

Jesus Was Indignant – Are We?

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People were bringing little children to Jesus, for him to touch them. The disciples scolded them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them. It is to such as these that the Reign of God belongs." Then he embraced them, laid his hands on them and gave them his blessing.

Mk. 10:13-14, 16

Jesus was attentive. His eyes were open, wide open. He "saw" children. He saw them as human persons. He loved them. He had concern for them. Parents sensed Jesus' warm, tender, caring love. That is why they brought their girls and boys to him. They wanted Jesus to lay his hands upon them and bless them. But Jesus' disciples were not attentive. Their eyes were not wide open. They didn't "see" the children. They experienced them as inconveniences at best, problems at worst. The children were interfering with and disturbing whatever the disciples were doing or wherever they were going. Like so many people of their age, they considered children unimportant, as unruly and misbehaving, as objects to be trained. They didn't look upon them as human persons. They didn't take them seriously.

When Jesus heard his followers scold the children, he was "indignant." The various translators of Mark apparently agree that this forceful word "indignant" captures accurately Jesus' feeling. That is how they describe him: "indignant." The word means filled with anger aroused by injustice or unworthiness. Jesus, therefore, was angry, angry at the way his disciples treated the children. He rebuked them, "Let the children come to me," he said, "Don't stop them. The Reign of God belongs to such as these."

The disciples had heard Jesus speak many times about the Reign of God. He had told them that his mission was to proclaim that Reign and to urge all to accept it. Nevertheless, his followers still didn't get it. They still didn't understand that the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed is different from the human kingdoms they knew. This Kingdom welcomes everyone, regardless of power, or lack of power, status or lack of status, race, ethnic heritage, culture, economic status. It welcomes children. In this Kingdom, God takes children seriously, reverences them as human persons, and welcomes them as full participants.

Lasallians, Christ expects all those who wish to follow him and live under God's Rule to do the same. He expects them to be indignant when individuals and society fail to treat children with love, with respect, with reverence. He expects his followers to express that indignation and act to remedy the injustice. We need to note, however, that the children Mark has described are not precisely the children that are the particular focus of Huether 2001. Neither are they the children the 43rd General Chapter delegates had in mind when they decreed that the rights of children be "a major focus of Lasallian mission." They were thinking of children and youth who are poor, marginalized, abandoned, exploited; children who are inadequately fed, housed, and cared for; children and youth who lack basic necessities of life, including the opportunity for a good

education. The members of the Chapter had in mind children and youth whose rights are neglected or even deliberately violated, children not allowed to be children. It is sad to say that countless children throughout the world match this description, including children in our own countries. It is sad to say also that we sometimes prefer to close our eyes rather than look squarely at the truth.

In his day, Jesus saw how the disciples treated children and was indignant. In our day, the Risen Jesus sees the way society mistreats children. Surely he is indignant today. Just as surely, he expects us Lasallians to be indignant also.

My purpose this evening is not to speak at length of such children. In the pastoral letter that you found in your folder, I devoted twelve pages to ways that individuals and society violate the rights of children today. Our two major presenters and all the breakout session leaders have the direct experience that I wish I had but do not. They will speak to us from that experience and will offer us information, personal reflections and recommendations. My purpose this evening is to place the theme of Huether 2001, "promoting the rights of children", in particular contexts: first, the context of faith, that is to say, the context of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ; second, the context of the life and teaching of John Baptist de La Salle; third, the context of our three hundred twenty-one-year story and of the orientations and directives of the 43rd General Chapter.

We need to consider more profoundly Jesus' understanding of God's Rule, because he stated unambiguously that it is to "such as these" children that the Reign belongs. We have to reflect on the meaning he gave to the Rule of God and the reasons he considered it so pertinent. After receiving the Holy Spirit at his baptism, Jesus travelled throughout Galilee declaring that the Reign of God is at hand. To proclaim and promote the Kingdom was the expressed purpose of his mission: "I must proclaim the good news of the Reign of God because that is what I was sent to do."

Yet what precisely does Jesus mean by the Reign of God? We look to his own words and actions for an answer. Even more than to his words and actions, we look to his very person. It is in his person that Jesus tells us what a society under God's rule looks like. Jesus makes God visible. He reveals God as loving and compassionate, keenly sensitive to the needs and sufferings of every human being. He reveals God's Kingdom as one of universal brotherhood and sisterhood. According to Jesus we are all brothers and sisters because we are all sons and daughters of the same Father. As members of this Kingdom, every person has the right to live in dignity, justice, and peace, everyone has the right to live as the human person God created her or him to be.

