

Johnston, John. "Lasallian Mission Today and Tomorrow." Presentation at District of New York Assembly, 13 August 1998. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 3, no. 2 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota: 2012).

© Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. 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.

---

## **Lasallian Mission Today and Tomorrow**

**John Johnston, FSC (*Superior General 1986 - 2000*)**

It was on 16 June 1997 that I received the invitation from Brother Michael Cony, Visitor, to participate in this Assembly. I gave him an immediate and affirmative response. I am happy to have the opportunity to be a part of this important event of your 150th Anniversary Year. My preference is always to speak directly and spontaneously to groups such as this one, but experience has taught me that the only way I can say everything that I have decided to say within a reasonable period of time is to use a prepared text. I have distributed the text because many people like the possibility of making notes or preparing comments and questions in the margins. On the other hand I know that some people prefer simply to listen to such presentations. Obviously you can do what you want to do!

The theme of the anniversary year and of the assembly is *Together for the Future*. The focus of the first day and a half is *The Future of our Lasallian Mission*. In accord with these themes, I will address the topic, *Lasallian Mission Today and Tomorrow*.

### ***Today and tomorrow***

I have chosen the words *today* and *tomorrow* rather than the word *future* in an attempt to express clearly that *yesterday* is *yesterday* and that *tomorrow* is *tomorrow*: neither *yesterday* nor *tomorrow* exists. There is only *today*. I appreciate Sister Joan Chittister's comment "that religious in large numbers are growing daily more disillusioned by endless historical review of past forms of religious life and long excursions into futuristic speculation. Our task is to live in the here and now."<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, we certainly must consider the future and its implications for Lasallian life and mission. But to consider the future is not necessarily to enter into "long excursions in futuristic speculation." Nor is it simply to wait passively for the future to arrive. On the contrary. We have to have a vision of what we would like the future to be and of what we think is realistically possible, given concrete data. Moreover, we have to do all we can to make that vision a reality, knowing, of course, that there can be countless unexpected factors that can and almost certainly will affect our vision in one way or another.

I think, therefore, that we have to live authentically and wholeheartedly in the present moment - with dynamism, creativity, enthusiasm, joy, and pride. One aspect of living fully *today* is that of making decisions that will help to prepare for the *tomorrow* of our vision. What we decide to do and what we fail to decide to do *today* will inevitably affect the lives of Lasallians *tomorrow*. To bring together, therefore, representatives of Lasallians of the District of New York to consider our life and mission and to prepare the way for decision-making is an excellent initiative.

### ***An international mission***

I have mentioned explicitly the *District of New York*. I suspect that some of you lay men and women have only in recent years become aware of the reality of "district." You have now begun to think of your schools and other centers as participants in the network of institutions of the New York District. Some of you, more than others, are aware of the network of apostolic activities of what we call the *Region of the United States/Toronto*.

But my presence here today, not as a United States American, but as Superior General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, is a reminder that the Lasallian world is bigger than your school, than your district, than your country, than your continent. It is a reminder that we are all participants in the Lasallian mission of human and Christian education, a mission lived in more than eighty countries throughout the world. There are some 810,000 students in more than 900 educational institutions: preschool, elementary, middle, secondary, technical, engineering, agricultural, teacher training, and university. There are programs for the illiterate, street children, orphans, migrants, itinerants, physically and mentally disabled, youth with learning impediments, and youngsters with behavioral problems. There are pastoral centers offering a variety of religious and apostolic activities. There are centers for sports and other forms of recreation and social activities.

Among the 810,000 students are infants, children, adolescents, young adults, adults, and veteran adults. They represent a striking variety of cultures, races, ethnic heritages, and languages. They are not only Catholic, but also Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Shintoist, Confucianist, members of traditional religions, or of no religious faith. Some countries of the Lasallian world are well developed or moderately developed economically, while others are extremely poor. Most of them enjoy relative peace, but many are ravaged by division, violence, and even war. Political realities range from highly supportive of our educational mission to totally opposed.

### ***From Brothers' schools to Lasallian schools***

There are some 67,000 administrators and teachers engaged in this worldwide mission. Ninety-two percent of them are lay men and women. Two percent are priests or religious of other congregations. Six percent are Brothers of the Christian Schools. These statistics graphically express the extraordinary change we have experienced during the past several decades in the manner of living the Lasallian mission.

For some 270 years, the Brothers of the Christian Schools were the "agents" of the Lasallian mission, aided by a small number of lay men. I have often described the operative model of that long period by an inverted triangle, the large number of Brothers at the inverted base and the small number of lay men at the inverted pinnacle. These lay teachers helped the Brothers conduct *Brothers' schools*. But during the post-Vatican II years, the number of Brothers markedly decreased while the number of lay men and women notably increased. Moreover the Church - and the Institute - which previously had "tolerated" lay personnel as "a necessary evil" - recognized officially that the laity are called to participate in all aspects of Church life.

