

## Lasallian Research in the Twenty-first Century

Robert Schieler, FSC, Ed.D., Superior General<sup>1</sup>

Good evening. I am happy to be with you once again.

Pope Francis, as we all know, is currently here in the United States and in my hometown, Philadelphia. The Pope is my starting point for this presentation. Coming close on the heels of the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis has dedicated 2016 as the special jubilee Year of Mercy. He also woke up the world this summer with his encyclical *Laudato Si*. We might look upon these proclamations as invitations from the Pope for three encounters: a personal encounter with the meaning of our Lasallian vocation for today, a relational encounter of mercy with people on the margins of our societies, and an encounter with our environment – God's creation.

I think I can relate these three encounters to some priorities of Lasallian research for the twenty-first century. At least, I am going to try. However, before I do so, I think it worthwhile to review where Lasallian research has been before suggesting where it might go in this century.

### Where We Have Been<sup>2</sup>

The last half of the 20th century saw remarkable progress in Lasallian research. That progress occurred on two levels: research initiated from the Center of the Institute and university research particularly, when Brothers and Partners chose Lasallian themes for their doctoral dissertations. I will limit my remarks to Institute-centered research. The progress was the result of decisions made at the Brothers' 38th General Chapter in 1956. While recognizing earlier research efforts of individuals, both Brothers and others, such as the history of the Institute written by Georges Rigault, the Italian publication *Rivista Lasalliana* and the work of the English Brother Stanislaus Battersby, Delegates to the 1956 Chapter and Superior General Brother Nicet Joseph realized no formal systematic research plan existed. Hence, the 38th General Chapter called for a formal Lasallian Studies Program. The French Brother Maurice Auguste established and directed the program. He is the architect of the collection of works known as "Cahier Lasallian". "The work plan of this collection is to produce texts, studies and documents focused on the person of John Baptist de La Salle, his written works, and the origins of the Congregation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; in preparation for the publication of two definitive works: a critical biography and the corpus of his works."<sup>3</sup>

There are currently 66 works in this collection, the majority being published in the 30-year period between 1956-86. It was during these years that the first edition texts of the Founder and the early biographies were published. Meanwhile in Spain, Brothers had undertaken their own research on our origins which appeared in a Lasallian Studies collection. Of particular note was the research on the family life of De La Salle by Brother Louis-Marie Aroz. It was also during this period, that in 1957, the *Jesus Magister Institute* was founded in Rome. This was an institute

for teaching Brothers desiring to obtain a Bachelor's degree in religious studies. The institute was under the patronage of the Pontifical Lateran University.

One incentive, while certainly not the main one, for launching Lasallian studies and such institutes as *Jesus Magister* at the Generalate and the *Pius X Center* in Spain was a position taken by the Spanish hierarchy at the time. Despite being called the Apostles of the Catechists by Pope Pius X, the Spanish Bishops declared that “without the formation proper to priests, the Brothers could not legitimately teach catechism in their own schools.”<sup>4</sup>

Upon the death of Brother Maurice-Auguste in 1987, Brother Michel Sauvage succeeded him as Director. During the period of his directorship the Institute launched a second series of Lasallian studies of historical and thematic works from the time beyond the first Lasallian century. Two other projects to note were the publication of the three-volume *Lasallian Themes*, clarifying 100 of the Founder's words and the beginning of the computerization of the writings of St. La Salle.

Under the directorship of Brother Alain Houry (1993 – 2004), there was further evolution in Lasallian Studies with the publication of *Lasallian Essays*, chief among them were a series of volumes on the history of the Institute by Br. Henri Bedel.

