

Rodríguez Echeverría, Álvaro. "Lasallian Universities – Communities of Memory and Hope for Society Today." Presentation at Encuentro X, Manila, Philippines, February 27-29, 2012. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 3, no. 2 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota: 2012).

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Lasallian Universities – Communities of Memory and Hope for Society Today

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Introduction

Once again I am delighted to be able to participate in this Encuentro here in Manila, particularly during this year which is such an important one for the District of the Philippines with the celebration of the centennial of the arrival of the Brothers to this country. I am certain that our Encuentro is one of the most important activities of this celebration, since university education has had such an extraordinary development and vitality here which is an inspiration to our international network of centers for higher education. My own presence here, as I recalled at the three previous Encuentros which I have attended – Encuentro VI in Barcelona in 2006, Encuentro VII in Canoas, Brazil in 2007, and Encuentro IX in Philadelphia in 2009 – is a sign of the importance which our Institute places on higher education, an act of faith in its enormous potential and an expression of the need for international relationships that are more integrated and in solidarity with one another.

Lasallian Universities and institutions of higher learning are more necessary today than ever given the historical circumstances that we are experiencing, which require us to preserve, produce and propagate knowledge by means of quality academic training and research that opens new paths and responds to the needs of our fellow human beings, especially the poor and excluded. Above all a transformation is required of us, in a changing world, one that always points to the person as our ultimate end and which allows us to continue being instruments of salvation, especially for those who require it the most, being witnesses and promoters of the Gospel's transforming values.

Certainly today, like yesterday, the human being is still a mystery. Our very being is a paradox. There are many elements that are in conflict in our inner selves. Like children we have many limitations; nevertheless, our aspirations and desires are infinite. As free beings, our freedom in a certain sense destroys itself once a choice is made. To choose one thing is to give up something else. On the other hand, along with Saint Paul, we do what we do not want to do and we do not do what we want to do. Open to others, our hunger for love is insatiable and our dedication is almost selfish. Our life is presented as a dramatic struggle in which many times we are defeated. Superior in the entire universe, by our interiority we can raise ourselves from the visible to the invisible, or let ourselves be enslaved as a new sorcerer's apprentice by the forces unleashed by our very selves.

It seems to me that this description can be used to describe each of us and the challenge that higher education presents to us today. We are first and foremost human beings, mysterious and paradoxical, an historical being constantly being built up, and we need to see university education as a path, a journey, as a vocation from conception until our death; as a call *to attain to full manhood in Christ* (Ephesians 4:13), aware that we are not pure reason nor pure brightness,

but also emotion, feeling, instinct, passion and desire. Therefore it is about an integrated formation that makes us avoid the real danger of anti-humanism: the danger of man as machine or as beast. An education that considers the head, heart, hands, and feet.

Zygmunt Bauman, in his book *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, gives us a realistic look at some of the characteristics of our world today. Starting with love and differentiating it from desire, he describes for us the reality that we live today. For love, any kind of distance, no matter how small, is seen as unbearable, because it is in the nature of love to be united, merged, identified. Desire, on the contrary, has to do with craving. In reality, rather than desire, you would have to speak about *the desire to*. And *the desire to* can ensure neither fidelity nor commitment because it seeks to multiply experience according to where the desire is aimed. Love brings stable or solid personal relationships, *the desire for liquid* connections that can easily be cancelled or changed, forgotten or multiplied. Bauman reaches the conclusion that today it is more difficult to love one's neighbor because, creating more and more barriers, we have devised ways to communicate by remote control; we would have to add that the culture of fear that we see today makes us protect ourselves and keep our distance from those who are different. It may sound romantic or sentimental, but our universities and centers of higher education should be moved, above anything else, by great love.

