

Association: New, Fruitful Branches Sprouting from a Tercentennial Tree

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Greetings and Memories

It is with a deep feeling of joy and gratitude that I am back today at Saint Mary's College. Its beautiful campus and in particular its lovely chapel bring many good memories back to me. I am especially reminded of the Christian Brothers who, while I lived and studied at Saint Mary's from 1993 to 1998, were part of the Saint Mary's College and the Joseph Alemany Brothers' Communities. Several of them have passed away, others are enjoying retirement and there are those who remain on the faculty of this wonderful institution of higher education. They were mentors to me and, especially, they were true Brothers, always willing to help me succeed as a graduate student.

In addition to the Brothers, I also remember with gratitude my teachers from the Intensive English Program and the School of Education. This afternoon, I reiterate to all of them my deepest gratitude. The education I received here was undoubtedly the first step on a path that brought me back for a new blessing this afternoon.

The years I spent here as a graduate student were indeed not only a privilege but, above all, a treasure not for my personal benefit but to be shared with others, just as it is recommended in the Gospel: "give freely what you have freely received" (Matt. 10:8). Unexpected circumstances precipitated my return to share the Lasallian Educational Mission, first in my own District and later in all the Latin American Lasallian Region, where I served as its Regional Secretary.

My debt to Saint Mary's College is enormous. To the generous support I received for my studies, I must add today a distinction for which I am honored but also humbled because the only merit I can claim is having fulfilled my duty to the best of my ability.

Introduction

Before coming to Saint Mary's I had my first stint as a teacher in tertiary education institutions. It was not until my return that I was assigned full time to several tasks in higher education. These tasks included teaching and administration. Since last year, when I was appointed Visitor of the

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Lasallian District of North Mexico, I have added to these tasks that of chairing the Board of Trustees for the six universities in the District.

When I received the invitation to address you on this occasion, I also received a suggestion to share with you the highlights of my experience in higher education. That is precisely what I intend to do. Particularly, I want to share outstanding programs I learned about when I visited some higher education institutions in the Latin American Region.

Let me begin by contextualizing the programs I am about to share to facilitate your understanding of their deep meaning. On the one hand, it is necessary to be familiar with some phenomena occurring in Latin America; on the other hand, it is also necessary to know about a transcendental process lived by the Institute of Brothers of the Christian Schools: Association for Mission.

The Latin American Context

In 2004, supported by colleagues from Georgetown University, social researchers from two Latin American universities organized in the Chilean capital a seminar entitled “Latin America 2020: Thinking Long-term Scenarios.” The seminar was part of Project Global Trends 2020, sponsored by the National Intelligence Council of the United States. The conclusions of that workshop identified the following factors of influence and agents of change:

Population: Currently, the Latin American population accounts for 8% of humanity. Demographic projections anticipate only a slight increase over the next fifteen years, because the regional birth rate is lower than in other regions of the world.

Institutions and governance: At present, democratic rules govern political campaigns and elections (except for Cuba). However, political institutions are not working; they do not meet citizens’ expectations either. The rules of law and accountability are not reinforced. Poor government performance has deteriorated the capacity of Latin American states to meet the basic needs of the population. The fragile fiscal sustainability of most countries in the region suggests the need for tax reforms and raises questions about the ability of countries to prevent future financial crises.

Social issues: According to economic projections, the participation of Latin America in the world GDP will tend to decrease due to low growth rates and inequality within the region. Poverty and inequality are endemic social illnesses which make people vulnerable to populist, demagogic and authoritarian electoral options.

Another important social issue is labor informality. Economic projections anticipate that in the next fifteen years the creation of jobs will be scarce. This scarcity will further weaken social security and the tax system.

Security: Compared to other regions of the world, Latin America will be a relatively peaceful region in the next 15 years. However, there will be border disputes and territorial claims. Local conflicts will persist, some of them with international repercussions. Many of these conflicts have to do with non-government armed actors

(mafias, drug dealers and terrorist groups). Guerrilla organizations will not be easily dismantled by national armies - e.g., Colombia is the most serious case, but not the only one.

Over the next fifteen years, public safety in large cities will become a pressing demand in Latin American societies. Insecurity and crime rates show upward trends for several years, coinciding with increases in poverty and inequality in most countries. Consequently, "iron fist" candidates will win and take office as mayors, governors and presidents.

Globalization: Latin American commercial integration to globalization will depend not only on political strategies but also on competitiveness of its production and export capacities.

Indigenous movement: In the next fifteen years, the influence of the Native Movement will increase throughout the region, particularly in southern Mexico, Central America and the Andean region. Where rigidity as well as political and economic exclusion predominates, the Native movement may evolve into radical expressions that will frontally oppose the standing political, economic and cultural institutions in Latin America.