What has been accomplished by these efforts of the past half century? Again, according to Brother Alain Houry, we have a better knowledge of the origins of the Institute and of the family of St. La Salle. We are better acquainted with Madame Maillefer and Adrien Nyel. Regarding Nyel, Houry says we now know he was not the “aimless wanderer” he was sometimes portrayed to be. His mission was to set up schools for boys and he did so. We also know more about La Salle as founder of the Brothers. He did not have a pre-arranged plan to open schools; he responded to requests. He did not provide the finances to found schools but relied on Divine Providence. And from living with the laymen who would be his Brothers, [he launched a movement] as he trained them in the spirit of their state.<sup>5</sup>

From this brief and superficial overview we see that Lasallian research in the 20th century had a necessarily internal focus. We did not sufficiently know our history, particularly the specificity of our vocation as a teaching order of laymen who call themselves “Brothers.” We owe a great deal of gratitude to those Brothers and Superiors who promoted Lasallian research.

While continuing to study the Institute's origin and evolution, I believe Lasallian research in the twenty-first century requires a much greater external focus. Why? The demographic change in the Institute is one reason. The great diversity in the Institute is another. It has been 60 years since the highly centralized and uniform Institute re-invented itself. These years saw the Institute morph from being one of centralization to one of subsidiary, from all male schools to coeducation, from faculties dominated by Brothers to faculties and administration dominated by laymen and women, and from a mono-lingual and mono-cultural Institute to one that is multilingual/multicultural, and one that seeks to acknowledge that its educational mission occurs in pluri-religious environments.

A third reason is the post-modern world the current generation and future generations will call home. The Second Vatican Council and the General Chapter of renewal in 1966-67 brought the

Church and the Institute into the modern world just as the modern world was transitioning into the postmodern world:

Our Lasallian schools today are immersed in a multi-cultural and pluri-religious world that would have been unthinkable for our first Brothers. Nevertheless, today we share with them the experience of a modern world that has lost its reason for being, along with the traditional models of Church and society, and the irruption of something new that is still perceived as something vague. It is in this transition that we find ourselves, to analyze how, in the Lasallian school, the faith-culture dialogue takes place.<sup>6</sup>

From the perspective of our universities I can suggest two additional reasons. As I have shared at other venues, Lasallian universities are going to play an even greater role in the Lasallian mission for the twenty-first century. Like any university, ours are expected/required to find answers to new realities: it is the core of a university's mission. Also, today, it is an imperative for universities to meet quality standards, one of which is commitment to research. This essential activity not only makes a university attractive to the new generations but also makes it relevant, because research instills curiosity and creativity. These attitudes and skills are extremely necessary to adapt to the constant change that characterizes our times. Most importantly, however, is we must be in accord with the words of Pope Benedict XVI when he says in his encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)* that:

Knowledge is never purely the work of the intellect. It can certainly be reduced to calculation and experiment, but if it is to aspire to be wisdom capable of directing man in the light of his first beginnings and his final ends, it must be 'seasoned' with the 'salt' of charity.<sup>7</sup>

He goes on to say:

Human knowledge is insufficient and the conclusions of science cannot indicate by themselves the path toward integral human development. There is always a need to push further ahead: this is what is required by charity in truth. Going beyond, however, never means prescinding from the conclusions of reason, not contradicting its results. Intelligence and love are not in separate compartments: *love is rich in intelligence and intelligence is full of love.*<sup>8</sup>

Rapid demographic changes, the diverse world of the Institute today and the global transition to post modernity command our attention to research the horizons rushing at us. I suggest two areas for this external focus: the contemporary Lasallian mission in response to today's urgent education needs and research that promotes advocacy for those entrusted to our care.

And who will conduct this research? In the past the primary researchers were Brothers based in Rome; however, this is no longer the reality. The cadre of future researchers will be laywomen and men in our universities along with some Brothers who may or may not be based in Rome. This being the case – the executive board of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU) and the newly created Institute International Council for Lasallian

Association and the Educational Mission (CIAMEL) – will need to be in close cooperation and coordination.

