
Limitless Lasallian Love: I Know I Ain't Lost

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Introduction

It is certainly my pleasure and honor to be with you today and have this opportunity to discuss some thoughts and hopes that I have as your Lasallian partner in our shared educational mission and vocation. You are Lasallians that I respect and admire for your strikingly enthusiastic dedication to the vision of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. I thank you very much for allowing me this opportunity to be with you.

I do want you to know at the outset that I am amazed that you invited me to share some of my thoughts. My amazement comes from the fact that this is the third time that I am standing before this group. Aren't you at least a bit ashamed of yourselves that you made the decision to suffer through another one of my escapades? Candidly, I rarely get invited back by any group. Your kindness truly attests to your Lasallian limitless tolerance and beneficence. You certainly are "Lasallians without limits."

I am especially delighted to explore the Superior and the General Council's challenge to become "Lasallians without limits." In Brother Robert's 2017 Pastoral Letter, his first sentence captures that challenge for each us:

Brothers and Partners without limits – or borders – is more than a geographic metaphor; first and foremost it refers to the call to personal and communal transformation.³

I believe that we can accomplish Brother Robert's challenge to the degree that we openly explore together how we may nurture a renewed, transformative, and energizing *limitless Lasallian love* in our schools, in our pedagogies, for our students, and for and among ourselves.

Think Outside the Box

I have a *foundational observation* that I ask you to consider. I confess that I did not come upon this insight with my own powers of discernment. With caution and trepidation – and, your promise that this is strictly confidential and only for you – I divulge my secret.

I was driving along Highway Route 35W in Minneapolis. On the side of the Highway, was a huge billboard typically seen on most roadways across the country. The first line on that billboard read: *The Minnesota Cremation Society*. And, under that was a big picture of a closed coffin. And under that was written: *Think Outside the Box*.

The wisdom and education you get from billboards should not be underestimated; but that's not the point I want to make. I invite us now to open up our Lasallian coffin and have the courage to think outside our traditional box, and especially outside our comfort zone. Lasallians of the twenty-first century must work together and in association with Saint John Baptist de La Salle's spirit and effectively respond to today's students without the limits of a closed and confined box of past solutions and wonderful successes, without worrying where the Holy Spirit will lead us, without fear of the pressures that will come our way even from the institutional Church if we challenge established norms, solutions, answers, and explanations that just may not be that effective any longer with our young people and others. These pressures I refer to are not some insignificant or inconsequential annoyances. I call to your attention in this regard Pope Francis' mention on the occasion of his 2016 Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia. He quoted the nineteenth-century papal statesman, Frédéric-François-Xavier De Mérode: "Implementing reforms in Rome is like cleaning the Egyptian Sphinx with a toothbrush." (It was reported that none of the Curia in attendance laughed!)⁴

Well, I know that you don't want me to share my toothbrush with you; but I would like to share briefly eight points for your consideration. Please do not view my observations as definitive and concrete propositions that you must follow; rather, consider my views as a context within which to make your own judgments and decisions. Some may say I am unorthodox. Some with less charity will claim that I am a heretic. You will have to decide that for yourselves.

I prefer to look upon my observations as explorations into our faith and our schools while respecting the Church's and our Lasallian traditions, but without limiting the prospects for possible transformation. After all, with the Holy Spirit we are always becoming Christians; therefore, we must be always *becoming* Lasallians who do not rest in any comfortable coffin. Even Jesus did not remain in his tomb. My aim is not to strategize what we should do in order *to have* the things we want to have; but rather, to explore together what we should do in order *to be* who we need to be as Lasallians for our students and for ourselves together as partners in today's Church and global society.

1. I Know I Ain't Lost

My *first observation* involves the underpinning that I bring to my entire approach to make real the vision of "Lasallians without limits." I can best explain this by briefly relating a true story and a lesson that I had learned and never forgot.

Back in the 1970s my fellow Brothers in Community were always welcomed to use my family's house in the Green Mountains of Vermont. It was located on quite a remote hilltop. While several of us were there, I gave directions to a couple of other Brothers who were joining us, but were never there before. I gave them the directions; but at the final point for the turn-off, there were only dirt roads that were not clearly marked. So, I told them that there was a typical Vermont General Store at that critical turn-off where there were always a few old Vermont farmers sitting in rocking chairs on the porch. I told the Brothers at that point the best thing to do is to ask one of them how to proceed to the DeThomasis' place since the locals all knew the house.

