

Together and By Association: In a Pluralistic Society¹

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I am deeply honored and, yet, deeply humbled by this award that I rightly share with all who have accompanied me on my journey as a De La Salle Brother. This includes family, the Brothers, friends, and Lasallians who have been examples to me throughout my life. I am also honored to be counted among the Saint Mary's alums that so often exemplify service to the community in so many ways. I can say now that I am a Gael.³

This week you have been celebrating the Lasallian heritage through the concept of *Together and by Association*. This afternoon, I will reflect on this idea in terms of Lasallian higher education in a way that I hope will have some meaning within the reality of Saint Mary's College.

The Meaning of "Together and by Association"

The words *together and by association* come from the vow of De La Salle and his first Brothers on November 21, 1691, when they made a vow of association just as we Brothers vow today "to remain in society with the Brothers of the Christian schools to conduct *together and by association* schools for the service of the poor."

The purpose was not only to create a community with one another for their own sake but also to join together for the sake of the young people. It was a vow that expanded the horizons of the small group beyond the first schools in Rheims when they were called to open other schools in Paris. The gratuitous Christian school was no longer a local project in the city. But it was becoming a movement pushing geographic and personal boundaries. With this vow De La Salle and his first Brothers realized that their work was not an occupation, a temporary of service or a job; but a vocation, something they had to do to be faithful to themselves, to each other, and to God.

The late theologian and Lasallian scholar Brother Luke Salm once pointedly told a group of Lasallian university professors that *together and by association* is not simply working together. The military works together, corporations work together, plumbers work together. You get the idea. The notion of "together and by association" implies being together, in a local community where life and values are shared, but also associated across the borders for the sake of a human and Christian education.

The late, renowned Lasallian icon Brother Michel Sauvage saw this expression as demonstrating a dynamic and fertile tension between "to keep together" and "to be associated" or between the "local community" and the worldwide "Institute" or "Society."⁴ This is a two-way concept in that the local community or ministry is challenged, nurtured, and supported by the larger Lasallian network of the Institute; but local community also tests ideas, creates projects, and

challenges the larger Lasallian network. Ideas come from the top and from the bottom so to speak.

For us it implies that our being Lasallians is not simply something local in this place but something that connects us with a greater worldwide network created for the sake of providing a “human and Christian” education. It means a personal educational commitment to young people, especially those on the margins to develop them spiritually along with the knowledge they need to live a full life that includes service to others.

The mission statement of Saint Mary’s College echoes this notion of “together” by saying, “to create a student-centered educational community whose members support one another with mutual understanding and respect.” It is always together, locally with our fellow educators and with our own students and by association with the larger Lasallian world that our mission is carried out.

To be in association, in the sense we speak, is to understand that the Lasallian mission is greater than any one ministry or institution. Therefore, we are challenged by this notion to look beyond the confines of our campuses to see how we can cooperate and share this mission.

I can share one example of how this sense of association can cross cultures and religions. To meet the needs of Christian refugee children fleeing Syria, who live in camps and on the streets, the Brothers are joining with Marist Brothers in the Fratelli project. Fratelli means Brothers in Italian. Marist Brothers and De La Salle Brothers as well as lay people from Lebanon, Spain, France and other countries are uniting to create an educational center for kids who have no chance of education since they left their land. Is this a risk? Yes. Could it fail? Sure. Do we know exactly what it will be like? No. But it is time to act together and break even the boundaries that separate religious congregations for the sake of kids that need it.

The point is that we are part of an international network of 900 diverse schools, universities, colleges, and educational centers. We share one mission that is lived in diverse educational works and agencies. When we talk about the Lasallian mission in one District, we always need to have an eye on the larger or global picture. We value both the diversity of our ministries and the balance and unity within a District, Region, or the Institute.

There is a relatively new International Association of Lasallian Universities [IALU]. It would be too long for me to discuss it here, but I hope this network can in the future assist local universities to collaborate internationally to fulfill the mission, share solutions, and create new programs to meet new needs and that faculty, staff, and students can benefit from this international network.⁵

Yet, Lasallian colleges and universities are not cookie-cutter copies of one another. We are not McDonald’s or Starbuck’s, but each work is designed to meet local needs and has a unique culture and way of being Lasallian, while also sharing a common worldwide mission.

A Lasallian College in a Pluralist Culture

The question, then, is how can we be Lasallians together and by association in a world and on our local campuses that are so pluralist in belief and culture?

Sometimes I have been asked that after living seven years in Italy, what have I noticed that has changed in the United States. What I notice, the pervading sense of fear in our country. I see that in so many personal conversations and news stories the emphasis is fear. We seem to be less the “home of the brave” and more the “home of the afraid.” I came across this quote from John Chapman, “People get so in the habit of worry that if you save them from drowning and put them on a bank to dry in the sun with hot chocolate and muffins they wonder whether they are catching cold.”⁶

Perhaps the attacks on 9-11, the terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels and San Bernardino, the economic collapse and even the 24-7 news cycle has created this pervading sense of fear. Or it may be that the constant and rapid change we experience is the cause. I am not sure, but I do feel that so many people I see are living in fear. Of course, sometimes we have to act on well-founded fears, but fear can be deadly when we fear ideas different from ours, people different from us, and when fear governs our lives. However, it is said that the most common expression in the Scripture is “Do not be afraid.”