### **At the Present Moment**

In 2007, the Office of Lasallian Studies evolved into the Service of Lasallian Research and Resources. The current Director is Brother Diego Muñoz from Venezuela. The creation of the *Digital Journal of Lasallian Research* has been an early accomplishment of the office. One role it may have today is to be an organ, like Saint Mary's University of Minnesota's *AXIS: A Journal of Lasallian Higher Education*, which will help facilitate the transition of Lasallian research to our new reality and give it a research agenda for the twenty-first century. In fact, this is already happening as evidenced by the research shared at these symposia and research studies presented at recent *Encuentros* sponsored by the International Association of Lasallian Universities.

This brings me to the current Institute research agenda. Last year, as I and the General Council began our mandate, it was very important that we enlarge the circle by inviting others in to help us move towards 2021, living together our joyful mission. That circle included the General Council, all the Secretariats and Services at the Mother House and the collaboration of the Office of Lasallian Research and Resources with IALU. In the final half of my presentation I will incorporate some of our research direction with the encounters suggested by the call and writings of Pope Francis.

### **Encounter with Our Environment**

At the entrance to the botanical gardens in Montreal stands a statute of Brother Marie-Victorin, a native of Québec, known as the “Father of the Montreal Botanical Garden.” In the history of our Institute there are other such Brothers who made significant contributions in the area of the natural sciences, including those impacting the environment. As an international institute dedicated to education we should be especially attentive to caring for our common home. While environmental issues and community service projects are addressed and promoted in individual schools, *Laudato Si* is a good impetus for us to consider crafting an Institute-wide environmental policy.

In *MEL Bulletin No. 46*, Brother José Martín Montoya Dura offers Lasallian schools an environmental plan for sustainable development. He notes that:

Generally speaking, one could say that environmental education has made progress from being merely a stance connected with the natural sciences, to becoming involved with the ethics of human development. At the present time, this aspect of pedagogy needs to be made a part of education, to concentrate on the economic and social processes of sustainable development, given that the existing model for development we have, does not solve great social problems such as poverty, inequality, injustice, war, etc.<sup>9</sup>

I certainly endorse a research agenda for the Institute and IALU that has an environmental focus. A recent initiative comes from *Encuentro XI* celebrated last March in Bogotá. During this gathering, the presidents of (IALU) identified several priority areas to be addressed by the association. One of these is “Joint Global Diplomacy and Lobbying;” it includes these key issues: poverty reduction, food security and the environment. IALU, as many of you know has already initiated collaborative research on the environment and nutrition. Last year you had an excellent keynote presentation by Dr. Clasen on the global water and sanitation scandal. He offered a number of reasons why Lasallian institutions should involve themselves in research on water and sanitation. Among them were:

...disease burden is borne chiefly by children, women and girls, and the poor. Many of the countries most affected are those in which Lasallians are already working. And ... the solutions have much to do with education of the young and vulnerable – the people that are the focus of the Lasallian educational mission.<sup>10</sup>

I headed my remarks with the quote from the Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin. "He believed that research, done rightly, merges with adoration; it opens one to beauty and wonder that is the mind of God as reflected in his creation."<sup>11</sup> We have been forcefully reminded of both the interconnectedness and the fragility of creation and our planet by Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*. As Lasallians with three centuries of educational innovations we can contribute to making sense of the postmodern world for all those entrusted to our care.

### **A Relational Encounter with Mercy**

Proposition 14 of the Documents of the 45th General Chapter states:

That the Institute pledge itself to promote awareness among Lasallians, to act on the challenges that confront children and youth, and to continue to defend their rights consistent with the proposals of the International Catholic Child Bureau.<sup>12</sup>

Established by Pope Pius XII in 1948, BICE is a NGO focusing on the protection of children. The Brothers of the Christian Schools is a charter member and a Brother serves as the Vice-President of the organization. The delegates to the 43rd General Chapter (2000) recognized that “the Institute does not presume that it alone has an effective educational approach and strategy to deal with present forms of poverty. This is why it considers it important to maintain relations and collaborate with other organizations...”<sup>13</sup>