Today some thinkers state that the prevailing anthropological model should be that of *man without a vocation*. At the conclusion of Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the protagonist, while speaking with her husband who is a surgeon who had to leave his hospital, says painfully, "Your mission was to perform operations." The husband's response was significant and summarized in part the sense of the work: "Teresa, a mission is a stupid thing. I have no mission. No man has a mission." We find ourselves face to face with a philosophy of *weak thinking*. One of its great supporters, Gianni Vattimo, in an interview where he was asked about the task of philosophy, said, "I believe that philosophy should not nor can it teach where one must go, but to live in the condition of one who has no direction." Therefore, there is no goal, no mission, no vocation.

Our universities do have very important goals, missions and vocations. Our universities should be communities of memory and hope for society today. Their point of departure as memory is that of Christian wisdom, focused on the double commandment of love and the reading made by Saint John Baptist de La Salle; their purpose is to keep hope alive in a world that seeks sustainable development which will overcome poverty, the violation of human rights, corruption, sickness, and will respond to climate change, biodiversity and inclusive globalization.

1. Communities of Evangelical-Lasallian Memory

To bring to mind is an expression with strong Biblical resonance, which leaves us not simply in the past, but which commits us today in the daily work of our lives, interpreting that past in a creative way and in a way that offers meaning. To bring to mind is to find the thread that unifies, motivates, enriches and drives our own vocation. Memory should lead us to the two sources that gave rise to our Lasallian mission: the person of Jesus and the Gospel on the one hand; our Founder, the first Brothers and the charism that was passed on to us on the other hand. Charismatic memory is more than theory, it is a story of love. It makes manifest God's intervention in the past, when our Institute was taking its first steps; an intervention that has extended throughout our history for more than 300 years and which gives us the certainty that

God continues to be present now and will be in the future, manifesting his providence and protection. It is about a collective memory that gives us a sense of identity and belonging and should inspire our university mission.

As the Peruvian Dominican Gustavo Gutiérrez said very well:

If you recall a previous event it is due to the validity that it has in the present. Expressions to say that God is working today and that, therefore, it is time that his followers must make decisions are abundant both in the first and second testaments. On the other hand, memory in the Bible goes beyond the conceptual, it aims to lead to a behavior, a practice aimed at transforming reality. To remember is to keep in mind or to care about someone or something. One recalls in order to act; without memory the action loses meaning and is limited to a type of intellectual gymnastic exercise.

Saint Augustine, in his profound reflections about time, tells us that *memory is the present of the past*. It is not a repetition of the past, but its present. Therefore as Jesuit Ellacuría points out:

A university of Christian inspiration will be all the more so the more it contributes to making that utopia proclaimed and promised by Jesus a reality, which is the Kingdom of God . . . This Kingdom needs engineers . . . This Kingdom needs economists . . . This Kingdom needs specialists in computing, chemistry, psychology, sociology, philosophy, law, as well as jurists and politicians . . . so that society is enriched . . . And this is not enough . . . The professionals of UCA will have Christian inspiration when, in addition to doing the best possible for others based on their chosen profession, they take on as a priority task to seek their own welfare, that of their family and that of everyone, looking at what the popular majority needs to overcome poverty, marginalization, injustice, lack of freedom and participation . . . a task that is eminently Christian . . . (University Writings, pages 290 - 292).

However, it also deals with a dangerous memory in a certain sense as expressed so well by Johann-Baptist Metz:

Memory easily becomes a false awareness of the past and an opium of the present. But there are other kinds of memory: dangerous memory, provocative memory. Memories and experiences of the past that cast a crude kind of light and let new and dangerous thoughts be born in the present. Suddenly, there appears a harsh and blinding light on something we have grown used to over time, and on the banality of so-called "realism." These memories break the rules of our dominant logic, bringing with them a certain subversive side. These memories are experienced as dangerous and inestimable encounters that visit us from the past. They are memories that we have to take into account. Memories which, in a certain way, contain the future.