For these reasons the triangle began to change shape and gradually came to resemble a normal, rather than inverted, triangle. But it quickly became apparent that this *Brothers' school* model no longer made sense. During several years of confusion and frustration, a new model gradually evolved. This model is today officially accepted. We call it the *Lasallian school* model. The change of language is important. A *Lasallian school* is a school that is "animated," not by the Brothers, with lay men and women in a supportive role, but by the entire educative community, in which the Brothers participate as administrators and teachers, or in some other way. This model is best described not by a triangle, but by a circle that is parallel to the ground.

This new understanding has become increasingly accepted as reasonable, necessary, and viable. Enthusiasm among so many of our lay colleagues, together with a willingness and readiness to participate actively, has both surprised and pleased the Brothers. The rapid development of this new way of understanding Lasallian mission has been bold and stimulating.

But the model of lay men and women and Brothers collaborating in a *Lasallian school*, the model with which you are most familiar, is *not* the operative model of a great number of Lasallian establishments today. In a number of countries, we have Lasallian schools in which there are no Brothers at all. This number is increasing. There are a few in the United States. Because of changing situations, we need to make more precise the models I have just described. Let us, therefore, subdivide the circle model into *Circles 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5*.

*Circle 1* describes a Lasallian educative community in which there is a community of Brothers directly involved in the school, a Brother as head, and a large number of lay teachers. The school served by this educative community is an active participant in the district network of Lasallian institutions. In some countries, such as the United States, schools are immediately accountable to "boards" or councils made up of both Brothers and lay men and women. But they are all ultimately accountable, at least in terms of their character, to the Visitor of the district. This model is the operative model of a very significant number of Lasallian institutions throughout the world today. But it is not at all the operative model in, for example, France or Belgium.

*Circle 2* describes a Lasallian educative community in which there is a community of Brothers directly involved in the school, a lay man or woman as head, and a large number of lay teachers. The school is also an active participant in the Lasallian network and accountable, ultimately, to the Visitor. This is the model of an increasing number of Lasallian institutions throughout the world and of a certain number of establishments in the United States, but not in the New York District.

*Circle 3* describes a Lasallian educative community in which there is a community of Brothers, none of whom, however, are directly involved in the school, a lay head, and a large number of lay teachers. The school participates actively in the Lasallian network in the same manner as the schools in *Circles 1 and 2*. This model is common in a number of sectors of the Institute, and will perhaps become more common as Brothers retire from school work.

*Circle 4* describes a Lasallian educative community in which there is no community of Brothers, a lay head, and a large number of lay teachers. The school continues to be an active participant in

the network and is accountable in the same manner as the schools in *Circles 1, 2, and 3*. This is an increasingly common model, especially in the Districts of France and Belgium.

Lasallian networks today are made up of schools which can be classified in some or all of these four categories. In France, however, there is a dimension that is unique: it is only in this district that the ultimate accountability, at least in practice, is not to the Visitor and District Council, but to a district level structure made up of Brothers and of lay men and women, with a lay man or woman as President. There is a full-time lay Executive Secretary. There is an equal number of Brothers and of lay members on both the Administrative Council and on the Executive Committee. The final authority, however, rests with the Visitor; for validity of decisions, his vote must obligatorily figure in the majority.

*Circle 5*, however, is quite different. It describes a Lasallian educative community that is similar to Circle 4. But the school it serves is accountable to intermediate bodies in which there are no Brothers and, ultimately, to an administrative council or board in which there are no Brothers. In other words the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is no longer involved at all. Responsibility for conducting all or some of the Lasallian Schools in a district has passed into the hands of lay men and women committed to operating schools in harmony with the Lasallian tradition.

*This model does not exist at the present time.* I have expressed it because I have the impression that it represents a destination toward which some districts are advancing. But I have the impression also – perhaps I am mistaken - that it is a destination that is "assumed" or "taken for granted," rather than chosen freely, consciously, and explicitly from among various alternatives. Throughout the past 318 years Lasallian education has always been intrinsically linked to the Brothers of the Christian Schools. *Circle 5* describes the Lasallian educational heritage, and responsibility for it, as having passed, *in whole or in part*, from the hands of the Institute to the hands of a corporate body composed exclusively of lay men and women.

This transfer would take place should the Brothers decide that they do not wish to maintain, or are not able to maintain, responsibility for all or some of the works in the Lasallian network, and should some kind of association of Lasallian lay men and women accept responsibility for maintaining the schools in the tradition. Obviously, there are alternatives to *Circle 5*: the district could decide to pass the schools to the diocese or to some other association not linked with the Lasallian tradition, or to close the school. Experience reveals, however, that lay partners frequently oppose, with surprising force, these alternatives.