Confronting new poverties and the commodity culture is one of the Institute’s themes for this intercapitular period. While urbanization has created more wealth to a new set of middle class, we know of the less positive trends not sufficiently attended to: homeless, rural to urban dislocation, loss of family cohesiveness, plight of street children, child labor, delinquency, prostitution, low wages and human trafficking. Concomitantly, in our post-modern world the dignity of the person made in the image of God is being undermined “as human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a ‘throw-away’ culture which is now spreading.”<sup>14</sup>

We are asking ourselves and I ask you: “Where is the Good News in all of this? How can the Gospel speak to these realities or how can we proclaim the Good News in our postmodern world?” Among the research projects envisioned by the Lasallian Research and Resources Service are: 1) Citizenship and Human Rights in Lasallian Institutions and 2) Promoting Gospel values and catechesis in Lasallian institutions. Outcomes of this research will hopefully provide some answers and direction to our questions.

### **Encounter with Our Lasallian Vocation**

As I mentioned above, a goal of Lasallian research in the last century was the writing of the critical biography of Saint La Salle in time to celebrate, in 2019, the 300th anniversary of the completion of his life and the ministry entrusted to him by God. I have a dream that there will appear in 2019 a widely received and widely read life of the Patron Saint of Teachers in relation to the Second Vatican Council. Certainly La Salle’s intuition that a community of laymen could have a Christian vocation and an apostolic ministry in the Church is an anticipation of the Council’s pronouncement that all women and men are called to a vocation of holiness and ministry in the Church.

Lasallian association is an important aspect of the life of our Institute; how is it being understood, received and lived in an Institute as diverse as ours is today? Institute Circular 461, *Associated for the Lasallian Mission ... an Act of Hope*, has become an excellent resource of our present understanding of association and where it might go in the future. However, there is an urgency to research Lasallian association at the local level. As I mentioned above, for some decades now our demographics have been changing at an increasingly rapid pace. Today, a number of our Lasallian institutions are no longer blessed with the presence of a Brother. In many places, the generation of laymen and women who served alongside Brothers has also retired, as has the generation after them. In addition to the impact of demographics, in some countries the government assigns teachers and administrators to schools. Just how effective have our Lasallian formation programs been? And what do we/I even mean by “effective?”

Yes, as past General Chapters and Superior General have said: “We need to welcome enthusiastically those who wish to become Lasallian associates and help them create new and original ways of living the Lasallian charism.” And they have equally emphasized that Lasallian Partners “... must be the protagonists in this search.”<sup>15</sup>

A truly lay spirituality must emerge from lay experience, be constructed on lay premises, develop lay leadership, and promote a kind of personal practice and ministerial involvement that is compatible with and truly transformative of lay life. If religious congregations can meet this challenge to assist, without taking over, we will not only have chosen to maintain our own form of life in the Church but we will have responded to the historical challenge brought to us by the people seeking association with us and we will have participated in what may be the most important renewal movement in the history of the Church: the emergence of a fully adult and responsible laity.<sup>16</sup>

Can research help us see if Lasallian association is contributing to the emergence of a truly lay spirituality? How can we assist in doing so? The Lasallian Research and Resources Service has two projects in this regard: The Identity and Spirituality of Lasallian Teachers, and Lasallian Memory and Educational Journeys.

Three encounters all calling for our own meeting with one another. In other places and presentations I have spoken of this as realizing the power of our networks. We Lasallians need to believe in the strength and the possibilities of our association. We are putting structures in place that can fortify our Lasallian network, to work more closely with each other, and while relishing the richness of our diversity, create common objectives and commit to walk the same path into the future. If we do this, then the hope for Lasallian Association to be a truly shared mission becomes more than a hope. It becomes our contribution to the educational mission of the Church in the twenty-first century.