Memory raises questions about commitment, reflections, strength and creativity. In our era we find ourselves facing particularly challenging uncertain signs. These signs invite us, then, to get to the heart of discernment, without getting caught up in what is secondary and temporary. These signs call us to face what is coming, starting from the present and not forgetting our roots. It seems to me that we are called to live the life and writings of the Founder and the story of the

first Brothers as a kind of *prophetic memory* that commits us to the here and now starting from the reality we are living today.

I believe that the Founder never expressed better the purpose of the Institute and its mission as he did in the first two *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. He starts from a conviction expressed by Saint Paul in one of his letters to Timothy (1 Timothy 2: 4): “God who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.” This is our dangerous memory, this is our mission and the mission of our universities. We came into being as instruments of salvation, of an integrated salvation that encompasses the totality of the person, of all persons, but with a very special tenderness for the poor, the excluded, the abandoned and for young people searching for meaning. This is the heart of Lasallian association, as the first Brothers understood very well when they sent a letter to De La Salle in 1714 in which they asked and ordered him to take charge of the Institute once again. They did this in the name of the body of the society to which he had promised obedience and they reminded him that this was God's work *and also yours* . . . and that they were concerned about *God's glory, the greater good of the Church and of our Society*. The Brothers spoke in the plural because they felt themselves deeply associated with the mission the Lord had entrusted to them. The use of the plural is a characteristic of all Lasallian works, also of the universities . . . and so we can see the importance of our "*Together and by association*" also on the international level.

I believe that it is worth recalling what the 2006 International Assembly on Association and the Lasallian Educational Mission said to us and which the General Chapter adopted as its own:

This Assembly wants to remind all Lasallians that the vitality of our mission depends upon how we respond today, associated together, to the needs of the poor. We value the efforts we Lasallians are making to liberate the poor from their different kinds of poverty and we ask you to consider the service of the poor and the promotion of justice as the heart and the cause of the strengthening of the Lasallian mission throughout the world.

To achieve this, the Founder and the first Brothers started from a series of educational insights that also became part of our own dangerous memory. Some of these insights are:

- In Lasallian education the person is supreme in such a way that persons are treated according to their individual, unique and unrepeatable being and attention is directed towards them in an integrated way. As we come into contact with each person, our question can be none other than that of Jesus: “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10: 51) or, as Benedict XVI stated: “In a time in which the great tradition of the past risks becoming a dead letter, we are called on to stand beside each young person with an ever new availability, accompanying him/her on the journey of discovery and the personal assimilation of the truth. By doing this we too can discover anew the fundamental realities in a new way.” (Address to the Bishops Gathered for the 61st General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, May 27, 2010).
- Lasallian education was born from the reality itself, so that it responds to the characteristics, needs, aspirations and cultural values of each nation. In our formation what is needed is to combine theory with a knowledge of the reality of our own situation. If we are not familiar with this reality, we cannot take charge of it. But it is not about just

taking on a reality, it also has to do with bringing the instruments to transform it and to open it to inter-cultural dialogue.

- Lasallian education deeply values the quality of relationships and it promotes working in common and creating community. The fraternity/sorority model is one of its distinctive traits. Each Lasallian should feel that he or she is a brother or sister with an open heart and without borders.
- Lasallian education educates for life and for work that is socially productive. From the beginning, pragmatism was one of its traits since it tried to respond to the concrete needs of young people. Today it is fundamental to help to integrate intellectual work and manual work; theory and practice; education and life in order to give each person the tools that will allow them to be the agent for personal and community development and for social promotion.
- Lasallian education translates into an association for the educational service of the poor. This association we live out in two ways: directly when we work with them; indirectly in other cases; on the university level as the 42nd General Chapter asked us to do, by studying the causes of poverty and by opening minds and hearts to be creative in the response to their needs starting from a profound social awareness. We should not forget when Gustavo Gutiérrez said to us: “The poor are hungry for bread, but they are also hungry for friendship, warmth, respect and giving time to a poor person is a way of welcoming him or her. There is no human being who can live with dignity if he or she does not feel friendship and love.”
- Lasallian education culminates in Christian commitment. It has been said that to believe today is to commit oneself and Lasallian educational aims to see that its audience live an operative faith in the practice of love; that they are prepared to be creators of relations among nations that are more just; that they commit themselves to activities in favor of justice and peace; that they are interested in the globalization of solidarity. Being Catholic, they are open to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue with an attitude of respect and openness to the values that may be mutually enriching.