Before accepting *Circle 5* as a viable alternative, however, profound and complex questions have to be addressed and answered: Is *Circle 5* feasible? Is it desirable? Would it be acceptable to the Institute? Would it be acceptable to Church authorities?

### ***Vocations***

The very fact that I am proposing *Circle 5* for reflection is an admission that the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is facing a very severe lack of vocations. We Brothers of the Christian Schools believe in our vocation and continue to be convinced that God is calling young men to follow us. We are blessed with good numbers of vocations in Latin America, Africa, and

some parts of Asia, areas where the need for education is acute. In the economically developed world, however, where our schools are generally alternatives to government schools, we have very few new candidates.

Some people, Brothers particularly, are uncomfortable when I speak about the crisis of vocations in areas of the Institute. They wonder why I am speaking "negatively" and ask whether I am becoming "pessimistic." My reply is that it is not a matter of speaking positively or negatively, or optimistically or pessimistically. It is a matter of speaking honestly and realistically and of proposing that we make today the decisions that are required, appropriate, and effective.

### ***New York District statistics . . . and the future of district institutions***

On 5 June 1998, there were 197 Brothers in the New York District of an average age of 65.1 years. There were no novices. In 1965 there were 649 Brothers; in 1975, 363; in 1985, 288. The number of Brothers has declined almost 70% in 33 years. What does the future look like? Our personnel office has made some projections, based on the *Life Expectancy Table* used by the United Nations in projecting world population. I don't know whether the instrument is reliable or not. Nevertheless, I am using its results as a point of departure for reflection and discussion. At my request our personnel office made one projection with no novices at all and another with two novices a year. Ten years from now the total number of Brothers would be between 161 and 181. But, of course, should you have more than two new Brothers a year, as we hope and pray, the total would be higher.

Regardless, it seems clear that in the next ten years, there will be a rapid and sharp reduction in the number of Brothers directly involved in schools. Today there are 123 Brothers less than 70 years of age. In five years there could be between 85 and 95. My own conviction is that the district should maintain apostolic communities of approximately five to seven Brothers, most of them active, and concentrate on a limited number of schools and centers. At some point in the not-too-distant future the district is going to have to decide whether to maintain responsibility for all the schools currently in the network, with or without communities of Brothers associated with them, or to maintain responsibility for a certain number of schools only, and to choose among various alternatives for the remaining schools.

Throughout the history of the Institute, when a district was no longer able to maintain a community in a particular school, it passed that institution, with very rare exception, to the diocese, to another religious congregation, to the state - or decided to close it. It is only in recent years that in several countries a concerted effort has been made to maintain schools as Lasallian schools, even without Brothers. The dominant reason for this effort has been the desire of our lay partners to continue the tradition. But it is one thing to maintain Lasallian schools when the Institute has considerable visibility, and when Brothers are directly involved in the operation and animation of the network. It would be quite another thing should the Institute be less visible and involved.

The question that must be directly addressed is whether it is reasonable, realistic, and desirable to strive to maintain the Lasallian network in the future without the involvement of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. In other words, can one envisage an association made up

of well-informed and profoundly committed lay men and women who, with the help of sound structures of animation and accountability, together with efficacious programs of initial and ongoing formation, maintain a network of Lasallian schools?

I don't think that we have to answer these questions immediately. But I do think that we have to enter into serious reflection and discussion in an atmosphere that is calm, creative, realistic, and totally free. When I say "free" I mean, among other things, that nobody - Brother or lay - should feel guilty about deciding to pass certain schools or even the entire network to the diocese. The fact is, however, that in a number of countries, our lay partners are strongly opposed to such a move. Nevertheless, we have to be clear. The Institute has *never* said that our schools must remain *Lasallian* even in the absence of the Brothers. The personal opinion that I have expressed consistently over the years is that what is essential is that our schools continue as *Catholic* institutions. If, however, they can be maintained also as *Lasallian*, so much the better.

### ***Meaning of Lasallian***

As I have remarked on a number of occasions, I frequently have the impression that when I use the adjective *Lasallian*, John Baptist de La Salle is very irritated with me. In fact he is probably saying tonight, "I founded ***Christian*** schools and my successor is talking about ***Lasallian*** schools." We should take this observation seriously. We have to avoid words and actions that suggest a "cult of personality."

Christian schools and Lasallian schools are not parallel categories. A Lasallian school - whatever its nature or level - is essentially *a Christian school*. De La Salle's use of the expression *Christian* was not based on ecumenical considerations. It might be convenient to claim that De La Salle founded "ecumenical" Christian schools, but that would be a distortion of historical fact. His schools were *CATHOLIC*, that is to say, shaped by belief in Jesus Christ as understood and professed in the Catholic Church.

