believe that the way to overcome violence, poverty and exclusion in Colombia is through war against illegal armed groups. We believe that we should try a different approach, which is to give opportunities to young people to help them find different paths than the one of enlisting themselves in those groups. Nothing produces more violence than poverty and injustice. Therefore, good education and opportunities are the way to reverse the situation and let harmony and peace flourish. Utopia is then a political proposal in its means and its purposes: quality education, education for responsible citizenship, education for social change, education for justice, education for peace, education for inclusion, education for political participation, and education for the transformation of the productive sector. The great and unique geopolitical opportunity for Colombia in leaving behind many of its social problems is to become “a food pantry” for the world. This is the gamble we are taking as Lasallians, as a University, and as citizens that dream of a better future for the country. Utopia is a dream, utopia is a horizon, and utopia is a reference point toward which to walk.

Dear friends, the Lasallian mission today is more current and important than ever. It doesn't matter where we fulfill it, if we are capable of maintaining the flame of passion and hope alive; if we are capable of believing in young people; if we are capable of discovering Jesus Christ and of seeing His face in every one of the people entrusted to us, of showing God's compassionate face, of fighting together for a more just and more humane world and of moving hearts to build-up humanity. Faith and passion for the education of the poor; faith and passion for our people; faith and passion for God.

Once again, I would like to express my gratitude to the Board of Trustees, to Brother President, and to my great friends and committed and generous Lasallians here at Saint Mary's College; to all of you, professors and colleagues passionate for the Lasallian mission; to my De la Salle Brothers in the United States as well as in my country, with whom we share this exciting adventure; to my family and friends, who have always encouraged and accompanied me; and to God, our Lord, who inspires and blesses us. Finally, I would like to assure you from the bottom of my heart that I am proudly Lasallian, that I am proudly Colombian and that, from this day on, I am proudly an alumnus of Saint Mary's College of California. Thank you, very much.