To speak about memory, as I mentioned at the beginning, does not trap us in a past that is very different from today's changing world, nor does it invite us to seek refuge in a nostalgic memory about what has been. To speak about memory places us in the today of our history. The insights of our founding origin should be part of our being and an incentive that helps us to know our reality better and to respond to needs. For that reason, it seems to me that Paul Ricoeur's theory about *narrative identity* is very suitable since it distinguishes conceived identity **itself** (*idem*) and conceived identity **as itself** (*ipse*). This last identity is in accordance with dynamic temporal structure and is marked by personal or collective stories that are part of our being. That is why the subject of the action appears as the reader or writer of his own life. The agent acts in the world and in the heart of a given context but at the same time the sense of his action is only accessible to him through a reading of his own history.

Let me say in conclusion that what we call subject is never given in the beginning. Or if it is given, there is the risk of seeing it reduced to a narcissistic I, selfish and miserly, and

that is precisely what literature liberates us from. So what we lose in narcissism, we gain with narrative identity. In place of the I entrapped by itself, there is born an itself educated by cultural symbols, in whose first row are the stories received from literary tradition. Those are the ones that confer a unity that is not substantial but narrative

Ricoeur 1984: 57 - 58.

If memory is the *present of the past* and if our identity is a narrative one, the logical deduction that we can make is that today, as inheritors of De La Salle, we should keep alive the fire that came into being by making those insights our own, so that each of our universities and centers of higher education will be able to continue, from other coordinates, the Lasallian mission of placing all means of salvation within reach. But we cannot forget, as Brother Carlos Gómez reminded us in his talk in 2008, citing Michel de Certeau, that “tradition is dead if it remains inactive, if an invention is not involved in giving life, if it is not innovative through activity that recreates it” (*La faiblesse de croire*, cited by Dominique Julia in the Prologue to "The Conduct of Schools. Pedagogical Focus" by Leon Lauraire, Cahiers Lasalliens 62, Rome, 2006).

2. Communities of Hope for Society Today

If memory is the present of the past, hope is the guarantee of the future. I am convinced that today our universities and centers of higher education have as one of their principal missions to keep hope alive in an uncertain and fragmented world in which the great stories have been replaced by immediate and gratifying experiences with little depth.

To live with hope is to have trust in God and to persevere with fidelity in faith. To hope is to have the ability to see, even when our eyes do not see. It is to recover our ability to dream a better world for all, it is to question inhuman structures and ideologies that make people unfaithful and to collaborate actively so that a new and liberated world is born. To hope is to discover and welcome each day the life force of the Risen Christ, who made this world new with the power of his Holy Spirit (Silvio José Báez, O. C. D.).

Yes, our universities should dream about a better world, question inhuman structures and ideologies, collaborate so that a new world is born.

Hope is a gift, but along with it comes a task that is fleshed out in concrete signs. Gustavo Gutiérrez in one of his writings reminds us of an enlightening passage in the book of Jeremiah.

The country was devastated, threatened by the Chaldeans from the north and the Egyptians from the south, conflicted by a war whose consequences made the Jewish people suffer. This was before the Babylonian exile. In those circumstances, a relative comes along to say that he, Jeremiah, has the first right of purchase for territory left by an uncle. The prophet asks himself what this territory might mean in a country partially destroyed and in which people have abandoned their property and fled abroad. Nevertheless, he soon realized that the Lord was speaking to him through this act. His task was to raise the hope of the people in the midst of a crisis of his people and his own depression. To do this he had to set foot on the land and witness with concrete actions that there still is hope and that there is someone who believes that the circumstances of the moment can be overcome (cf. Jeremiah 32: 6 - 15).