Unfortunately, the Brother driving at the time was a temperamental and volatile individual without much patience. What is important to understand is that these old-timers had very little engagement with the outside world, which made them quite suspicious of any “flatlanders” (the name that they had for any outsiders). As I directed, the Brother stopped at the General Store and called out to the men on the porch for directions. One of them slowly got up from his rocker and went to the car window gazing at Brother with a suspicion reserved for those “flatlanders.” The Brother asked how he should proceed to the DeThomasis’ house. The response was: “I don’t know.” Brother then asked if any of the other men on the porch knew. Again, the answer came: “I don’t know.” Then the Brother asked if there was a phone in the General Store that he could use to call the house (these were the days before cell phones). Again, the answer came: “I don’t know.” With that, Brother’s patience ended; and he arrogantly blurted out to the old-timer: “Well, what do you know, if anything?” The answer came immediately and in a calm, soft but confident tone: “I know I ain’t lost!”

I learned from that incident more than four decades ago one of the most important lessons that I have applied all these years as I grasp and try to make real that truly intoxicating Lasallian spirit with which we are all gifted. And that is, even though I may not have all the answers and even though I may not know exactly which way to go and even though I don’t know where I will end up, if I have faith in my Lasallian spirit for a *limitless Lasallian love* I am not afraid to dare to think and to act outside the box because “I know I ain’t lost.”

Similarly, I ask us to consider Picasso’s approach to art when he said:

God is just another artist. He made a giraffe, an elephant, and a cat. He has no style. He just keeps trying new things.⁵

So, if *no style* was good enough for our loving Creator, why should we Lasallians expect to have any style that constrains us only to replicate our past and not have the courage to create our own new, unique Lasallian future? Let’s not be naïve. If we are to be “Lasallians without limits” we will not know where that will take us, nor will we know exactly how to get there. However, when I stay true to the Lasallian spirit and rethink that rich tradition and try new things, I have never been afraid of where it will take me because “I know I ain’t lost.”

2. That We May All Be One

A *second point* that I would ask you to consider involves the very core of Christian hope without which we empty the beauty and inspiration of Jesus’ Good News that graced us with his unconditional and limitless love. The *Gospel of John* reveals to us a special Christian hope. When Jesus talks directly to his Father, he says:

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.”⁶

Was Jesus telling us that we must all be the same? After all, Jesus was One with, in and through his Father and Holy Spirit, the Mystery of Three different (not the same) Divine Persons, but yet One God. Different and not the same, yet One. When we cease to have limits is when we will be

One by fearlessly opening up that coffin of the past. When there are no limits, there is not sameness, nor thinking the same, nor acting the same, nor insisting that our students and we must all be the same. When we cease to have limits is when we will be One and not have fear to open up that coffin of our past and set free Saint John Baptist de La Salle's spirit.

Yet, as we survey how groups, organizations, politicians, news media, nations, religions, and even the institutional Church embrace differences today, unfortunately, we see "labels" being menacingly tossed about: conservatives, liberals, libertines, heretics, infidels, unorthodox, objectively disordered, intrinsically evil, etc. More and more, many accept and tolerate the attitude that it is "my way of thinking" that is the only way to "the" truth and to be One in communion with Jesus and his Church. Such an attitude and educational thrust may be described as a "Catholic-Taliban" approach.

I want to stress that when I use that characterization, "Catholic-Taliban," I am not in any way casting aspersions on any particular religion or any of the various persuasions of how individuals view their personal practices within a religion. The problem today is not that Christians or any other religions may have conservative, progressive or liberal understandings. The problem is that a rigid fundamentalist culture and perspective has become an evolving rigid "ideology" that is, often times, disguised by some as a "theology" or a "pedagogy" which sets insidious limits in our Church, on our students and on ourselves. Unsuspectingly and slyly, this attitude sets limits that strive to control our personal relationship with the limitless love of our Creator. That cannot be permitted. And if we do tolerate that, we will be lost – really lost!

As we open up that coffin and put new living flesh, our flesh, on the bones of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, we will not necessarily be the same; but we will surely be One with our students, ourselves, the poor, the marginalized and our Church as the People of God. I like to think, when we open that coffin that encases De La Salle's bones, we set free a spirit that early Christian mystics so beautifully called a *spark of the divine*.