Lasallian schools must be transparently *CATHOLIC*, *signs of the kingdom and means of salvation*, as the *Rule* of the Brother states. The Christian identity of our schools involves more than courses of religious instruction, more also than pastoral programs. The Christian dimension must permeate and shape every aspect of the life of the school: tone, atmosphere, spirit, signs, symbols, relationships, curriculum, requirements, policies, regulations . . . Because our schools are Catholic, they are called to *propose* - but in no way to *impose* - Jesus Christ, accepting all the young people confided to them with love and respect, whatever their religious beliefs.

It has happened in the Lasallian world that board members and/or teachers have expressed a willingness to call their schools *Lasallian*, but a reluctance to acknowledge that they are *Catholic*. They profess "fidelity" to certain Lasallian pedagogical principles, but at the same time minimize or hide, if not deny, the Christian and Catholic character. My predecessor, Brother Jose Pablo Basterrechea, used to caution Lasallians about "taking the name of La Salle in vain," that is to say, adopting a reductionist approach to his life and teaching. We need to remember that De La Salle's vision of education cannot be separated from his vision of the human person and of God. We need, therefore, to be clear: an institution can legitimately call itself *Lasallian* only if it is unambiguously *Catholic*.

## ***The Specificity of Lasallian Education***

But if Lasallian schools are essentially Catholic schools, is there a "specificity" of Lasallian education? Are there characteristics that give Lasallian schools a specific identity?

The answer is clearly "yes." Lasallian schools are Catholic schools, but schools in which a certain number of specific characteristics are given prominence. These characteristics correspond to priorities which De La Salle considered essential. The founder, however, did not leave us a list of characteristics. For this reason contemporary lists can vary somewhat in content, order, and number. I have made a list of seven characteristics, and, for practical purposes, have placed them in a certain order. But there is nothing absolute about either the list or the order. In practice the characteristics are interrelated. It is the integration of these characteristics which gives the school its *Lasallian* identity.

I have spoken of these characteristics at length on a number of occasions. I limit myself now to naming them. A school can be said to be Lasallian when there is a profound reverence for each student as a unique person, when there is a genuine spirit of communion among all who constitute the school community, when the school offers education that is of quality and adapted to the young people who frequent it, when it really merits the adjective *Catholic*, when it manifests solidarity with the poor and promotes the quest for justice and peace, when its administrators and teachers have made their own the characteristics of Lasallian education, and when the school community is formed in reference to the story of John Baptist de La Salle. It is not my purpose to reflect on all of these characteristics tonight. I limit myself to a few of many possible topics.

## ***Education in the Faith***

Sister and sociologist Patricia Wittberg says that our contemporaries, including young people, are searching anxiously for *community* and for *spiritual depth*. Quoting social scientist Robert Bellah, she remarks that the culture of individualism is leaving people "suspended in glorious, but terrifying, isolation."<sup>3</sup> So many people lack a significant "local" community. As TV producer Norman Lear noted, "We are lonely. Lonely for feelings of connection. Lonely for institutions that we believe matter and will reach out to help us."<sup>4</sup>

My direct contacts with young people are, unfortunately, very limited. Nevertheless, I have had a number of short but sometimes profound experiences in small group encounters and in large assemblies. Moreover, I have read the testimonials of many young persons, and have listened, a number of times, to videotaped comments. My experience supports what the professionals are telling us: many young people today are lonely, confused, and dissatisfied. They are hungering for significant and loving relationships, for meaning, for "spirituality." Two years ago I was profoundly moved by the letter that an Italian youth left for his parents before committing suicide: "You gave me the *necessary* and the *superfluous*, but not the *indispensable*." He doesn't define *indispensable*, but it seems clear he is referring to love, respect, affirmation, meaning . . .

While Catholic schools cannot "solve" the problems of loneliness and meaninglessness, they can help young people cope with the challenges of life in a constructive manner. We Lasallian

educators must be sensitive to the profound needs of the young people with whom we are in contact and to the messages they send us on a daily basis. De La Salle tells the Brothers that the grace of their state is to be "older brothers" of young people and "to touch their hearts." To share in the mission of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is, therefore, to share in a call from God to be brothers and sisters of young people, to reach out to them, to walk with them side by side, to listen to them with loving care, to take them and their questions seriously . . . in short, to strive to touch their hearts.

A Lasallian school, then, must be a place where young people, whatever their age, race, ethnic heritage, religious, economic/social status, can ask their most profound questions and express their deepest aspirations, doubts, concerns, and fears, and know that they will find acceptance and encouragement from teachers who love them, reverence them, and relate with them as brothers and sisters.

