
The Lasallian Mission: A Global Educational Network

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Magandang hapon.² It is an honor to be with you this afternoon. I welcome opportunities to be on university campuses for I am convinced of the increasingly significant role our universities, colleges, and institutes of higher education exercise in the Lasallian global mission. I am particularly happy to be on your campus today because I am aware of the reputation of excellence De La Salle University has in this country and throughout Asia, as well as the advances it has made in the very areas I will address in this presentation. In my current role, I constantly call attention to the unimaginable potential of our global mission. This potential is more fully realized when our various international networks collaborate. It is important that we strengthen this collaboration, not only locally but regionally and internationally.

My remarks today have four parts and a conclusion. In the first section (part 1), some background will be provided on our Lasallian legacy. This is followed by the *raison d'être* for the mission (part 2), the partnership of two networks (part 3), and some priorities that can enhance the effectiveness of our mission today (part 4).

Our Lasallian Legacy

I begin with three "snapshots" of our heritage at particular moments in time. The first is the historical transition Western Civilization made from the medieval to the early modern period. The second is the apex of modernity in the mid-20th Century. The third "snapshot" is our present moment in time; a period not unlike De La Salle's time, as our world transitions from modernity to early post-modernity.

Those of you who have some familiarity with the story of John Baptist de La Salle, that city saint made patron saint of teachers in 1950, know that he received a classical education, studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, and earned a doctorate at age twenty-nine. He was now ready to continue a lifelong path that more than likely would have culminated in a bishopric. Then he would have been forgotten by history. Fortunately, Divine Providence intervened and with a small group of laymen he introduced a new way of being Church.

As one historian of the French Church and society in the 16th and 17th centuries opined:

La Salle's creation was more radical than anything we have seen so far, since he refused to allow any of its members to be a priest . . . What lay behind this reworking of existing models was a determination to educate young boys from poor social groups . . . insisting on using French as the language of instruction in subjects chosen essentially for their practical value to their pupils. Such a drastic departure from the educational practices of the earlier Orders and Congregations evidently called for an equally startling break with some of their key constitutive features.³

In other words, while De La Salle himself was a product of a classical medieval education, he gradually came to realize the children of the working class and the poor needed something different. While not consciously, nonetheless, De La Salle and the first Brothers introduced an educational model that effectively contributed to the transition of French Society from the medieval to the early modern period of Western Civilization. Guided by the Holy Spirit,

he was led by a passion for God and a passion for the poor. From one event to another, he and his Brothers became progressively aware of their corporate identity and clearly articulated the purpose of the mission entrusted to them. Guided by the light of faith and moved by compassion, they showed little interest in academic and political controversies over religious matters of the day. They simply and single-mindedly embraced a specific vocation to announce the Good News in service to the poor.⁴

Succeeding generations of Brothers built on this founding event as the Institute expanded to its global identity in the modern age.

The modern period reached its apex during the 20th century. At the midpoint of the 20th century, the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, in an address at Manhattan College upon receiving an honorary degree on the occasion of the tercentenary of the birth of Saint John Baptist de La Salle in 1951, noted the importance of the charism of the Brothers of the Christian Schools:

From the very start, they have understood that as concerns the working classes . . . *Education must equip youth with a genuine and efficient professional training and the means of making a living.* And they have understood at the same time that the formation of the soul and of the intellect . . . remains the highest and most indispensable aim of education. That integration, for which all are looking today, of the practical and the theoretical, of vocational preparation and the cultivation of the mind – with the implied general enlightenment, ability to think and judge by oneself, and orientation toward wisdom – that integration is natural for them; and they work it out spontaneously, because they are neither idealists despising matter nor technocrats despising disinterested knowledge; they are Christian educators in the most concrete and realist sense of this expression.⁵

At that moment in time, there were approximately 14,000 Brothers, reaching a peak of 16,500 by the end of Vatican Council II in December 1965. Those 16,500 men – and for the most part it was only men – dominated the faculties and staffs of all our schools and educational centers.

Today we live in a very different Institute from that of fifty years ago. The Institute, like the rest of the Church and society, is navigating its way from modernity to a post-modern world. Yet, I contend our present reality echoes Saint John Baptist de La Salle's efforts of ushering in a new way of being Church. As I contemplate the signs of our times and look back to the origins of our Institute, I see that the Founder is still inviting us to a new way of being Church.

As one senior Brother recently shared:

The living Institute of today gives witness to the prominence of the lay vocation in ministry, a better-educated membership in the Church, an influx of colleagues and volunteers who share our enthusiasm for mission. Brotherhood and sisterhood have been proclaimed as the social foundation of the Christian community. The wisdom of our Founder is now seen as prescient in the lay ministry of education and catechetics through baptism and confirmation, to represent the leading Evangelical edge of the total Church. For this, we must pledge our support to re-found the Institute in the realities of today.⁶

For the Lasallian Institute, the reality we are living today traces its origin back five decades.