One role of the college in the spirit of association is to be counter to this culture of fear, to be universal, to open up minds, to provide new ways at looking at old and new problems, to challenge our notions and even our ideals, so that we can have well-integrated individuals who see themselves not only as citizens of the nation and the world but agents in its development. We boast, and with good reason, of the material and career success of graduates, but we also must encourage in them a sense of responsibility for the common good if we are to live up to our Lasallian heritage.

One of the changes we experience is the religious diversity of our students and staff and the uncertainty about the role and place of belief in a Catholic and Lasallian college today. Are we Catholic and in what way? Are we Catholic and Lasallian, how? Or are we either Catholic or Lasallian?

Saint Mary’s mission statement clearly states that “we affirm and foster the Christian understanding of the human person which animates the educational mission of the Catholic Church,” but it also states that “recognizing that all those who sincerely quest for truth contribute to and enhance its stature as a Catholic institution of higher learning, Saint Mary's welcomes members from its own and other traditions, inviting them to collaborate in fulfilling the spiritual mission of the College.”

This statement emphasizes the community building and sense of association about which I am speaking. I have met Hindus. Muslims and Buddhists who can call themselves Lasallian because they can take elements of the holistic Lasallian education, the notion of touching hearts and student centeredness, and apply it as teachers. While Lasallian education is always based in Catholic teaching and belief, elements of it apply to people who are not

Christian. Father John Haughey, SJ, who spoke here several years ago was very clear that a college is not a parish. The point is that the college has to be a place where ideas are respected but also respectfully disagreed with. The development of critical thinkers is the key to maturity, courage in the face of fear, and even spiritual growth.

Pope Benedict XVI in speaking at La Sapienza University of Rome in 2008 stated that “freedom from ecclesiastical and political authorities” is essential to the university’s “special role” in society. He asked, “What does the pope have to do or say to a university?” And he answered, “He certainly should not try to impose in an authoritarian manner his faith on others.”⁷

At a gathering at Bethlehem University, the late Archbishop Pietro Sambi, Papal Nuncio or Ambassador to the Holy Land, gave his insights on Catholic identity when Catholicism is in the minority:

When you are a minority, as Catholics are in this culture, you need three strong principles. The first is a clear identity, a clear sense of what you are and what you want to be. As a minority, if you lack a clear identity, you’re like a drop of wine in a glass of water ... you’ll disappear. The second thing is a strong sense of belonging. I would express it in this way: you need a community, and the community needs you. Whoever walks alone sooner or later will be lost in the desert. Third, when you are a minority, you need a deep commitment to excellence. You must excel in human qualities, in family qualities, in professional qualities, in the qualities of Christian life, in order to be a light for others. If you don’t have a sense of excellence, you will be submerged by the majority.

We must be strong in our identity but open to dialog, as in the story of Jesus’ dialog with the Samaritan woman at the well. He sat with her and talked with her; he did not change his message but listened to her. Being Lasallian provides a great opportunity for listening and dialoging.

There is no easy answer to this issue of Catholic identity, and there will continue to be tensions around the issue of Catholic and Lasallian identity. While some Catholics may say they identify more with the Lasallian charism than with the Church, we have to remember that De La Salle’s values were rooted in Catholic Christianity. He called his schools Christian schools. I think when we Catholics feel disaffected at times from the Church; it is when Church representatives are not perceived as acting with gospel values. How then do we deal with this on the college level? We must remember that we are sometimes the representatives of the Catholic faith to our students and co-workers. I think that we may have to look back to the nature of the Lasallian college itself and to our gospel values as our guide.

Conclusion

We journey together as one local community and in association with a great international network for the sake of all those students and fellow educators entrusted to us. Let us all be open to the challenges and blessings of our common Lasallian mission. Let us realize that this mission of Lasallian education is a privilege. It is a privilege to be a Lasallian educator and touch hearts and a privilege to be a student in a Lasallian school. Therefore, let us take care of our younger

hearts' desire and passion that called us to education and nourish the passion and desire of the young people entrusted to us.

I am grateful for this honor and for your attention to my few comments. I wish you success in your commitment and efforts to journey together and by association with the students to new horizons so that our world may somehow be a better place.

Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered on the occasion of the conferral of the degree of Doctor of Educational Leadership, *honoris causa*, by Saint Mary's College of California in Moraga on 12 April 2016.

2. Brother Thomas Johnson, FSC, earned his bachelor of arts degree in English from Lewis College [now Lewis University] and a master of arts degree in English and a master of education degree from De Paul University. He is a former Vicar General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (2007-2014) and currently serves as director of novices for the Region of North America of the De La Salle Christian Brothers in Chicago, IL.

3. "In true mascot form, the SMC [Saint Mary's College] Gael is an Irish warrior, representing the power of passion and hard work."

4. Michel Sauvage, FSC, "For a Better Understanding of the Lasallian Association" in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 5, no. 2 (2014).

5. Claude Reinhardt, FSC, "The Contribution of Lasallian Higher Education Establishments to the Lasallian World Network" in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 2, no. 2 (2011).

6. John Jay Chapman, *The Collected Works of John Jay Chapman* (M&S Press, 1970).

7. Benedict XVI, "Lecture at La Sapienza University," as reported in "Sectarian Catholicism" (*America Magazine*, May 11, 2009).