It is that very *spark of the divine* that must set ablaze a Lasallian education in which we model for our students how we Catholics are One and in communion with all women and men. We are One even – no, especially – with those who look, think, believe, live different life-styles and, in the sanctity of their consciences, honestly and lovingly live out their moral, ethical, and gender identities. That spirit does not make us lost on a dark road to "relativism"; rather, it lights up the path to a *limitless Lasallian love* because that *spark of the divine* let's each Lasallian say, "I know I ain't lost" because I love not just "the many" but "the all." Remember, "the many" signifies a limit; but it is "the all" that connotes without limits!

3. Change Versus Transform

I surmise that right now you may be thinking: "Hey, Louis, that sounds very nice but how can we Lasallians be that *spark of the divine* for our students, for ourselves, for the Church which among its own leadership and faithful believers struggle with many differing and – let's face it – opposing views? Am I just "romanticizing" a vision of *limitless Lasallian love*? I don't think so. I believe that we must enter the real world just as De La Salle did with his signature pragmatism.

Therefore, enter tensions; enter headaches; enter controversy; enter arguments that will surely knock at our doors.

With this scenario, I ask you to consider my *third observation* and explore the subtle difference between the dynamics of “change” and “transform.” Saint John Baptist de La Salle honestly and directly confronted internal differences and opposition from within society, from the tutor guilds of his time, from the very Institute that he established, and from the institutional Church’s hierarchy and structures. Yes, De La Salle had to contend with tensions and headaches. If we claim to have his spirit and to do what he did, should we expect anything different?

Saint John Baptist de La Salle had confronted and transformed the *status quo* of his times by realizing that only to “change” past ways to make it better is not enough. His genius and courage was to “transform” education – not just change it – by daring to think, to imagine and to act in ways that most had never even thought of, or even dared to think of. Our Founder was much more than a pedagogical marketer who just changed the techniques of teaching. He was a transformer of education who had seen, imagined, and created a new future to free students from the shackles of limiting societal, cultural, and religious forces of his times. Our Founder was more than the *patron of teachers*. He was the *agent for social transformation*. That’s why he was in trouble most of the time, with mostly everyone and even his own Brothers.

I believe Pope Francis captured this very idea when he said at this past Christmas Eve Mass:

This same faith impels us to make space for a new social imagination, and not to be afraid of experiencing new forms of relationship, in which none have to feel that there is no room for them on this earth.⁷

Do people, our students, see a transformed Catholic Church today where all are welcome and where there is room for all? Are all our students and our own colleagues always welcomed in our schools – without limits?

Recently, a report came out entitled, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*. The principal author is our Lasallian colleague John Vitek (CEO of Saint Mary’s Press) in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University (CARA). Some highlights of that research identified that:

- More young Catholics are leaving the faith than ever before.
- Seventy-four percent of them stopped identifying as Catholics between the ages of 10 to 20.
- Of all the major denominations, Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses of the young.
- Disaffiliation with the Church is largely a thoughtful, conscious, intentional choice made by young people.
- Some young people left the Church because they were in some way injured by the Church; some left because of what they consider “meaningless rules and rituals” versus that of their experience with the “real world.”

- These young people reported that disaffiliation brought to them happiness, relief or freedom.
- The young indicated that fear of being judged keeps them from the Church.⁸

Lasallians, this is what young people and our students are experiencing. Does this sound to you that all we need to do is change some of our techniques? Or do we honestly need to transform Catholic education? The young are the future of our Church. Yes, “I know I ain’t lost” and “I know you ain’t lost”; but I am not too sure if most of our young people feel that they aren’t lost – in our Church. May they never be lost in our schools.

Our world needs the People of God to create a new future making it real that *thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven*.⁹ Quite frankly, I don’t know about you; but lately I haven’t, nor have our students, experienced heaven on earth in our world, in our country, in our politics and even, regrettably, in our institutional Church. We must transform our schools so that our students will experience a good bit of *thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven*. I do know that if I am willing to follow that *spark of the divine* and the Founder’s spirit and nurture a transformation in ourselves and our schools with a *limitless Lasallian love* where *all* are welcome, then, “I know I ain’t lost,” nor will our students be lost.

4. Teaching Authority

For my *fourth observation*, I know very well that none of us has to be reminded that we are in a global society interconnected by technology and Artificial Intelligence. If we are reading the *signs of the times*¹⁰ perceptively, we have become quite aware that the 1970’s vision for peace, understanding, and harmony promised by the *age of aquarius* has morphed into the *age of twitter* with its divisiveness, poverty, environmental destruction, human trafficking, “cultural warriors,” and terrorism. If we do not read the *signs of the times* accurately, what makes us think that we can solve the *problems of the times* effectively?

