

The Educational Mission of John Baptist de La Salle: Are We Doing Enough as Lasallians Today?

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Most Reverend Bishop Emeritus John Cummins, Brother Stan Campbell, Saint Mary's College President Jim Donahue, distinguished Trustees, Regents and Administrators of Saint Mary's, beloved Brothers from the Saint Mary's College Community and the District of San Francisco, Lasallian Faculty and Students, Ladies and Gentlemen: It is really a great honor and privilege for me to be with you this day, literally an ocean's distance from the many concerns that are piled on my desk back home.

Our school year opens on June 2nd and these months are the most toxic for us. I accept this singular honor to be included as one of the SMC Gaels with your gracious conferral on me of an honorary degree in Educational Leadership. I am also grateful for this opportunity to share with you some of my experiences as Secretary of Education in the Philippines where 21 million public school students in 47,000 schools are entrusted to my care.

John Baptist de La Salle, as most of you would know, was an educational reformer, establishing schools for the instruction of poor children in seventeenth-century France. He had been to education then what Steve Jobs was to computers in recent decades. Deeply moved by the condition of the poor as viewed with the lens of his faith in God, he embarked on a mission to democratize learning. From the tight control of the teaching masters, he opened the doors to catechism, etiquette and basic knowledge for the masses of French society.

With great depth and wisdom, he understood the power of education to liberate humans by opening minds to new knowledge, touching hearts through relationships, and nurturing souls through the word of God.

Three hundred years into the future, the educational mission of De La Salle has spread across eighty countries, with over a thousand schools, run by more than 80,000 Lasallian partners, Brothers and other religious, teaching about a million students today. In fact, around 10% of those students are in seventeen Lasallian institutions in the Philippines.

These are quite impressive statistics. A success story. A good business model. Surely even Saint La Salle would be impressed at how far his little band of Brothers and teachers has come in their mission of educating the young and spreading the Gospel.

However, before we start patting each other on the back, thinking that all is fine and well, and believing that our work is pretty much headed in the right direction, let me share with you

another number so staggering it looms over these proud figures like a long, dark shadow – 57 million.

According to a UNESCO report published last year, as of 2011, “more than 57 million children [worldwide] continue to be denied the right to primary education.” By 2015, only half of the world's countries will be able to provide universal primary education. Fifty-seven million youth without an education! That is 150% as large as the population of the entire state of California! I find myself asking the question, “Are we doing enough as Lasallians today?”

Its present-day campus and its 150 years of presence tell us that Saint Mary's College of California has many best practices to share, as Saint Mary's is a success story. If I go around the seventeen Lasallian institutions in the Philippines, I can say almost the same thing.

Nevertheless, I would like to borrow the words of Drew Gilpin Faust, first female president of Harvard University: “[Schools] nurture the hopes of the world: in solving challenges that cross borders; in unlocking and harnessing new knowledge; in building cultural and political understanding; and in modeling environments that promote dialogue and debate.”

Are our institutions nurturing the hopes of the world? Are we solving challenges across borders? Are we confining ourselves to the small silos of our successful institutions? Have we become too content with succeeding within the comfort zones in which we have operated so well? Have we gotten too caught up with the day-to-day business of transmitting knowledge, managing the organization, and keeping busy with our own affairs?

The beautiful depiction of the Founder kneeling in front of Saint Mary's College is a wonderful reminder of our founding story, which rewrote the stories and lives of the children of the artisans and the poor in seventeenth-century France. Would anyone on this campus dare rewrite the stories and the lives of 57 million children whom the world has forgotten?

In a twenty-first-century world of complex and intricate networks of people, information systems and technology, are we utilizing these resources to their fullest potential to bring education to where it is needed the most? Doing so is surely no simple task. This complexity is also no reason for us to sit back and assume someone else will do the job for us.

In the Philippines, approximately 1.5 million children still have no access to basic education. In addition, maybe another 4 million young adults below thirty years old have not finished high school. When I was offered the post in the Department of Education, I thought to myself this would be an excellent opportunity to reform the educational system and infuse it with key features and best practices found in Lasallian educational communities. I was naïve in presuming that I stood alone against a multitude of secular, underpaid, and uninspired public school employees who had little or no sense of faith, service or communion. In the close to four years that I have held this office, I have been proven very wrong. I have come across hundreds of stories of ordinary people demonstrating extraordinary commitment to the noble vocation of teaching, and proving without a doubt their selfless love for their students.

Take for example the case of Teacher Lorna, a newly hired Muslim teacher in a predominantly Christian community of Talisayan Elementary School in Southern Philippines. One fateful day in 2011, an insane man with a kitchen knife entered the campus and started stabbing people randomly. Lorna gathered her mostly Christian students inside her classroom's water closet, embraced them tightly and used her body as human shield to protect her students from the attacker.

In a more recent example from Tacloban, which was ground zero in the devastation left by super typhoon Haiyan, teachers who lost their homes came to school the day after the storm to organize the community so they could clean the debris, put up makeshift classrooms, and care for evacuees. I spotted one of them and made light of the situation commenting, “You lost everything but you did not forget to put on your lipstick.” Our Filipino lady teachers just love their cosmetics. She brought tears to my eyes: “Brother, if I came to school without my lipstick, my students would not think we could start rebuilding. They would be as devastated as I am. I need to cheer them up and give them hope!”

Then, of course, there are the lesser known, less spectacular, yet equally heroic acts that thousands of other teachers commit in their daily struggle: getting up at four in the morning because they live several towns away from the nearest school; walking along mountainous cliffs and rickety rope bridges because not enough infrastructure has been built; or simply shelling out some of their personal funds to purchase colored chalk and other materials which make life in the classroom just a tad bit more colorful for the children.

Why am I sharing these stories with you? It is to reinforce the truth that there are numerous good and dedicated people out there, though not affiliated in any way with De La Salle, not even necessarily Christian, with whom we could partner, network and collaborate to find better ways to spread our mission.

For Lasallians here at Saint Mary’s College and all around the world, we have a vast network of partners, students, alumni, stakeholders and benefactors with whom we could work and from whom we could seek support. We could engage them to make our institutions even more successful. We could do even better than that. We could engage them and everyone else – all people of good will – to solve some of the world’s problems.

Fifty-seven million children with no access to education. Are we being agents of transformation in our world today? Do we care enough to rewrite the stories of 57 million children in the world?

Einstein once said, “If you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got.” If Lasallian institutions continue to do after three hundred years what our Founder started, we will continue getting what we get today: successful graduates of Lasallian institutions. De La Salle certainly did something different and that changed the face of education.

The power of technology is at the tip of our fingers. If we can send people to the moon, and remotely drive robots on Mars, what is to hold us back from reaching sideways to those who live alongside us on this planet? Our Founder transformed education more than three hundred years ago. With limited resources, limited knowledge and hardly any modern technology, he

accomplished this with ingenuity, innovation and in collaboration with others. Maybe it is time to relive his story in our own day.

Maraming salamat po!

Notes

1. Before appointment as the Secretary of the Department of Education for the Republic of the Philippines, Armin Luistro, FSC, Ph.D., fulfilled a number of education leadership roles, most recently as President, De La Salle University (2006 – 2010). He completed the Doctor of Educational Management at University of St. La Salle (Bacolod City, 2005); and the M.A. in Religious Education and Values Education and B.A. in Philosophy and Letters, at De La Salle University, Manila.