## **Conclusion**

The ultimate encounter is the encounter with Jesus. It is a Gospel adventure to encounter our own vocational call. In announcing the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis said:

Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism.<sup>17</sup>

How timely is the arrival of Pope Francis on the world stage and his challenge that we move from the center of the stage! In the words of one spiritual writer:

Jesus located himself away from the comfortable center because that is where the marginalized and dispossessed were to be found.... To move from the center to the edge ...is to contribute to a rearranging of the world and a restructuring of relationships. In this world the first becomes the last, the master becomes the servant, and the teacher becomes the learner. And in that moment, that movement, the person who was overlooked and disenfranchised is raised up and dignified and the realm of God breaks through.<sup>18</sup>

This is where our research and our advocacy encounter one another. And in that encounter, we take responsibility for our common home.

## **Notes**

1. Brother Robert Schieler, FSC, Ed.D., was elected Superior General of the De La Salle Christian Brothers in 2014. Previously, he served for seven years as General Councilor for the Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN). A Brother for 46 years, Brother Robert took the

habit on September 1, 1968, in Ammendale, Maryland. He was first introduced to the Christian Brothers as a student at West Catholic Boys High School (now West Catholic Preparatory High School) in Philadelphia, PA. The Philadelphia native is a graduate of La Salle College (now University) in Philadelphia, PA, and holds masters' degrees in European History (Notre Dame) and Asian Studies (University of Philippines) as well as a doctorate in Educational Administration (University of Pennsylvania). Brother Robert was elected as General Councilor for RELAN in 2007 after serving as Visitor of the Baltimore District from 2001-2007; Director of Education for the United States-Toronto Region; Executive Secretary for the Regional Education Board and College Presidents Association; Assistant Visitor and Director of Education for the Baltimore District; in a variety of administrative positions from Assistant Principal to Superintendent of Schools during 11 years in the Philippines; as a delegate to the 44th General Chapter in 2007, attendee of the 43rd General Chapter in 2000 and the 42nd General Chapter in 1993; and as a valued member of several boards, including Saint Mary's University of Minnesota and Bethlehem University.

2. In this review of Lasallian research I am indebted to an article by Brother Alain Houry, a former Director of Lasallian Studies in Rome. The article is: "50 Years, and More, of Lasallian Studies: Chronicle and Perspectives" *Digital Journal of Lasallian Research*, (1) 2010.

3. Alain Houry, FSC, "50 Years, and More, of Lasallian Studies: Chronicle and Perspectives," *Digital Journal of Lasallian Research*, (1) 2010, p. 6.

4. Alain Houry, FSC, "50 Years, and More, of Lasallian Studies: Chronicle and Perspectives," *Digital Journal of Lasallian Research*, (1) 2010, p. 5.

5. Alain Houry, FSC, "50 Years, and More, of Lasallian Studies: Chronicle and Perspectives" *Digital Journal of Lasallian Research*, (1) 2010, pp, 21-23.

6. Diego Muñoz, FSC, "Building a Common Program: Lasallian Educational Challenges in the 21st Century," *Digital Journal of Lasallian Research*, (9) 2014, p. 90.

7. Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Caritas in Veritate*, Rome, 2009, p. 40.

8. Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Caritas in Veritate*, Rome, 2009, pp. 40-41.

9. In *MEL Bulletin No. 46*, Brother José Martín Montoya Dura, Jos Martin.

10. Dr. Thomas Clasen, "The Global Water and Sanitation Scandal: A Challenge for Lasallian Universities," *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education*, Vol. 5, no. 3, 2014, p. 4.

11. Kenneth Garcia, "Haunting the Hallways," *Notre Dame Magazine*, Spring, 2015, p. 28

12. *Documents of the 45th General Chapter*, Rome, 2014, p. 23.

13. *Documents of the 43rd General Chapter*, Rome, 2000, p. 20.

14. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si*. Rome, 2015.

15. John Johnston, FSC, "Living Today our Founding Story," 2000 Pastoral Letter, Rome,



p. 62.

16. Sandra Schneider, IHM. *Finding the Treasure* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), p. 97.

17. *Documents of the 45th General Chapter*, Rome, 2014, p. 26.

18. Anthony J. Gittins, *A Presence that Disturbs: A Call to Radical Discipleship* (Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2002), p. 162.