Lasallians, it seems to me that it is time for us, and all those concerned with education, to stop in our tracks and take a “reality check.”

Reality: information and knowledge – once the domain of “authority” from governments, schools, and religions – are now rooted and vested in the fingers of each person.

Reality: it is now individuals – who *click, click, click* away on their computers, iPhones, iPads, desk tops, lap tops, and technological gadgets of all kinds – that are the educational authorities.

Reality: it is there they find information and knowledge that they need, that they think they need, or that they are just curious to know.

Reality: there is Google, twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, whatever, that is now integral to education.

Reality: now it is possible for individuals – not traditional authorities and not even our own schools or the Church – to decide the how, what, when, where, why, and from whom people will learn.

Reality: institutions, including the Church, that think in today’s world they can say an issue may not even be discussed, have to be comatose with that dreaded disease: “analysis-paralysis”!

Furthermore, what we see is a transformation that has made any person who *clicks* away not just a “seeker” of information, but now the reality is that that person – any person – has the power to be “the source,” “the teacher,” the dispenser” of *information, values, and knowledge*. This more concealed, masked, and camouflaged result has caused, not just a change, but also a qualitative transformation in how persons are *in formation*. We know when students enter our schools and churches today, they don’t cut off their fingers! Perhaps, I should say they don’t check their brains, consciences, doubts, and questioning minds at the door so as eagerly to await only what we, or the Church, want to teach. Education and religion have been democratized in a global, competitive, and free-market world.

With this transformation, the authority and inherent power to educate is in association with our very own students. Now there is a qualitative and intrinsic dimension that not only blurs, but redefines and reconstructs the very definition and understanding of teacher-student relationship and Church-faithful believer relationship, whether we like it or not.

Lasallians can’t be complicit by permitting our schools to be laid safely to rest in the coffins of the past. Lasallian educators must not just be a teacher of meanings and dispenser of information; but rather, we must become explorers. Explorers, not only in our traditional, rational, doctrinal, and comfortable world of reality are sufficient any longer. We must even find ways to be present in their emerging technological world of *virtual reality* where our students comfortably and freely interact and find their imagined and hoped for future. We must explore and accompany them to be *in formation* and find their own meaningfulness on their own faith journeys.

What I am suggesting in this my *fourth point* is that in the twenty-first century, Lasallian educators have vastly different problems than we had in the past. The reality is that now, if our students don’t believe in something; the problem is no longer that they will believe in nothing. The problem today is that they will believe in anything. *Click, click, click* away! Will we truly accept the implications of what it means to free ourselves and our students to be “Lasallians without limits”? It can’t just be a cute and catchy phrase!

5. “Born Again Christians” or “Christianity Born Again”

My *fifth point* follows from the previous observation. Traditionally, when we pointed our finger up to the sky, we were pointing to heaven. Now, we are pointing to that enticing, mystifying, and magical iCloud and the epiphany of *virtual reality*. Make no mistake about it, that iCloud, though invisible, is a solid wall that captivates and fascinates people’s imaginations. That iCloud now stands between Church and believers, between school and students, between God and creation. Let us not make the mistake that this indicates that we solve our problems just by finding

innovative and clever applications from the latest technology. Rather, we and the institutional Church must engage, explore, and permit our students to question the very relevance of our traditional teachings, how we believe, how we love, how we pray, and how we teach.

Employing the latest apps will not ensure an effective evangelization in today's world. We can no longer understand Christian evangelization as bringing students to the Church. Rather, it must be to bring Jesus to our students with our *Lasallian limitless love*. Yes, we must use the latest technology; but more importantly we must personally accompany our students to explore, question, doubt, and dialogue with us – at their side accompanying them on their faith journeys. Then, with God's grace, they will find the Church for themselves.

We need actively and effectively to integrate the kaleidoscopic array of perceptions in today's globalized world including the wisdom and insights from other cultures and faith traditions. We Lasallians know very well that not everyone in the world, nor even among ourselves, see the one God of all with the same theological, philosophical, and Catholic lenses. I just completed nine years of living and working at our FSC Generalate in Rome. I can certify with metaphysical certainty that neither in our own Generalate nor in the over one thousand other Religious Congregations' Generalates nor in the Vatican itself is there anything resembling unanimity of beliefs and vision for the institutional Church. It could not have been said any clearer than when Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen of Parramatta, Australia, when he said there is a need to dismantle the pyramid model of Church:

It is to acknowledge and to have the courage to die to the old ways of being Church that no longer convey effectively the message of the Gospel to the culture in which we live.¹¹

How else are we to interpret what Saint Paul tells us:

I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.¹²

I am suggesting point blank in this my *fifth observation*, that it is not just “children at risk” in today's world that is our only problem as Lasallian educators. It's the “Church at risk” that is also our problem in Catholic Lasallian schools. Therefore, I am convinced that it isn't *born again Christians* that will be the answer for Lasallian schools; rather, it will take a catechesis that will usher into our schools nothing less than a *Christianity born again*. Yes, not *born again Christians*, but rather, *Christianity born again* – the time has come!

