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## **A Vision of Lasallian Education for Today's World**

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I treasure this honor that Saint Mary's College of California gives me today. I am deeply grateful for this wonderful, meaningful and significant recognition. I have always appreciated and highly regarded you, the Brothers, the women and men of the faculty and staff and students of Saint Mary's. You are determined and resolute with a vision to educate with a liberal arts foundation, and with an impressive values infusion in all of your academic and professional programs. You truly transform the minds and touch the hearts of all who are fortunate enough to be part of this unique and distinctive Lasallian community of learners.

All liberal arts colleges can boast that they "teach minds"; but Lasallian education, especially here at Saint Mary's, adds a most powerful and dynamic dimension. That dimension was so magnificently described by Saint John Baptist de La Salle when he said: To touch the hearts of your students is the greatest miracle you can perform.<sup>3</sup>

I don't think I have to convince any of you that today the country, the world, and the institutional Church desperately need some miracles – right now.

I know how truly fortunate I am to be here with you today as you celebrate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of De La Salle's passing.<sup>4</sup> I had served for nine years at the Brothers' international center in Rome. There, in the sanctuary chapel behind the main altar, encased in full view for all to see, are the actual remains of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. Over the years, thousands of Brothers and Lasallians have venerated and knelt at the bones of this great person who worked miracles in education. But those bones now lie there – powerless, dead and silent – as relics of a truly outstanding faith-filled servant leader.

Now each of you are right here in this chapel, at this College, 6,277 miles away and 300 years later. You, the women and men of Saint Mary's, must now put flesh – your flesh – on those dead, impotent bones and make them real, relevant and rigorously alive. Alive with a Lasallian education and vision that respond to today's world and to today's needs. It certainly is a very different world with very different needs from the world of 300 years ago.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle did his job then – indeed, a very good job! He needs us, right now, to do our job and bring peace, justice, dignity and unconditional love to all people of good will. We must bring hope through today's Lasallian education especially to the poor, marginalized, abandoned and discarded people in our world; to people of all faiths and creeds, or with no sectarian affiliations; to people who are excluded because of color, race, gender, or life-style; and to those people who are ideologues in politics or religion claiming that they have the monopoly on truth.<sup>5</sup> That is what a Lasallian education for today's world demands. That is what is needed to put flesh in today's world on De La Salle's bones for the resurgence and reawakening of Lasallian education. No less a quest is needed for today's Lasallian education.

For me, De La Salle's greatness and importance was not that he just "changed" educational pedagogy. As you think about it, "change" involves doing better what you have always been doing. However, De La Salle did not just develop new teaching techniques. Through his teaching and in his schools, De La Salle introduced into the learning process a new worldview, a re-created imagination, and a re-awakening of loving and caring in the minds and hearts of his students. No less a quest is needed for today's Lasallian education.

Do we not see now in hindsight that De La Salle dared to use and infuse a dynamic into education that made his learning process actually become the "agent for social transformation"? He dared to create a new future and a renewed, revived inspiration for primarily working class and poor students who were too often excluded, marginalized, and without a future. De La Salle did this by creating an education for them that transformed and detonated the power within the person to remove the binding and confining shackles forced upon them by unjust pressures and prejudices whether from society's embedded favored and advantaged or from governmental authorities or from the Church "clericalism" of the time. Yet, De La Salle remained, at his core, a faith-filled and loving follower of Jesus' Gospel and the Church as the "people of God."<sup>6</sup> No less a quest is needed for today's Lasallian education.

We have historical evidence that relates to the many times that De La Salle was in trouble with the many different authorities and power players of his day.<sup>7</sup> So I guess that we Lasallians should not be too surprised that, when we embrace the educational spirit of De La Salle and call-out societal injustices, or challenge those who disrespect the dignity of each person, we too may get into trouble.

However, I would also ask you to consider that when we Lasallians are constructively critical and support the integrity of God's magnificent creation with all its kaleidoscopic array in the awesome diversity among people, we do not have to be mean-spirited, divisive or destructive. Isn't there just too much of that in the world today, in politics today and, for shame, even in institutional religions today? We know that De La Salle incorporated into his pedagogy appropriate norms of politeness, civility and respect for others.<sup>8</sup> Yes, he may have taught his students to be polite and check their hats when entering a building or a Church; but he certainly never taught that any of his students should also check their brains and hearts at the same time – at anybody's or any authority's door.