Why can't our universities and centers of higher education think about buying some *territory* at this time of uncertainty? Here *territory* could mean a project that responds concretely to the needs of the poor, immigrants, the unemployed . . . *Territory* could mean scientific, sociological or theological research that responds to specific, current issues. *Territory* could mean an interdisciplinary plan that involves students in a service project. *Territory* could mean an extension program for teachers who need updating. *Territory* could mean a campaign for literacy or sponsoring some educational or agricultural project in poor countries. Universities need a lot of evangelical creativity and human solidarity.

To be communities of hope for society today assumes a thorough knowledge of our own situation. We know that starting from reality and discovering within it God's saving plan is one of the central points of our Lasallian spirituality and pedagogy. I never tire of recalling the call made to us by the last General Chapter that all of us Lasallians have *our eyes open and our hearts burning*.

The next Synod on the New Evangelization that will be held in October invites us to know how to read and interpret the various situations present in human history today. We know that we cannot generalize nor can we simplify and we also know that a local reading of situations is indispensable, but on a general level the following situations can help us to contextualize our universities and centers of higher education today.

1. **The cultural sector** in general presents us with an era of profound secularization – a secularization that has taken on a modest tone which has permitted this cultural form to invade the daily lives of persons and to develop a mentality in which God is, in fact, absent, either wholly or partially, from existence and from human awareness and this is expressed in a culture of relativism and a hedonistic and consumeristic mentality. Nevertheless in some regions of the world there is a promising religious renewal taking place.
2. **The social sector** includes the great phenomenon of migration which propels more and more people to leave their countries of origin and to live in urban contexts, modifying the ethnic geography of our cities, countries and continents. This phenomenon is cause for an encounter and a mix of cultures that society has not known for centuries. Along with this social scene there is the related phenomenon of globalization, with its negative aspects prevalent only in the market area, but which can foster new forms of solidarity and progress for all.
3. **Means of social communication** today offer enormous possibilities not only for the industrialized world, but also for broad sectors of developing countries. The spread of this culture brings unquestionable benefits: greater access to information, greater possibilities for knowledge, exchange, new ways for expressions of solidarity, greater ability to build a culture which is more on the world level while making values and better results in thinking and human expression become the heritage of all. Nevertheless, there are risks of a profound egocentric emphasis, the exaltation of the emotive dimension in structuring relationships and social links, a loss of the objective value of the experience of reflection and thought, in many cases reduced to the place of one's own way of feeling.

4. **The economic sector** involves a growing imbalance between the North and the South in terms of access to and distribution of resources, as well as the damage to creation. The long-lasting financial crisis in which we find ourselves points to the problem of the use of material forces, which does not easily find the rules of a global market that is able to protect a more just way of coexistence. Despite daily communication the media devotes less and less space to read this situation from the viewpoint of the poor, the Church and, I would add, from our universities. Much is hoped for in terms of concrete sensitivity and action.
5. **The science and technology research sector** presents opportunities to be ceaselessly amazed by the wonderful steps that research has made in these areas. It is easy in a digitized and globalized context to make science our new religion, to which we could direct our questions about truth and meaning of hope, knowing that we will only receive partial and inadequate responses.
6. **The political sector** is marked by a general loss of trust and a loss of the power for decision making on the world and national levels. In this scenario, there are topics and areas that need to be enlightened by the light of the Gospel; efforts made on behalf of peace, development and the freedom of peoples; improvement in the forms of national and world governments; the building of possible ways for listening, living together, dialogue and collaboration among diverse cultures and religions; defense of the rights of people and nations, especially among minorities; promotion of the weakest; the protection of creation; and efforts on behalf of the future of our planet.

The document invites us to observe these scenarios, knowing how to overcome the emotive level of defensive judgment and of fear in order to understand objectively the signs of what is new, along with challenges and frailties (cf. 13th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, number 6).