If we truly understand the salvific gift to us that Jesus died for, we must come to the conclusion that Jesus was not a “born again Jew.” Jesus was the gift to *all* people and *all* creation that created a “born again Judaism” which we now call Christianity! That is why he was crucified. He dared to transform Judaism and respond to the *signs of the times* by being *all things to all people*.

Let us heed the insight that Pope Francis related at the Vatican on September 14, 2017. Speaking at a meeting for new bishops he gave them some advice:

I invite you . . . to cultivate an attitude of listening, growing in the freedom to renounce your own point of view when it is shown to be partial and insufficient in order to assume God's point of view.¹³

After reflecting on his words, I know that the Pope *ain't lost either*. (I guess it's even possible for a Jesuit to be a Lasallian!)

6. A Signpost to Truth

If we do become all things to our students and to each other and work toward a *Christianity born again*, we are confronted with a *sixth consideration*. I relate a story told by the insightful spiritual author, Anthony de Mello, who was an Indian priest and psychotherapist. In his book *The Song of the Bird*, he tells a story about the devil and his friend taking a walk together. Suddenly, a man walking ahead of them stops and picks up something on the ground. The friend then asks the devil, "What did that man find?" The devil responds, "A piece of truth." The friend says to the devil, "Doesn't that disturb you?" "No," says the devil, "I shall let him make a belief out of it."¹⁴

For Anthony de Mello,

A religious belief is a signpost pointing the way to truth. People who cling tenaciously to the signpost are prevented from moving toward the truth because they have the false feeling that they already possess it.¹⁵

We Lasallians must not become those ideologues who twist our Catholic faith and reduce it to ideologies, creeds, rules, and laws that are presented as the totality of divine immutable truths. We do well to heed Hannah Arendt's advice when she wrote in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development of the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction.¹⁶

Ideologues, whether they are politicians, educators, religious leaders or just any ordinary individual, believe and proclaim their version of truth as if reason is to ideology as fine dining is to gluttony. Any deviation from their truth is heresy. Yes, rigid religious ideologues are certainly people of conviction – they were born with their minds made up. Perhaps, former Vice President of the United States, Hubert Horatio Humphrey, had it right when he said:

The difference between heresy and prophecy is often one of sequence. Heresy often turns out to have been prophecy – when properly aged.

I believe that wonderful and lovable comedian, Gracie Allen, had a magnificent theological insight when she said: “Don’t put a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking.”¹⁷ Though this is certainly the right approach and spirit for Lasallian schools, we know very well that we will get in trouble with the religious ideologues, who can’t seem to appreciate that God, the Father, gave us the Holy Spirit as that radiant glow of evidence that there is a “holy comma” in Jesus’ revelations from two-thousand years ago! When Jesus died on the cross, it was not “period” – it’s ended. God graced, blessed, and gifted us with the Holy Spirit, that “holy comma” of limitless love, of limitless *becoming*.

Furthermore, I believe Saint John Baptist de La Salle has always nurtured within Lasallians a spirit giving us the insight, his holy comma, leading us to realize that the Church and our schools must always be alive and transforming. As such, for Lasallians we should never permit religious ideologues to place a period on the Holy Spirit’s continuous revelations that make Jesus’ love real, alive, and growing in each of us, in each of our schools and in each of our students in the here and now.

We have to make the decision that we Lasallian educators, are accepting and inviting of our own, and our students’ challenging questions, even when we don’t have answers to them. But we must never allow answers, whether given by us or by the Church that may not be questioned. That is what will make our *limitless Lasallian love* real to our students. Truly real, because even though we don’t have all the answers, it is with De La Salle’s Christian vision, charism, spirit, pragmatism, and innovation that each of us will have the confidence and that *spark of the divine* to say, “I know I ain’t lost” – that’s our “holy comma”!