Poor, Abandoned and Far From Salvation

John Baptist de La Salle told the early Brothers that their mission "seeks to spread God's Kingdom." He exhorted them to foster God's Reign in their own hearts and in the hearts of others. He and the Brothers clearly understood themselves as men called to educate "first and foremost" economically poor and neglected children – "children to whom the Kingdom belongs". The Founder describes such children poignantly in the second of the meditations he wrote for the time of retreat. In this description of late 17th and early 18th century French children, we easily recognize the young people who are the concern of the General Chapter and

of Huether 2001.

De La Salle writes that the poor too often allow their children "to live on their own, roaming all over like vagabonds." Poor parents, he says, cannot send their sons and daughters to school because they are unable to pay the teachers. They have to work outside their homes and are obliged to leave their children to fend for themselves. Neglected, the children become accustomed to idleness and fall victim to "bad companions." They contract immoral habits that are difficult to overcome.

Our Founder saw the Christian schools as a remedy to such misfortune. These schools were to keep children constructively occupied all day, learning reading, writing, and religion "all free of charge". Consistent with our reflections on God's Reign, he says that God looks upon such children "with compassion." Through human ministers rather than directly, God takes care of them as their protector, their support and their father. "This God of goodness," De La Salle says, "places these children in your hands." The Founder invites the Brothers, therefore, to be good shepherds, like Jesus, who sought and found the lost sheep, placed it upon his shoulders, and brought it back to the fold. "I am the good shepherd," he says, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me; and I will lay down my life for my sheep." "Since you are taking Jesus' place," he says to the Brothers, "look upon yourself as obliged to do the same thing."

This Jesus, who describes himself as the Good Shepherd, is the same Jesus who was indignant that the disciples tried to hinder the children from coming to him. He is the same Jesus who came to proclaim and promote the Kingdom of God, a kingdom in which children are loved and treated with reverence, where young boys and girls are able to be the children they have a right to be.

Major Focus of Lasallian Mission

The document which presents the proceedings of the recent General Chapter refers to the rights of the child often and in diverse contexts. It devotes particular attention, however, in the section subtitled "Urgent Educational Needs." It is here we find that oftquoted phrase, "major focus of Lasallian mission." Every district is to make the defense and promotion of the rights of children and young a central element of its plan of action.

The Chapter takes as point of departure the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which it describes as an internationally ratified agreement to oppose the exploitation of children and young people. You have found a summary of this very important 1989 document in your folder. The General Chapter acknowledges that despite the recommendation concerning it in the General Chapter of 1993 and its treatment in the Pastoral Letter of 1999, "Brothers and partners have little knowledge of its content." Consequently, the Chapter calls on all Lasallians to learn the Convention, to consider seriously its implications for Lasallian mission, and to act accordingly with profound and faith-filled conviction, loving sensitivity, creativity and effectiveness.

It stipulates that every District appoint at least one Brother or Partner to help Lasallians

- become more knowledgeable and aware of the problems of poor and disadvantaged children at every level;

- establish relationships with international, national, and local organizations devoted to promoting the rights of the child;
- ensure that our schools, universities, and other centers teach and respect the rights of the child;
- call violations of the rights of children to the attention of the appropriate authorities;
- maintain contact with the Lasallian Educational Secretariat at the Generalate in Rome, in order to foster collaboration among Lasallian sectors throughout the world;
- conduct periodic evaluations to gauge progress in carrying out these directives.

The delegates of the General Chapter also establish what was to become the Lasallian International Children's Fund. I have placed in your folder an explanation of the fund and a brief report on its present status.

In a related decision, the Chapter calls for the establishment of an international network using current means of communication to enable Lasallians to share information, ideas, results of research in areas such as the rights of the child, efforts for building mature and effective educational communities, promotion of justice, peace, service of the poor, literacy, and pedagogical innovation.

Let's Open Our Eyes

I think that these reflections on the Reign of God, the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, the life and teaching of Saint De La Salle, and the decisions of the 43rd General Chapter argue convincingly that God is calling all those united in Lasallian Association to know and really "see" situations in which too many children and youth live, to "feel" indignation in the face of this injustice, and to ACT.

We need to know better the reality of children and young people in our own neighborhoods, in our cities, in our nations, and throughout the world. We watch hungry and starving children on our television screens and occasionally street children, child laborers, and child soldiers. We wrestle with the consequences for children of our policies toward Iraq. We are profoundly concerned that our military action in Afghanistan not inflict harm on children. Closer to home, do we have any idea how many runaway and homeless children there are in the United States or Canada? Or the number of girls less than 15 years of age who live by prostitution on US and Canadian streets? Do we know the reality of the children and teenagers in our inner cities? Do we feel indignation in the face of that reality?