### ***"Evangelizers" and "catechists"***

St. De La Salle says that the "principal function" of the Brothers, the function for which they have been "appointed by God," is to "catechize," that is to say, to teach "the doctrine of Jesus Christ" and to confirm "his holy law in the minds and hearts" of those whom they instruct.<sup>5</sup> That and similar passages inspired the authors of the *Declaration* to say that "by vocation" the Brothers are "catechists"<sup>6</sup> and that they should "undertake in a very particular way the *evangelization* and *catechesis* of the most neglected among the young, especially the adolescents."<sup>7</sup> All those who participate in the mission that the Church has confided to the Brothers of the Christian Schools share, in varying ways, in the commitment to "evangelize," that is to say, to propose, directly or indirectly, Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

### ***Teachers of religion***

To speak of the "Christian" dimension of a Lasallian School is to speak of the total atmosphere and of the spirit that permeates the school. Nevertheless, the teaching of religion has to be at its center. We need serious programs of systematic religious instruction, programs with well-qualified teachers and evident priority in the curriculum, timetable and school budget.

While I have no precise information on the situation of the teaching of religion in the institutions of your district, I know that in many, perhaps most, of our high schools in the United States, religion is taught four or five times a week. That is far above the Institute average. I commend you sincerely on what you are doing in this area and encourage you to continue to evaluate the effectiveness of your programs and to revise them accordingly.

### ***Youth ministry***

In Institute publications you find numerous references to *pastoral* activities. The word *pastoral* is used as a noun in languages of Latin origin and includes in its meaning a broad range of activities, including prayer, sacraments, youth retreats and assemblies, communities of faith, Lasallian youth groups, and Lasallian volunteers. In the United States, many of these activities have been grouped for the past twenty-five to thirty years in the department called "campus

ministry." Once again I applaud what has been accomplished in this regard, and encourage you to continue to give a place of honor to pastoral activities in all of your Lasallian schools.

It is not my intention to attempt a commentary on all aspects of youth ministry. I limit myself to a few remarks about two movements in the Lasallian world today: Lasallian youth and Lasallian volunteers. I think that these movements are important because young people are telling us emphatically and unambiguously that they find them to be helpful responses to their search for meaning and community. These rather informal structures seem to be effective. When approaches to the education of young people in faith and in community are found to be efficacious, they should be fostered!

### ***Lasallian youth***

There is no uniform definition of the term *Lasallian youth*, nor is there a uniform organizational structure. But we are witnessing a growing number of international, national, regional, and district gatherings of young people - students of our schools, former students, or other youth attracted to these activities. These assemblies take different forms, but they all touch in some way the three traditional Lasallian traits: faith, communion, service. I have had the privilege of participating in international meetings of Lasallian youth in Toulouse, Quebec, Manila, Bujedo, Rheims, and most recently, Memphis - all memorable experiences. Each of these large assemblies seems to give birth to new local assemblies.

Obviously, short gatherings of this nature are insufficient. Ongoing groups or communities of Lasallian youth are indispensable. There are already many such groups in existence, including in the United States. I am always pleased when I have the opportunity to exchange with them during my visits. But the number of groups and of participants is still small. Lasallians, whatever your ordinary apostolic work, give a few hours a week to the accompaniment and animation of groups of Lasallian youth. Sharing your faith with young people who are hungering for meaning and community is a very authentic manner of living your "vocation" of Lasallian educator. Moreover, I think that you will be able to say, after some weeks, that you yourself have been strengthened in your religious convictions.

### ***Lasallian volunteers***

I am very proud of what has been accomplished in the *Lasallian Volunteer Movement* of the United States/Toronto region during the past decade. Over the years I have had a number of occasions to meet Lasallian volunteers, either during their summer sessions or in their communities and apostolates. I am delighted that some are with us today. At the same time I want to acknowledge publicly that the New York District has had a long history of volunteers. I remember meeting Brother Peter Stewart and Manhattan College students in Guatemala in the early '70's. And I know that Brother Ed Phelan has had young people living and working with the poor for many years.

Movements of volunteers in the Lasallian world are developing in diverse ways. Participants are usually young adults, often but not necessarily former students. During the last fifteen to twenty years, the number of volunteers for service during the summer vacation in poor areas of the

world has increased steadily. Two summers ago there were some 300 volunteers from European Lasallian institutions alone working in Africa, Asia, and Africa. These volunteers included students, former students, teachers, parents, friends, and Brothers. Several countries have "long-term" volunteers, but it is only in the United States that volunteers share the community life of the Brothers.

In various countries, including the US, I have listened with great interest to the testimonials of volunteers and former volunteers. They speak of the tremendous impact the experience has had upon them, almost inevitably asserting that they have received far more than they have given. In addition to gaining increased knowledge of economically poor areas in their own countries or abroad, and a deepened sensitivity to the realities of the people, some volunteers relate that they have "found themselves." Others say explicitly that they have discovered or rediscovered religious faith.

The *Lasallian Volunteer Movement* deserves and needs the strong support of all Lasallians.