Our Lasallian Preference: The Well-Being of the Poor

A half century ago, in the closing weeks of Vatican Council II, the final major document was published: *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* [*Gaudium et Spes*]. It opens with these words:

The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men [and women] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.⁷

In advocating for the Church to be in dialogue with the world, it puts the poor front and center.

Coming on the heels of Vatican Council II, the Brothers' General Chapter of renewal (1966–1967) and the publication of *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration*⁸ clearly affirmed that the poor are our preferential option for our educational service.

When discussing our Lasallian mission today, we always talk about the issue of our educational service with the poor. In our Lasallian universities, we face many challenges as we consider costly remedial programs and limited financial resources. We struggle with meeting the poor on their own terms; that is, seeing reality as they do.

The reflections offered by the Jesuit president of the University of Central America, Father Ignacio Ellacuría, are enlightening. You may recall that Father Ellacuría – along with other Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter – was murdered in 1989 by repressive forces in the country of El Salvador.

According to Ellacuría,

A Christian university must take into account the Gospel preference for the poor. This does not mean that only the poor will study at the university; nor does it mean that the university should abdicate its mission of academic excellence – excellence which is needed in order to solve complex issues of our time.

What does it mean? According to Ellacuría, the university should be present intellectually where it is needed:

- to provide science for those without science;
- to provide skills for those without skills;
- to be a voice for those without voices;
- to give intellectual support for those who do not possess the academic qualifications to make their rights legitimately heard.⁹

Consider for a moment these statements from a university president who intentionally re-imagined the university as a school that preferentially – not exclusively – serves the poor.

Father Ellacuría identifies the university as “a place” where needs and hopes meet. It should be an intersection where intellectual activity and the poor dialogue in their search for human development, spiritual maturity, and professional preparedness.

He also speaks of “presence.” It is not about increasing the number of the poor at a university. There is no question of creating a gap or lowering academic standards but of lifting up. Embracing these virtues is included in order to transform real problems.

But Ellacuría goes even further, identifying four verbs that energize the purpose of a university. The verbs used are:

- “provide” science for those without science;
- “give skills” to investigate, to collect what they learn, and apply that learning;
- “to be a voice” for those who do not have a voice. We are not substitutes; that is, we do not speak in place of, or for them; we give them the power to speak for themselves;
- and, finally, give “intellectual support.”

Let me emphasize that Ellacuría does not speak of empowering the poor as an act of charity but rather as a fundamental tenet of justice, as articulated in our Catholic social teachings.

This requires a concern for excellence in the study of the context of the poor from the perspectives of different academic disciplines. The interdisciplinary approach opens new possibilities favoring interventions and actions.

Finally, finding ways and means to make higher education more accessible to the poor would be more fruitful if the embodied purpose of the university were to be a place where the poor and their teachers become present to each other and stimulate respectively the quality of every student at the university. Fortunately, within our own Lasallian Family, we have both examples of this kind of presence and models of the kind Ellacuría described. While I am not personally familiar with all existing initiatives, I do know of such a university in Colombia called Utopía. In the United States, there are “the first generation initiatives” in Lasallian universities – programs targeting young people from families who have never had a member receive a higher education.

Here in the Philippines, the origins of the College of Saint Benilde brought tertiary education to those who otherwise may not have had the opportunity to attend college. Our Lasallian Family has also something more – networks.

An Exciting Lasallian Partnership: Two Networks Serving One Mission

De La Salle University is part of two Lasallian networks that will be among the main protagonists of our mission in this century. The two networks are our worldwide Institute and the International Association of La Salle Universities (IALU), an association of some 60 institutions of higher education. While these institutions are just a small percentage of the 1,000 institutions we conduct worldwide, one-third of the 1,000,000 students entrusted to our care are in our universities and other institutions of higher education. It is my hope that these two networks will collaborate more closely going forward, especially given the context of our post-modern world and the rapidly changing demographics of the Brothers' Institute with the aging and diminishing number of Brothers on the one hand and the formation, research, and resource capabilities of our universities on the other.

In this time of post-modernity, effective networking is essential to realizing some of our dreams for the education of the poor, the vulnerable, and the working classes and for confronting some of the challenges to those dreams. We have the technology and the communication tools to strengthen our networks globally: the International Association of La Salle Universities (IALU), the International Association of Former Students (UMAEL), the *Signum Fidei* Movement that currently has nearly 3,000 members, and our international movements of Young Lasallians and Lasallian Volunteers. And we are networking with like-minded organizations as well. For example, with the Congregation of Marists Brothers, we launched the *Fratelli Project*, creating educational centers for Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Lebanon.