When I ask, however, "Do we have any idea?" I mean more than "Do we know the facts?" I mean awareness. We have to discipline ourselves to SEE reality we haven't seen in the past, reality we somehow "know" is there, but don't allow ourselves to face. Consciously or unconsciously we pull down the blinds to block out what we don't want to see. Many of us, I think, are in a state of denial. We don't see what is there because if we do, we will feel obliged to react, and we don't know what that implies. We rationalize. We tell ourselves that we can do nothing about injustice to children even in our own country, much less elsewhere in the world.

That remark surely contains truth. We are indeed doing good work with our students. And we can't do all the good in the world. Nevertheless, we have to focus on Jesus and recognize the

indignation he felt at the way his disciples treated children. We have to allow the story of John Baptist de La Salle to transform us, that young man who became so sensitive to children he described as "poor, abandoned, and far from salvation" that he changed radically the direction of his life. He entered the world of such children, made himself one with them, learned how to teach them, and gave his life to save them. The stories of Jesus and of John Baptist de La Salle led the General chapter to challenge us to open our eyes wide, to SEE children and youth today who, in one way or another, are "poor, abandoned, and far from salvation." If we really see them, we will experience indignation. But like De La Salle we have to move beyond. We have to ACT creatively, audaciously, perseveringly, and effectively.

Let's ACT

In my pastoral letter of 1997, I suggested that our international family of Lasallians consider the promotion and defense of the rights of children as a new way of living De La Salle's commitment to the education of poor children. To my pleasant surprise those paragraphs provoked interest and discussion in a number of parts of the Institute. In 1999 I dedicated my entire pastoral letter to the subject. I thank God for what has happened and what is now happening throughout the Lasallian world. But I frequently find myself in an awkward, even embarrassing, situation. Many believe that because of those initiatives, I am some kind of expert in the promotion of the rights of children. Nothing could be further from the truth. My knowledge is very limited. My experience is even more limited. You are the ones with knowledge of young people today. You are the ones with experience. You are the ones that can make Huether 2001 the catalyst that we want it to be.

Lasallians, Huether 2001 must give birth to a culture of action on behalf of the rights of children and youth. It must launch the United States/Toronto Region, each District, and each institution on the path of new and effective initiatives to benefit children in need. Huether 2001 must not end Saturday night. The conversation that we start and the commitments that we make during these three days must continue to influence us long after we leave this hotel. We have to make our own, then live, what I am calling a culture of action on behalf of the rights of children and youth.

To foster this culture of action, we have to enter into serious communication with one another. Together and by association we have to listen, think, share, discuss, and search. We need to dream and brainstorm not only during times structured for that purpose, but throughout our three days together. Some of us have more experience with children "at risk" than others. Some of us have more familiarity with issues related to the rights of children. Nevertheless, we are all experienced in helping young people discover their potential as human persons and in challenging them to struggle to become the persons they have a right to be. Some of our experiences are more positive and more fruitful than others.

Regardless, we can help one another. It is evident that we have to be open to the Spirit. But unlike the experience of the disciples after Jesus' Resurrection, the Spirit is not likely to descend upon us in a visible way and transform us on the spot. The Spirit is already with each of us individually and with all of us as the Huether 2001 community. As we share with one another, we will create a process of synergy, from which can come ideas for constructive action, action that perhaps we are not even dreaming of at this moment. Like Abraham we can find ourselves

moving off into new and unknown territory. But the Holy Spirit will indeed be with us in this process, enlightening and guiding us imperceptibly but truly. Attentive to the Spirit, we will find ways to actualize our potential as an international and regional communion of men and women formed, inspired, and challenged by the founding story of John Baptist de La Salle.

Some Possible Ideas

I would like to propose some possibilities for action. Some possibilities. Of course there are many more, perhaps more appropriate and more feasible. Still, my comments can serve as points of departure for discussion.

- Create ongoing education and formation programs centered on the rights of children. Whether Brother, lay, priest, or member of another religious congregation, every Lasallian administrator, teacher, staff member, parent, board member, former student, friend, benefactor, and, of course, student needs and can profit from such programs. I am thinking of short but well-planned courses designed to help Lasallians become better aware of lack of reverence for children and youth at local, national and international levels.
- Know the essentials of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations in 1949; the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the UN in 1989, the World Declaration and Plan of Action that resulted from the World Summit for Children in 1990. (Progress on that Plan of Action was to have been evaluated at a special assembly of the United Nations the third week of September. The assembly was cancelled, however, because of the tragic events of September 11.)
- Help Lasallians know the social teaching of the Catholic Church, specifically the calls for respect for the rights of children. For example, Pope John Paul II's message of peace in 1996, entitled "Let's Give Children a Future of Peace"; and the 1991 document of the United States Bishops, entitled "Putting Children and Families First: A Challenge for our Church, Nation, and World."
- Give as many Lasallians as possible special training to become strong, effective leaders in this movement.
- Strengthen existing schools, centers, and programs that serve children, youth, and young adults "at risk".

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