### ***Education of the poor, the neglected, the marginalized***

You are all aware that preference for the education of the poor "comprises an integral part of the purpose of the Institute."<sup>8</sup> Those who call themselves *Lasallian* must, therefore, be sensitive to the cry of the poor, neglected, and marginalized both "at home" and "abroad" and be disposed to respond in one way or another.

John Paul II urges religious women and men, despite the shortage of vocations, to be attentive to *new* needs, "to respond generously and boldly to *new* forms of poverty," to present *new* answers to *new* problems . . . It is interesting to note the repetition of the word *new*. He reminds us that we must be *attentive, creative, generous and bold*. Each of these words is an invitation to reflection, decision, and action.

The *Rule* of the Brothers twice invites them, in accord with an exhortation of Vatican II, to consider passing some of their current work to others in order to respond to pressing needs. This orientation recognizes that because of their vows, Brothers are more free and flexible than their lay partners, especially those with families. In conformity with those articles of the *Rule*, our Institute has urged Districts to take at every District Chapter some new initiatives on behalf of education of the poor at home or abroad. In fact the number of new creations and the number of Brothers who have volunteered for the education of the poor both in their home areas and in foreign countries is impressive.

Some of you - Brothers and lay are working directly in the education of the economically deprived, victims of social injustice, delinquents, those neglected by society, young people with learning difficulties, those with family problems . . .<sup>9</sup> Others of you are involved in social justice education or are responsible for service programs or for Lasallian youth groups who reach out to the poor. Some of you are striving to make your schools "impact centers," centers that refuse to exist as "islands" in their milieu and reach out in creative ways to the poor and needy of their neighborhoods. I know that our schools are trying to augment their scholarship funds in order to help the young people whose families cannot afford our tuition and fees. We must do what we

can. We sometimes become frustrated that we cannot do more. But it is essential that we not give up. We can always do more - as individuals, as school communities, as district community.

### ***Pastoral Ministry of Human Rights***

You know that this year is the 50th anniversary of the *Declaration of Human Rights*. That historic proclamation of the United Nations recognizes formally and unambiguously that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this *Declaration*, without distinction of any kind."<sup>10</sup>

Pope John Paul II has given extraordinary attention to the significance of the *Declaration*, affirming its content in two of his annual *Messages for World Peace Day*. In his Message for 1998 he recalls that honoring human rights is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace, and asks earnestly that governments accept the implications of the *Declaration* and make laws that are consistent with it. We know, however, that governments have failed in varying degrees to live up to the *Declaration*. Human rights are too often made subservient to the quest for power, wealth, and pleasure. Moreover, some governments claim that the *Declaration* is not relevant to their particular culture. Nevertheless, the Pope - and he is in no way alone in his position - insists that human rights are universal, their source being the equal dignity of every person. While there must be recognition of cultural diversity, the resulting specificity must not be used as a justification for violation of human rights.

Six weeks ago, the Vatican Council for Justice and Peace organized a four-day international congress on the Pastoral Ministry of Human Rights. The Congress was a manifestation of the commitment of the Church to safeguarding and promoting the dignity and rights of the human person at every step of life - from conception to death and in every political, social, economic, cultural, and religious circumstance. Participants included bishops, priests, lay women and men particularly charged with Justice and Peace on the level of Conferences of Bishops and of specific dioceses. I was privileged to attend as a member of the Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Commission of the unions of Superiors General of women and men.

There were numerous calls during the congress for more effective education and formation of Catholics in the area of human rights, particularly through Catholic schools and parishes. Those pleas prompted me to write to all the Visitors of the Institute on this topic, asking them to evaluate the mission of their district in the light of our responsibility to form young people to respect for human rights.

### ***Human Rights and our Lasallian Mission***

Our *Rule* urges the Brothers to become increasingly aware of the root causes of poverty and to strive earnestly to promote justice and human dignity. These directives, while intended explicitly for the Brothers, have to be extended to all those who share in our Lasallian mission today. They are in harmony with the recommendations of the Congress, as well as with the exhortations of the Pope to educators at all levels of Catholic education. We Lasallians must instruct young people in their duties and responsibilities with regard to justice, charity, racial harmony, and need for structural changes in society.

We must have programs in our schools that enable young people of all ages (1) to grow in knowledge of the situation of human rights in the world today, (2) to learn the social doctrine of the Church, (3) to experience the life of the poor, the marginalized, the neglected, the homeless, the sick, the aged . . . , and (4) to have opportunity to reflect on this experience in the light of the Gospel and of the teaching of the Church.

I invite you to devote attention to this theme during these days. Examine the reality of education for justice in your network of apostolic activities in the New York District and determine ways to promote more effective education in the area of human rights. While the approach to justice and human rights must be comprehensive, I want to speak briefly on six specific issues. Three of them I will consider together.