From a secular reading, Lasallian universities cannot remain insensitive to the Millennium Declaration adopted by the United Nations in the year 2000 that was signed by 147 heads of states and governments, affirming their “collective responsibility to respect and defend the principles of human dignity, equality and equity on the world level and to respect all inhabitants of the planet, especially the most vulnerable, in particular the world's children to whom the future belongs.” United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon pointed out “that the Millennium Goals belong to all of us. We need to feel a part of the initiative. During the next seven and one-half years each day will be a new one to help millions of persons throughout the world.” These goals are supposed to be reached by 2015 and 11 years have already gone by. I believe that the normal question we can ask ourselves is: What have we done, what have our universities done to collaborate with this initiative? And an even more important question: What are we going to do in the next four years to:

- a) end poverty and hunger,
- b) achieve universal primary education,
- c) promote gender equality,
- d) reduce the rate of infant mortality,
- e) improve maternal health,

- f) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases,
- g) guarantee environmental sustainability,
- h) promote a global partnership for development?

CONCLUSION: Lasallian Universities, Communities of Memory and Hope

The goal is very high and the challenges are many. But it is worth the effort because what is at play is the future of humankind. Rooted in the Christian-Lasallian wisdom tradition, we should reflect on our identity, about what characterizes us and makes our universities different, starting from a memory that energizes us and from a hope that responds to the world's urgencies and to the needs of the young. But also, associated in memory and hope, we should enable exchange and collaboration on the international level.

On the occasion of the 125th anniversary of the University of Deusto in September 2011, the Superior General of the Jesuits put universities in the following context:

We find ourselves today at a crossroads: how to harmonize necessary development and the utilitarian dimension of knowledge with reflection on the ends and meaning; with the overall set of the reality itself that are not limited to mere practical utility. How to see that the effectiveness of university achievements take into account the freedom of thinking that is able to generate new visions; a thinking that does not make the short term the only value; that does not put the means in front of the ends of knowledge; that does not forget that knowledge should not become an instrument of power, but of service.

Father Adolfo Nicolás

The Pope spoke to us of the horizon that should guide our mission today: “The horizon which invigorates the work of the university can and should be an authentic passion for human beings. Only through service to others is science utilized to till and keep the universe” (cf. Genesis 2:15, Benedict XVI, Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Board of Directors, Professors and Students of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, May 2011).

I believe that this is also our challenge today and for that reason we should be memory and hope. And this is a call to be close and to respond to our reality, aware that:

The truth of reality is not made yet; that is only a part of reality. If we do not go back to that which is being done and that which remains to be done, the truth of reality will escape us. You have to know the truth which does not suppose putting into practice or realizing what you already know, but knowing that reality which combines practice and theory and is seen as true.

Ignacio Ellacuría. *The Philosophy of Historical Reality*. UCA Publishers, San Salvador, El Salvador, 1994).

De La Salle advised something similar to the Brothers: “Do not be concerned so much about knowing how to do a thing perfectly, as about doing it as perfectly as you can, for by doing it as well as you know how, you deserve to learn and to understand what you would not otherwise know” (Collection of Various Short Treatises, *Reflections on Their State and Employment That*

the Brothers Should Make from Time to Time, Especially During Retreat, Regarding the Use of Time, IX).

This is about learning by doing, discovering the truth by uniting theory and practice, memory and hope. Lasallian universities are communities of memory and hope. I believe that this is already being done but still we can do more. The prophetic word that should encourage us is the strength that impedes memory from stagnating in the past and at the same time, it impedes hope from being diluted in a far distant and illusory future. A university program that deals only with the promotion of technological development, or only with practical pragmatism for career development, or that would be content with having a classical humanities program, has little to do with memory and hope. But on the contrary, a program that is not content with repeating yesterday's curriculum but through research and the discovery of new knowledge is committed to young people to transform the world and society with a view to the common good, such a program is living the creative and rich tension of being memory and hope.