Many often talk about tradition; but do we really appreciate that De La Salle's respect for tradition had very little to do with conforming to past ways of doing education, or past ways of believing, or past ways of caring and loving? He transformed education because he understood that tradition was not merely copying, thinking and doing as it had always been done. No! De La Salle knew that the core and heart of "Christian tradition" is "to teach as Jesus did."<sup>9</sup> It is a call to each and every person to care and love creatively, and use knowledge to create an inclusive world as it should be at that moment in time. To teach that way is always risky. It cost Jesus his life.

Make no mistake about it. De La Salle was a faithful Catholic with a capital "C."<sup>10</sup> However, as an "agent of social transformation," as I contend, he also gave birth and nurtured a catholic Lasallian education with a lower case "c," i.e., an education which has "universal" application to the real world and to real people of good will. In essence, the spirit of De La Salle's education was,

is and must be, I contend, to honor and respect the dignity and right of each person “to become” who she or he decides to be for herself or himself. Without that dimension that embraces the power of each person “to become” the person she or he yearns and hungers “to become,” it is not Lasallian education. But to teach with that spirit is also risky. But we need to take that risk.

No matter what religious sectarian views, or lack thereof, Lasallians may have, they are truly Catholic with that lower case “c” because the essence of a Lasallian education is catholic, not only in a sectarian sense, but in its “universal” commitment to love and accept as Jesus did all persons creatively and inclusively; to teach and learn prophetically; to be courageous enough to be visionaries; and to be bold enough to dream dreams that will literally make it real that “thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps back in the 1800s, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s famous epic work, *Aurora Leigh*, described this same vision poetically in those oft quoted familiar words:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.  
The rest sit round it and pluck blueberries,  
And daub their natural faces unaware . . . .<sup>12</sup>

It is that kind of a vision and dream that makes a Lasallian liberal arts education the miracle that De La Salle believed was possible and universal.

And understand, his vision for education was not pretentious, Pollyannaish or pietistic. It was pragmatic. De La Salle was truly a pragmatist because he understood that we must make our education effective by doing, implementing, achieving, risking, and respecting the personal uniqueness and dignity for each learner. I believe Picasso had a keen insight into what this means when he said:

God is just another artist. He made a giraffe, an elephant, and a cat. God has no style. He just keeps trying new things.<sup>13</sup>

It will be that kind of risky spirit that will put the flesh on De La Salle’s bones in today’s world and make for a true modern-day universal epiphany of a Lasallian education. We must not be afraid to try “new things.” Our world desperately and certainly needs “new things.” It needs a “new human synthesis” that will bring to the world peace, justice and a commitment to the integrity and inclusiveness for all of God’s creation and all the people in it. There is no dichotomy between worldliness and holiness if we Lasallians teach as Jesus did.

That “new human synthesis” can best be accomplished with a dynamic Lasallian education which understands, believes and teaches that Jesus’ call that “we may all be one”<sup>14</sup> does not, never has, and never will mean that we must all be the same – or think the same, or believe the same – as long as we all lovingly care for each other with all our beautiful, God-given differences.

We must be aware and fear labeling people of goodwill who strive for peace, harmony, acceptance, and justice for all. Labeling people as heretics, conservatives, liberals, intrinsically disordered, and so forth is a death sentence to constructive dialogue, knowledge, and wisdom. Labels! Labels are for peanut butter jars and other consumer products. Never! Never must they be glued onto the essence of a person, or who, what or how a person loves. The only acceptable label, and it should be etched onto a person, is: *made in the image and likeness of God!*<sup>15</sup>

We Lasallians must learn – no, we must actually invent – a new language. A new language that – when we speak – teaches the minds and touches the hearts of all who listen. A new language that will cultivate and cherish:

- the dignity of each and every person;
- the respectful acceptance of all lifestyles that nourish loving, caring and respectful relationships;
- the end to the insidious interpretations and expectations of a systemic and domineering “patriarchal culture” wherever it is found;
- the embracing of an unconditional equality for women and for gender sensitivity in families, businesses, schools, societies and in all institutional religions; and
- the personal and institutional responsibilities for the integrity of life, peace, justice, and sustainability of the environment.