### ***1) Racism***

A sense of superiority and prejudice based on race, nationality, ethnic group, tribe, or religion is a major problem, with tragic consequences, throughout the world. During my remarks to Brothers, teachers, and young people of the Lasallian world during the past twenty-two years, I have repeatedly spoken on the topic of universal brotherhood and sisterhood. I have said that my experience of meeting people from all over the world has reinforced my conviction that we are essentially the same, that our differences, while real, are secondary. We are the same because we are all sons and daughters of the same Creator and, consequently, we are all brothers and sisters. How sad that we have not learned to live together as brothers and sisters - in mutual respect, in justice, and in peace. I have insisted that our Lasallian Family - one of the largest and strongest forces in education today - can and should make a significant contribution to universal brotherhood and sisterhood. One of our most important goals must be that of helping young people learn to live as brothers and sisters among themselves and, at the same time, learn to become brothers and sisters to all with whom they come in contact.

As a native Memphian, as one who grew up with segregation laws and institutionalized discrimination, racism has been throughout my life a personal preoccupation. The racial situation has changed in the US in the thirty years since Martin Luther King's assassination. On that momentous occasion I joined thousands in marching silently through Memphis streets lined with heavily armed military forces. If anyone had told me on that day in 1968 that within a relatively short time, Memphis would have an African-American mayor, police chief, school superintendent, and Catholic bishop, I would have laughed at his naiveté. But it has happened. Laws have changed. Some people have profited from the changes. Nevertheless, we all know that the ugly monster of racism is, unfortunately, alive and well.

Following remarks on justice that I made in an informal address to the Midwest District Assembly last summer, a Brother who is head of a large Chicago school expressed his disappointment that I did not mention racism explicitly. He said that we had to confront the problem more directly and more effectively. Most of our young people come to us at 14 years of age or so. If they suffer from the evil of racism, we can be sure that it is already deeply rooted. Dealing with it on the intellectual, moral, and communal levels of school life is a great challenge. But deal with it we must. Lasallians, we must take racism very seriously and do all we can to combat it.

## **2) *Crime and violence, 3) the gun culture, 4) capital punishment***

These comments are quite personal. I make them as one who has lived out of the United States for twenty-two years, headquartered in Rome but frequently in visits to the countries that constitute the Lasallian world. My perspective is, therefore, that of a United States American abroad. There are moments when I am proud to be a United States American. There are other moments when I am ashamed. I have selected three specific issues that cause me great shame. They are concerns that are of considerable importance to Italians and therefore receive heavy coverage in the daily newspapers and on the evening television news. They are three issues - among others, unfortunately - which, I think, have significantly diminished the stature of the United States as an international moral leader.

The issues are crime and violence, the gun culture, and capital punishment. The three are, it seems to me, intrinsically linked. I find incomprehensible the love affair that so many people in the United States have with guns, including highly sophisticated guns, as well as the refusal to acknowledge relationship of the consequences of that fascination with the high level of crime and violence, a level far higher than that of most other countries in the economically developed world.

Then there is capital punishment . . . I have noticed in Rome that executions that receive page one coverage and are treated in the evening television news sometime receive scant if any attention in the *International Herald Tribune*. The *National Catholic Reporter*, at least, reminds its readers each week of current executions. Sister Helen Prejean and John Grisham have made the evil of capital punishment graphically visible to all. Nevertheless, executions occur now with minimal media attention. Nations that permit capital punishment are denied membership in the European Community. In its acceptance of capital punishment, the United States stands virtually alone amidst its friends and is instead allied with countries it consistently criticizes for human rights abuses. It's true that the Catholic Church has only recently taken a clear stand against capital punishment - and even that stand is not as clear-cut as many would like. But the revised *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states clearly that capital punishment is justified only in absolute necessity and that such cases are "very rare, if not practically nonexistent."<sup>9</sup>

Three issues . . . it is my hope that Lasallian schools in the New York District will give constructive and effective attention to them.

## **5) *The External Debt of Poor Nations***

Lasallians, you are probably already aware that the Pope considers the celebration of the jubilee in the year 2000 as a Providential opportunity for responding to one of the most critical issues of our day: the external debt of poor nations. During the congress on human rights, the officials of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace encouraged us to promote active participation in campaigns designed to urge nations and private sources to abolish the unpayable debt of the most impoverished nations and to reduce the debt of other poor nations.

A month ago I sent to the Brothers of the Institute a letter from the General Council concerning the problem of the debt, together with pertinent information. I have asked the Brothers to

circulate this documentation among members of the Lasallian Family and to promote the international campaign for signatures among our young people, teachers, parents, former students, and others associated with us.

The matter of the debt has particular relevance for our Lasallian Family, given that we are present in a significant number of the poorest countries of the world, as well as in a significant number of the richest. We need to manifest interdependence and solidarity with those in need.