I have not the slightest doubt about the transformative potential and power of our international networks. Often, however, we are so passionate about a given place, a particular work which we love, that we lose a sense of the whole. This happens with both our networks – the worldwide Institute and IALU. On the one hand, Lasallians have great zeal for what they are doing in their particular ministries. On the other hand, we risk diminishing the possibility for a greater mission impact. How can we exploit the international character of the Institute in order to increase and improve our service of human and Christian education?

With this question in mind, I move to my final point and a consideration of some priorities to enhance the continuing vitality for the mission.

Our Lasallian Universities: Effective Networks Enhancing the Mission

Organization

The Institute's 45th General Chapter held in Rome in 2014 made a significant acknowledgement. It stated:

The Chapter believes that the work done in higher education is an important contribution to the mission. It acknowledges this role of higher education and encourages it to continue its contribution to teaching and learning, research and societal development.¹⁰

In this acknowledgement, the Chapter delegates recognized that:

- universities are places that allow for research to contribute to scientific thinking and they provide the tools to improve the quality of life for women and men today, particularly the poor.
- universities are places where opportunities for dialogue between culture and faith can be encouraged and explored in all its depths and richness.
- universities are places where further research in pedagogy can be investigated to ensure the promotion of education in general and the Lasallian mission in particular.
- universities are places where professional training of Brothers and Lasallian Partners can be undertaken to ensure the development of the Institute, the society and the Church it serves.¹¹

This acknowledgment led to two decisions involving our universities: the appointment by the Institute of a General Councilor to accompany Lasallian higher education and the creation of an International Council for Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission (CIAMEL) with university membership. These are two concrete steps facilitating closer coordination with our universities for the global Lasallian mission.

Collaborative Research

Regarding the vitality of the mission, the General Chapter again recognized that Lasallian universities can share their research expertise – as you are already doing in some cases. For example: Dr. Arnulfo Azcarraga and his team on biomedical projects, research analyzing the anti-microbial properties of medicinal plants native to the Philippines, and food safety practices in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Connected, both networks (Institute and IALU) can conduct research on such topics as the economy, the culture of commodity, the poor, and the new poverties, and how all these are affecting the young people and adults in our educational communities.

I would think there are young, non-tenured faculty members among our higher education institutions who are looking for a niche in the world of research. Research with a Lasallian nuance can be conducted through the disciplines of education, history, theology, sociology, and spirituality.

Networking among Lasallian universities can stimulate concrete research projects concerned with promoting the common good. We can learn from each other and encourage one another to continue our academic and professional formation. It would be interesting and encouraging, for example, to see a group of Lasallian universities cooperating with research related to migration, the experience of immigrant workers in the Middle East, and street children and young people displaced by wars.

Each academic discipline, or a selected group of disciplines, could conduct investigative research – such as you are already doing – in the areas of health, nutrition, and the environment as they affect people living on the peripheries and the fringes of societies. This type of collaborative research could help us create concrete programs to improve the lives of many people.

Lasallian Vocations

To commemorate the 300th anniversary of the death of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, the General Chapter designated 2019 as the Year of Lasallian Vocations. Research, at least in the Western world, tells us that young emerging adults are delaying life choices until their late twenties and even early thirties. Can Lasallian universities in collaboration with District, Regional, and Institute vocation ministers conduct their own research and develop more effective strategies to promote Lasallian vocations at the tertiary level, both to the Brothers' life and for interested Lasallian educators?

Collaboration with Other Lasallian Organizations

Finally, can we imagine harnessing our two networks with two other networks in our Lasallian Family: Lasallian Volunteers and UMAEL, the international association of former students? Today, no single network has the capacity to respond effectively to all of today's needs in a timely fashion. Most organizations do have a few people, or places, or projects that contain the innovative seeds of the future in some partial form. Together we can locate and support those that might be cropping up in our networks.

Conclusion

Two thousand years ago God incarnated himself bringing the Good News of salvation to our world. He gathered about himself small groups of men and women to carry that Good News to the ends of the earth. A thousand years later, give or take a century or two, God called Francis of Assisi to “go, repair my Church in ruins.” He, too, gathered a small group of followers to announce the Good News in a new millennium. Another thousand years later, give or take a century or two, a Pope takes the name Francis, the first to do so. Coincidence? This Francis is telling us, we “cannot leave things as they presently are. We are no longer served by ‘simple administration.’ In all regions of the earth, let us be in a ‘permanent state of mission.’”¹²

Biblical scholars suggest three characteristics of the mission of Jesus: boundary breaking, foot washing, and table fellowship.¹³

- *boundary breaking*: Jesus challenged the religious customs and practices of his times and of his faith.
- *foot washing*: Jesus turned our human values upside down, acting more like a servant than the master.
- *table fellowship*: Jesus shared meals indiscriminately, whether with the leaders of the community or with outcasts, sinners, and tax collectors.