7. The Role of Women in the Church

And, talking about answers that can’t be questioned, I would like to ask us to consider as my *seventh point* the growing doubts by many faithful Catholics, and especially our students, as to the answers the institutional Church gives regarding the role of women in the Church. There is current discord and a crisis of credibility because of the lack of inclusiveness for women in the leadership, decision-making, and sacramental life of the Church. More and more such criticism is not coming only from Catholics leaving the Church. Rather, such judgments are being voiced by faith-filled Catholics staying in the Church and in our schools and among ourselves.

This perceived discrimination is not a matter of concern for women alone. Nor is it some passing cultural fad. Rather, it is a matter of that *sacred* equality bestowed on men and women who are created in God’s own image and likeness. To end this apparent inequality is just as essential for the completeness and spirituality for men and for all Lasallians as it is for women. This cultural “female shift” for equality is not *going* to happen sometime in the future. The fact is that it already happened – the *tipping point* has arrived. It will not be changed; it will not be deterred; and, it will not be stopped. Any politic, economy, school, or Church that ignores this faces future ineffectiveness at best, and probable irrelevance for sure.

Any objective observer, conservative or liberal – knowing nothing prior about the institutional Church and studying its structures, rules, and organization – could only conclude that the phrase *people of God* would be more honestly reflected with the descriptor, *men of God*! How else can

we interpret some of these actual facts. At the Second Vatican Council, of the almost 700 men and only 15 women present from the whole world, women were not even permitted to speak in public at the Council much less have a vote. At the 2015 Family Synod in Rome, there were 270 voting men and not one woman with a right to vote. The Church prides itself in its rich intellectual tradition, and yet it commands that we may not even discuss women's ordination to the ministerial priesthood. Does the institutional Church really reflect the *people of God* or the *men of God*?

If any of us doubt the enormous impact that women's issues have on the very understanding and core for justice and the integrity of creation in today's society and in the Church, then try to explain away the enormously successful social movement epitomized by the #MeToo hashtag and its selection as *Time Magazine's* "Person of the Year 2017" or the spotlight given to women's issues at the 75th Golden Globe Awards ceremony this past January.

Reports of sexual harassment and abuse by Hollywood and media personalities, politicians, business executives, religious people, and even celebrity chefs have been condemned by many secular leaders. However, there is a growing sentiment that most institutional Church leaders have not been as much of the "cultural warrior" on this issue as they have been on some of their other issues.

Nichole Flores, assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia, reflecting on the institutional Church's appearance of comparative silence and complicity on these women's issues, strongly opines:

In orienting women primarily toward meeting the needs of men, it takes women away from being oriented toward Christ, in a way that's idolatrous.¹⁸

Father Dan Horan, a Franciscan and assistant professor of systematic theology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, observes:

This is, *de facto*, a religious and Christian concern; but because the public face and leadership [of the Church] are nearly exclusively male, they're unlikely to recognize and speak out against it.¹⁹

The secular world, undeniably, is advancing toward a world where women and men are equal partners – without limits. We desperately need a spirituality flowing from our Church and our Lasallian schools that leaves no doubt that we are a loving communion of women and men who are welcomed equally, without exception and without limits. It is not God who all of a sudden realized this evolution of the truth in an equal and unitive understanding of men and women. It is our human and institutional Church's understanding of God's creation and Gospel message that should be evolving.

8. Ambiguity

All of my presentation now comes down to my *final observation*. I use the words of another comedian that I believe sets an encompassing framework for all that I believe. The insight is from Gilda Radner, the famed comedian of *Saturday Night Live*, who died of cancer at the age of forty-two in 1989. She said as she neared her final days:

I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment, and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity.

Delicious ambiguity! You may rightly be asking, "Should Catholics and Lasallian educators who have the Church, its Magisterium, its dogma and its *Catechism*, ever be accepting of ambiguity in our teachings and beliefs?" Or an even more problematic, edgy, and foreboding question for the institutional Church is, "Can it accept that its doctrines and teachings may have a subtle streak or hue of ambiguity in them?" After all, ambiguity describes something that is unclear, indefinite, uncertain, vague, and sometimes even with traces of equivocation.

