

That We Might Be a Bright Beacon of Light¹

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The purpose of most windows is to allow a view of the outside and to bring light into a building. The purpose of stained-glass windows, however, is to beautify buildings and often times to tell a story. For example, the windows of a magnificent gothic cathedral, more likely will tell a biblical story. The windows commissioned for a castle will tell an epic story. Some homes also have stained-glass windows, and in this case the story told may be related to family events. In all the cases, stories and legends are told through a combination of beauty, color, and light.

From now on, the wonderful De La Salle stained-glass windows [being unveiled today] will reflect colors in the interior walls of this magnificent Chapel here at Manhattan College; by so doing, they certainly will beautify it but, most importantly, they will tell a story, a family story, the story of the origins of the Lasallian family – and invite all who entre this Chapel to continue to bring to life this Lasallian Family story in our world today. This particular story is one of faith, communion, and service. And, like the story of every family, this one, ours, is also made of joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties. Moreover, it is a story of salvation, because that is precisely what Saint John Baptist de La Salle, our Founder, wanted: to bring salvation closer to all, a reality for all, especially to the poor.

Manhattan College initiated one chapter of this story of salvation; it was the first Lasallian College established in the US, and probably in the Institute. This fact makes Manhattan College a real pioneer, transforming the long history of Lasallian education from its well-established success in elementary and secondary education into the transformative and diverse world of higher education. After Manhattan College ventured forth into Lasallian higher education, many other institutions of higher learning were established, especially in the first decades of the last century.

The fragile sprout of Lasallian higher education that began with Manhattan College back in 1853 has become today a strong, growing, and promising network of Lasallian Institutions of Higher Education, commonly referred to as IALU. At recent count, the network – IALU – is comprised of 61 institutions located mainly in North, Central and South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. This network supports the efforts of all the constituent institutions to meet the challenges facing higher education. Answering the calls young people and their parents, our Brothers Superior General of the Institute and our Lasallian International Assemblies of Mission and General Chapters of the Brothers have encouraged the international association of Lasallian higher-education institutions to play an increasingly important and significant role in support of the Lasallian Educational Mission.

Brother Alvaro Rodriguez, former Superior General, opened his address to the Encuentro VII of IALU, assembled in Barcelona, on January 14, 2004, with these words:

My presence among you is intended to be a sign of the importance our Institute gives today to higher education and an act of faith in its enormous possibilities. In the history of the Institute, the growth of Lasallian universities in almost all the Regions of the world is without precedent and is a sign of the times, which we cannot ignore.

Why is the international Institute recognizing higher education? I will let the international 45th General Chapter of the Brothers, which met in Rome a few years ago, answer the question. According to the Acts of the Chapter, “naturally, higher education has a significant role to play for the Institute, the society, and the Church” (*Circular 469*, #3.21).

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

Finally, the 45th General Chapter acknowledged the remarkable work being done at Lasallian institutions of higher learning and encouraged them to continue their contributions to teaching and learning, research, and societal development. And all of this began when a small seed was planted in this field here in New York that has its roots and heritage in the life of John Baptist de La Salle in France – depicted so beautifully in these stained-glass windows. Yes, this small seed has borne fruit and has made us, Lasallians, very proud.

Today, Manhattan College [with the installation of these stained-glass windows] retrieves a remembrance; its pioneer memory comes alive again. Today, Manhattan College distinguishes another pioneer, the first General Councilor of the Institute appointed to accompany Lasallian institutions of higher education. That is me. Receiving this honorary doctorate honors me deeply and also humbles me because I am reminded of something that is greater than me. I am reminded that the family story which began more than three centuries ago needs to continue and that those who are to write the following chapters need encouragement and, most importantly, need witnesses. If we can assure both, that is, encouragement and witnesses, then the best chapters of our family story are still to come.

This Chapel of De La Salle and His Brothers, the centerpiece of the Manhattan College campus, has been, is and will be a place of worship; that is true. But, now, with these new windows you have made this Chapel also a place of discovery for those who search for meaning in their lives. The Chapel is now, even more so than it ever has been, a place of fostering the Lasallian identity and the commitment to the educational mission entrusted to the Institute and carried out in the College.

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss-American psychiatrist, a pioneer in near-death studies and the author of the groundbreaking book *On Death and Dying*, where she first discussed her theory of the five stages of grief, once said:

People are like stained glass windows. They shine and gleam when the sun is out; but when the darkness takes place, their true beauty is manifest by the light that radiates from within.

I hope, better, I pray that any student, faculty, staff, administrator, alumnus, or relative who visits this Chapel will see his or her inner light ignited so that each one will be a bright beacon of light for a world which yearns for light, truth, beauty, and love. All these gifts were given to society, to the Church, to youth, and to the poor – in this field of education – through Saint John Baptist de La Salle. And these windows are here so that we do not forget it.

May God bless Manhattan College! May God bless all of you! Thank you!

Endnotes

1. This is an address delivered for the dedication of the Life and Work of Saint John Baptist de La Salle stained-glass windows in the Chapel of De La Salle and His Brothers on the campus of Manhattan College on 07 April 2016. On this occasion, Brother Gustavo was awarded the degree of Doctor of Pedagogy, *honoris causa*.

2. Brother Gustavo Ramirez-Barba, FSC, who received a Doctor of Education degree from the University of San Francisco, currently serves as a General Councilor of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He is both a former Visitor of the Lasallian District of North Mexico and a former Rector of Universidad La Salle Noreste.