To break boundaries is to witness to an alternative worldview; to engage in foot washing is to serve the vulnerable; to share table fellowship is to be in communion with all. These three characteristics were emulated by Francis of Assisi and now by Pope Francis. When we Lasallians do this, we can create an experience of *communitas*. *Communitas* is

a small group led by an impossible dream and utterly committed to one another for the sake of the dream . . . They produce a burst of creative energy . . . that galvanizes, inspires and commits them to realizing the dream.¹⁴

De La Salle and the first Brothers were such a small group and look at what has been accomplished. We are a much larger body today, Brothers and Partners and alumni, with global communication tools unimaginable in De La Salle's time. And like De La Salle and his first Brothers, we are becoming progressively aware of our global Lasallian identity and mission for the 21st century. Small bursts of creative energy are present in our Lasallian world. In the past two years, I have seen Lasallians networking: in the slums of Lima, Perú; with street children in Abidjan, Ivory Coast; Indonesian refugees in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah; and Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Lebanon. Here in the Philippines, examples are the Jaime Hilario Integrated School for children of farmers and fishermen in Bagac, Bataan, and the KUYA Drop-In Center – a shelter for street children.

These are examples of responses to Pope Francis' call for all Christians to go to the frontiers and peripheries of our societies.

In his very first *Meditation for the Time of Retreat*, De La Salle tells us:

Not only does God will that everyone come to the knowledge of truth, but He wants everyone to be saved.¹⁵

Here we have been given our purpose and mission as members of the Lasallian Family. In his *Apostolic Exhortation: The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis writes:

The Church, in her commitment to evangelization, appreciates and encourages the charism of theologians and their scholarly efforts to advance dialogue with the world of culture and sciences . . . Universities are outstanding environments for articulating and developing this evangelizing commitment in an interdisciplinary and integrating way. Catholic schools, which always strive to join their work of education with the explicit

proclamation of the Gospel, are a most valuable resource for the evangelization of culture, even in those countries and cities where hostile situations challenge us to greater creativity in our search for suitable methods.¹⁶

Is this not reason enough for closer coordination of our two networks? Universities and our secondary and primary schools, together, announcing the Good News of salvation for all, in this world and in God's kingdom to come.

Can we harness the passion of so many Lasallians to actually be such a *communitas* for the vulnerable in our midst? On the horizon, can we discern a path forward? Can we be as innovative and inventive as Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers were as our world transitions from modernity to post-modernity? The Pope has reminded us that our salvation came from a "yes" by a lowly maiden from a small town on the edge of a great empire. As Lasallians, we are sincere and simple everyday folk ministering in cities and small towns everywhere. I want to further connect and strengthen our networks for the greater glory of God and so that the wellbeing of the vulnerable will lead the Lasallian mission to wherever it is most urgently needed today.

Isn't this something worth committing ourselves to? I think it is.

Thank you.

Endnotes

1. Brother Robert Schieler, FSC was elected superior general of the Brothers of the Christian Schools at the 45th General Chapter in 2014. He earned a doctorate in educational administration at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. These remarks were delivered on 19 July 2016 during the conferment of the degree doctor of pedagogy, *honoris causa*, at De La Salle University in Manila, Philippines. Although some significant overlap exists between these remarks and the keynote address delivered at Encuentro XI of the International Association of La Salle Universities (IALU) in March 2015, additional rich insights and a clear development of thought on the part of the superior general are evident (especially about networking and the exciting partnership evolving between the two networks of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and IALU).

2. "Good Afternoon" is a translation of this Filipino expression.

3. Joseph Bergin, *Church, Society and Religious Change in France: 1580–1730* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), page 118.

4. Miguel Campos FSC, "Our Corporate Mission in Light of a Faith That Does Justice." First Lasallian Seminar, La Salle University (Philadelphia, PA), 2010, page 2.

5. Jacques Maritain, Paper delivered at Manhattan College in "Historical Note," 30 April 1951, pages 43-44.

6. Colman Coogan, FSC, Reaction delivered at the 2016 District Retreat of the District of Eastern North America.
7. The Documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* [*Gaudium et Spes*] (Pauline Publications, 2013), page 342.
8. *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (Rome, 1967).
9. Ignacio Ellacuría, SJ, Commencement address at Santa Clara University (San Diego, CA), June 1982.
10. *Circular 469: The Documents of the 45th General Chapter* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2014), #3.20, page 26.
11. Ibid, pages 26-27.
12. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium* [*The Joy of the Gospel*] (Vatican, 2013), #25.
13. Anthony J. Gittins, CSSp, *Reading the Clouds* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1999), page 69.
14. Anthony J. Gittins, CSSp, *Called to Be Sent* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2008), page 7.
15. Meditation #193.3 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994).
16. Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, #133 & #134.