Perhaps, a small and delightful story of an encounter between Johnny, a six-year old boy, and his father might bring home this point. As with most children, this little boy just adored his loving and caring grandmother who, like all grandparents, possesses the existential categorical imperative and unquestionable divine right to spoil the little ones. Johnny would often go to his father and say: "Daddy, when I grow up I want to marry Grandma." Little Johnny was saying this so often that finally his father thought it better to correct his son. He said: "Johnny you can't marry Grandma." The little boy started sobbing and sputtered-out: "Daddy, why can't I marry Grandma?" The father answered as you might expect: "I know son that you really love Grandma, but you can't marry her because she is my mother." At that point Johnny stopped crying, looked-up quizzically at his father, and indignantly stated: "But, Daddy, you married my mother!"

Of course, we all know the scientific, moral, legal, genetic reasons, and complexities that explain why little Johnny can't marry his Grandma. But, do you seriously think that you can explain that to a six-year old? Now, I ask us to consider that we are truly the *children of God*. God reveals the Holy Trinity through Scripture, the prophets and the Church. However, don't we *children of God* know that all those good attempts to explain God's limitless love for us can never be captured totally in any human formula, even an infallible one?

We encounter and embrace God, just as little Johnny did with his loving Grandma, through our loving relationship in faith with our Creator. Do we not understand that no amount of dogma, creeds, or our physical and rational senses give us the capacity to comprehend totally or control our personal relationship with God?

The *Book of Hebrews* gives us the answer:

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.²⁰

And so, it is from the beginning of God's revelation that we can only see what is created by what we don't see. What *delicious ambiguity* God gave us!

We could cite many passages in Scripture that clearly manifest that those who wrote the accounts in the Bible were not relating a rigid, ideological, or rationalized account of God acting in human history. Their intentions were not to relate rules or words that could totally capture the salvific encounter of our God with humanity. They were revealing a Holy Surprise, the Holy Mystery that requires a faith-filled personal encounter and relationship with loving Divine Persons. What a surprise! What else could capture such a limitless embrace with omnipotence and eternity than a sensitivity and a holy *delicious ambiguity*? Surprise, such ambiguity, rather than negating the reality of an all-loving God, attests to the real limitless embrace that the Eternal One gives us.

If we Lasallians do not teach with a faith that does not have more "I don't know" than "Here is the answer," then it is not the Catholic faith that we are teaching. It is superstition or folklore. Robert McKim, philosopher of religion at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, delves into this very subject in his book, *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*. He writes about religious thinkers who characterize this religious ambiguity as *God's Hiddenness* stemming from the ambiguity in which God is Mystery. He observes: "...God is hidden to a considerable extent from almost all human beings at almost all times."²¹ What *delicious ambiguity*!

Conclusion

Lasallians, in conclusion, each of you know very well that to *teach minds and touch hearts* we must be effective instruments for service to the poor, for justice, for peace, and to champion respect for the integrity of creation – without limits. We can be "Lasallians without limits" to the degree that we are the Lord's ambassadors who accompany and explore with our students and among ourselves the ambiguity that we are in God's holy presence on this earth. Yet, we see poverty, inequality, suffering, hatred, terrorism, and sin all around us. Indeed, as with all we Lasallians do, I always remember that I am in the holy presence of God. Therefore, "I know I ain't lost."

The Catholic Church rightly proclaims vigorously and waves the banner for freedom *of* religion. Therefore, the institutional Church must understand that that proclamation for us who always remember that we are in the holy presence of God is nothing more than a nice sounding pious exhortation, if we do not cherish and welcome a freedom *in* religion, a freedom to *become all things to all people*, to all our students and ourselves without limits. In other words, a freedom *of* religion is a meaningless and fraudulent rationalized abstraction unless it is reconciled and nurtured with a freedom *in* religion, *in* our Church, and *in* our schools. It is a freedom for those of us who call ourselves Lasallians to accompany our students responsibly and responsively, to explore with them on their own faith journeys, to acknowledge to them our own diversity of

thinking, believing and life-styles, to make each of us truly a part of that graced Gospel story of salvation and unconditional love without limits.

I know very well that all that I have said is a bit, shall we say, *messy*! I do not have one secure and definitive strategy, pedagogy, or proven steps that will guarantee success for our Lasallian mission; but then again, neither did Saint John Baptist de La Salle. Lasallians are embraced by the encouragement and spirit of the Founder who dared to transform Catholic education. Saint John Baptist de La Salle did not make Lasallians *born again Catholic educators*. He made us nothing less than instruments for a *born again Catholic education*. And for us to do that now, we must embrace the encouragement and spirit that we find in Holy Scripture: “Be not afraid.” There are 365 times that Scripture tells us to *be not afraid*.