That is the new, inclusive and universal language needed for a Lasallian education in today’s world.

In conclusion, I am reminded of an insightful thought that I read in a book entitled *If You Lived Here, I’d Know Your Name*.<sup>16</sup> The author lives in a remote little town in Alaska. She wrote that as she attended a funeral service,

I fanned myself with the funeral program and wondered if eagles and spirits and mountains and maybe even strange lights and meteors are God’s way of getting our attention. Do we feel God’s presence because we are looking for [God] or do we feel it because [God] is looking for us?

Lasallians of Saint Mary’s, God and Saint John Baptist de La Salle are looking for us to continue to be the prophetic educators that will “explode” minds and hearts to make real the vision “thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” No less a miracle is acceptable for a Lasallian education.

God and De La Salle are looking for you. *Take the risk. Be there.*

God and De La Salle will find you. *Take the risk. Be there.*

God and De La Salle only want you to be miracle workers. *God and De La Salle will take that risk, but you better dare to be there.*

Thank you all so very much for your kindness and the honor that you have so graciously given to me. And after 300 years we can still say: *May Jesus live in our hearts, forever!*<sup>17</sup>

## Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered on 1 May 2019 during an academic convocation on the campus of Saint Mary's College of California. On this occasion, Brother Louis was awarded an honorary doctorate. Saint Mary's College identifies itself as an institution of higher education "based in the Catholic, Lasallian and Liberal Arts traditions"; and in its mission statement, the College commits itself "to probe deeply the mystery of existence by cultivating the ways of knowing and the arts of thinking, to affirm and foster the Christian understanding of the human person which animates the educational mission of the Catholic Church, and to create a student-centered educational community whose members support one another with mutual understanding and respect."

2. Brother Louis DeThomasis, who co-founded Christian Brothers Investment Services (CBIS) in 1981, is a president emeritus of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. He earned his doctorate in financial management from Union Institute and University in Cincinnati, Ohio.

3. Cf. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994), #139.3.

4. During 2019, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and the Lasallian Family commemorated the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death in Rouen, France, of John Baptist de La Salle on 7 April 1719.

5. For a deeper appreciation of the contemporary Lasallian roots from which these assertions spring, see *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 2015): In a Pluralistic World (#14 & #14.1); and *Report of the International Assembly 2006* by the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (Rome, 2006): Main Orientations and Areas of Emphasis (pages 34-37).

6. While the expression "the people of God" has roots in the Old Testament and the New Testament, it has been given greater attention in the Catholic Church due to its significance in the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). For a further discussion of "the creative forces in the birth of John Baptist de La Salle to a new Church," see "Lasallian Spirituality: Our Heritage" by Michel Sauvage FSC in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, edited by Robert C. Berger FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999), pages 269-271. De La Salle's journey is presented in terms of a shift: (a) from an established Church to a missionary Church, (b) from a Church for oneself to a Church for the world, (c) from a powerful Church to a serving Church, and (d) from a clerical Church to a Church for the people of God.

7. Cf. *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* by Luke Salm FSC (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989): the ecclesiastical establishment (pages 99-111) and the educational establishment (pages 112-126).

8. Cf. *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility* by John Baptist de La Salle and edited by Gregory Wright FSC (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1990).

9. Cf. *To Teach as Jesus Did: A Pastoral Message on Catholic Education* by National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1973).

10. The word “catholic” by itself means universal, broad-minded, or wide-ranging. Generally, one uses “Catholic” when referring to the Catholic Church. The expression used in the Nicene Creed, which is recited each Sunday at the Roman Catholic celebration of the Eucharist, is: “I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.”

11. Cf. *Matthew* 6:10.

12. *Aurora Leigh* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1856).

13. Cf. *Life with Picasso* by Françoise Gilot (1964).

14. Cf. *John* 17:21.

15. Cf. *Genesis* 1:26.

16. Heather Lende, *If You Lived Here, I'd Know Your Name: News from Small-Town Alaska* (Algonquin Books, 2006).

17. Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 2015), #64.1.