### ***6) Defense of the Rights of Children***

It is my personal conviction that Lasallians throughout the world can and should make a major commitment in a matter that involves injustice of scandalous proportions, an issue to which our charism and heritage invite us. I am proposing that Lasallians everywhere dedicate themselves to the defense and promotion of the rights of children. In the second of the meditations that De La Salle prepared for the use of the Brothers during their annual retreat, he says that it is only too common for the children of artisans and the poor to live on their own, "roaming all over like vagabonds." Because their parents cannot afford to pay teachers, these neglected, abandoned, and idle children associate "with bad companions" and develop "persistent bad habits" that are difficult to break.<sup>12</sup> Following this graphic description of the plight of the poor children of his day, the Founder expresses his deep conviction that to remedy this unfortunate situation, God, in his Providence, has established the Christian Schools.

That particular way of striving to "remedy so great a misfortune" maintains, of course, its validity. But I want to suggest that in addition to an ongoing and persevering endeavor to reach the poor directly, the Lasallian Family make a concerted effort to struggle against the poverty and injustice to which millions of children are subject today. That struggle would involve confronting such specific issues as neglect and abandonment, racial discrimination and hatred, discrimination against girls, homelessness, living in the streets, physical abuse, loneliness, despair, suicide, absence of effective schools, illiteracy, child labor, hunger, physical and emotional sickness, sexual abuse, commercial sexual exploitation for pornography and prostitution, war, child soldiers, land mines, refugees, crime, gangs, arms trafficking, drugs, alcohol, drug trafficking . . . This list is, sadly, not exhaustive.

The 42nd General Chapter in 1993 called attention to the *Convention of the Rights of the Child* adopted by the United Nations in 1989. Although the Convention became international law a year later and theoretically provides protection to poor children against exploitation and abuse, it has had relatively little effect.

The same Chapter proposed that the Superior General and General Council name a group of experts to study broad educational concerns, one of which is the "rights of the child." Implementation of that proposition has taken the form of five colloquia, all of which have now taken place, on families, globalization, urbanization, new information technologies, and communication of the faith. In each of these colloquia, the topic of children has been central.

Some years ago the Jesuits decided to devote themselves in a concerted manner to the problem of refugees. I admire what they have accomplished. I think that the Lasallian Family, located in

more than eighty countries, including more than 67,000 teachers, 810,000 pupils, and countless parents, former students, and friends, could have a very significant impact in the struggle against the neglect and exploitation of children. When I use the word "struggle" I mean campaigns for just laws, for implementation of the laws, and for strict accountability. The program would have to be carefully planned, organized, and implemented at the levels of communities, schools, districts, and regions. I think that our universities could be particularly helpful - as I suggested in July 1995 to the rectors and presidents of Lasallian institutions of higher education, gathered in Rome.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Lasallians of the New York District, the theme of your celebration of the 150th anniversary of the New York District is ***Together for the Future***. The focus of the first day and a half of this assembly is ***The Future of our Lasallian Mission***. I have called my presentation ***Lasallian Mission Today and Tomorrow***. In short this assembly is about ***LIFE*** - life yesterday, life today, life tomorrow. I think it fitting, therefore, to make my own the concluding remarks of an extraordinary address that, two years ago, an eighteen-year-old student of De La Salle Institute in Auckland, New Zealand, delivered to the National Catholic Education Convention in his country. This young man told those distinguished educators a simple story, a story that I think has something important to say to you.

Once there were two men, one old and wise, the other young and smart. One day the young smart man captured a small bird in the palm of his hands and he went up to the old wise man and said, 'Old man, I have a small bird in the palm of my hands. Is this bird dead or is it alive?' He was going to trick the old man. The old man thought to himself, 'If I say it is dead, then the young man will release it to fly away, thus proving me wrong. But if I say it is alive, he will squeeze it to death and again prove me wrong.' After thinking about his response carefully, the old wise man replied, '*Young man, the life of the bird is in your hands.*'

**Lasallians of the New York District, the life of the bird is in your hands.**

### **Notes**

1. Sr. Joan Chittister. *The Fire in These Ashes*. Rowman & Littlefield: 1995, p. viii.
2. Sr. Patricia Wittberg. *Pathways to Re-Creating Religious Communities*. Paulist Press: 1996, pp. 81-82.
3. Robert Bellah. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. University of California Press: 1988/2008, p. 6.
4. Norman Lear.
5. John Baptist de La Salle. *Meditations*, 145.3.

6. *Declaration on the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the World Today*, 1966, 38.1.
7. *Declaration*, 38.3.
8. *Declaration*, 34.4.
9. *Rule*, 40.
10. General Assembly of the United Nations, *Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948.
11. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, par.56, revised Canon 226. March 25, 1995.
12. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*.