Okay, yes, now you know that I neither know nor have all the answers. I don’t know where a *born again Catholic education* will take us. None of us really knows. I do know, however, that there may be a clue from a compelling observation that Nietzsche made: “You need chaos in your soul to give birth to a dancing star.” Lasallians, you know very well that chaos is a messy business. However, if there is one thing that we must do in our schools to transform our Church and our world, it is for us to give birth to those dancing stars – our students! Surprise, we can do this by being “Lasallians without limits.” Surprise, we can do this with our *limitless Lasallian love* for our Church, for our students, and for and among ourselves and with all our differences and all the chaos in the world.

Let’s not be afraid to tackle that chaos and give birth to those magnificent dancing stars – our students. With that spirit and love “I know I ain’t lost,” “I know you ain’t lost,” and “I know that our dancing stars – our students – will not be lost” because, surprise, Saint John Baptist de La Salle and Jesus lives in our hearts, forever!²²

Endnotes

1. This address was delivered on 28 February 2018 in Orlando, Florida, at the annual meeting of the Lasallian Association of Secondary School Chief Administrators (LASCA).

2. Brother Louis DeThomasis, FSC, who co-founded Christian Brothers Investment Services in 1981, is a De La Salle Christian Brother. He was the chairman of CBIS-Global in Rome from 2008 until 2017 and is a president emeritus of Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota. He earned a doctorate in financial management from Union Institute and University in Cincinnati, Ohio; and he has been awarded six honorary doctorates (Benedictine University, Lewis University, Manhattan College, Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, Saint Thomas Aquinas College, and University of Saint Thomas).

3. Brother Robert Schieler, FSC, *Pastoral Letter: Set Out in Haste, Association for Lasallian Mission (Rome, 2017)*, page 3.

4. Cf. “Pope to Curia: ‘Betrayers of Trust’ Are Frustrating Vatican Reform” by John L. Allen, Jr., in *Crux: Taking the Catholic Pulse*, 21 December 2017.

5. Cf. *The Surrealist Picasso* by Anne Baldassari (Flammarion, 2006).
6. *John* 17:22
7. Cf. “Pope Says Saga of Holy Family Echoes in Today’s Migrant Refugees” by John L. Allen, Jr., in *Crux: Taking the Catholic Pulse*, 24 December 2017.
8. Cf. *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* by Robert J. McCarthy and John M. Vitek (Saint Mary’s Press, 2018).
9. Cf. *Matthew* 6:10.
10. An allusion to *Perfectae Caritatis*, the 1965 decree of the Second Vatican Council on religious life, which focuses on renewal and adaptation in light of the *signs of the times*.
11. Cf. “Australian Bishop Urges End to Clericalism” by Peter Feuerherd in *National Catholic Reporter*, 13 December 2017.
12. *I Corinthians* 9:22-23.
13. Cf. “Pope Tells New Bishops to Respect Dialogue with Consciences of Laypeople” by Joshua J. McElwee in *National Catholic Reporter*, 14 September 2017.
14. Anthony de Mello SJ, *The Song of the Bird* (Random House, 1984), page 39.
15. Anthony de Mello SJ, *The Song of the Bird* (Random House, 1984), page 39.
16. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968), page 168.
17. Last letter to George Burns as quoted in *Two Minutes for God: Quick Fixes for the Spirit* by Peter B. Panagore (Simon and Schuster, 2007), page 73.
18. Cf. “Silence on Sexual Violence Makes Church Leaders Complicit, Says Victim Advocates” by Heidi Schlumpf in *National Catholic Reporter*, 6 November 2017.
19. Cf. “Silence on Sexual Violence Makes Church Leaders Complicit, Says Victim Advocates” by Heidi Schlumpf in *National Catholic Reporter*, 6 November 2017.
20. *Hebrews* 11:3.
21. *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* by Robert McKim (Oxford University Press, 2001). Page 12.

22. For expanded reading on this topic please see the following:

Do You Know What You're Doing God?: Unveiling a Spirituality For the Twenty-First Century by Louis DeThomasis FSC (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2017).

All Things to All People by Louis DeThomasis FSC (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2016).

The Silent Schism: Healing the Serious Split in the Catholic Church by Louis DeThomasis FSC and Cynthia A. Nienhaus CSA (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2014).

Dynamics of Catholic Education: Letting the Catholic School Be School by Louis DeThomasis FSC (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2013).

Flying in The Face of Tradition: Listening to the Lived Experience of the Faithful by Louis DeThomasis FSC (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2012).