Natural resources and the environment: Latin America's biodiversity will be one of the major regional assets in 2020. However, environmentalists anticipate in the next fifteen years a deepening of destructive trends such as climate change, land degradation, deforestation and scarcity of fresh water, and their negative impacts. The region is particularly vulnerable to negative impacts of climate change due to the high proportion of the population dependent on the natural resource economy.

Science and technology: Generation of knowledge is an important asset for any country in search of growth. However, Latin American countries will not be able to invest their scarce resources in developing large research projects. Technology-adaptation projects, which have the potential to create an export capacity comparable to that of Asian countries, will also be missed in the Region. Of course, there will be exceptions to this poor trend.

The Lasallian Institute and the Association for Mission

Let us now take an inside look at the Institute of Brothers of the Christian Schools. From the mid-twentieth century, the Institute has undergone a transformative process. This process is shared with other religious orders of the Catholic Church.

Since I started working on this address, a quote from the Hebrew Testament kept coming to mind: "No need to remember past events, no need to think about what was done before. Look, I am doing something new, now it emerges; can you not see it? Yes, I am making a road in the desert and rivers in wastelands" (Isaiah 43:18-19). Indeed, if we observe attentively the

development of our mission, we will notice that something new is happening in almost every corner of our Institute.

Today, much evidence proves that the Lasallian Educational Mission is living a transition to a period of greater vitality. It is not the first time that this has happened. If we look at the history of our Institute, we will find that there are other moments of our life which constitute an “historical pattern of deaths and resurrections”; for example, the death of our Founder, the French Revolution and the approval of secularization laws by the French Congress in 1904. Our time is also witnessing important transformations that will lead us to new life. Repeatedly, Brother Superior General refers to this time as a time of exodus, as Easter time. Therefore, this is a time that requires us to die in many ways as a condition to see a season of hope to arise.

What are the signs of this transformation? I will mention only some of the most outstanding. First of all, we observe the increase of new ministries to accommodate new realities and to meet new needs. For example, demographic changes in most Latin American countries have increased demand for higher education. The Lasallian response has been the establishment of universities and other centers of tertiary education. The most recent General Chapters call us incessantly and insistently to reach out to people traditionally excluded - for example, native people, impaired persons, working children, migrants and victims of violence. The Institute answers these calls with a variety of initiatives to serve the poor.

From the beginning until approximately 40 years ago, the faculty of Lasallian schools was almost exclusively Brothers. Teaching teams evolved, and today they include Brothers, lay colleagues, women religious and priests.

New teams require new formation. Christian Brothers and lay partners are heirs to the Lasallian charism. The former and the latter answer their Christian call inspired by the spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. It is of the utmost importance that all of them share the source of their nourishment. Therefore, programs of shared formation for Brothers and other Lasallians are flourishing in every District and Region of the Institute. Though similar in content, these programs vary in duration, intensity, methodologies, and scope.

Recognizing that we Brothers are not anymore alone in the mission, we are required to rethink structures for mission at local, district, regional, and international levels. Most recent General Chapters have insisted on the creation of boards, organization of assemblies, and even on the creation of communities with Brothers and lay partners. These proposals reflect ongoing experiences and invite us to take them to new phases. These and other structures necessary to adapt ourselves to new realities have to be evidence of the appreciation for the vocations and identities that come together in the Lasallian family.

Another transformation that we observe in the Lasallian Educational Mission is its intercultural and interreligious character. The century-old presence of the Institute in countries whose roots and traditions are not Catholic is a fact. However, a change of attitude has made it possible for educators coming from other religious traditions not only to work at Lasallian schools but also and most importantly to feel at home. The person-centeredness and brotherhood are essential

traits of the Lasallian educational style. These traits attract and commit educators from different religious traditions to work for the advent of a better world through education.

In short, the Institute has gone through an enriching process initiated by the Second Vatican Council and driven by its own desire for a renewed life and thinking. But this process has not been problem-free. There remain uncertainties, false perceptions and frustrations, especially related to the absence of formal structures of association and lack of experience. In spite of problems and difficulties, the Lasallian educational mission, carried on exclusively by Brothers for a long time, now has been enriched and is reaching new levels of transforming influence thanks to lay Lasallians who not only contribute their time and professional skills but most importantly also share their visions and commitment. The expected outcome of this complementarity is an unforeseen enhancement of the Lasallian mission.

Outstanding Programs

What do we Lasallians in Latin America, encouraged by Association for Mission, do to meet new and old needs of youth in Latin America? Undoubtedly, Lasallian universities are making a big difference in almost all Latin American countries. I suggest these five institutions exemplify the tremendous difference that associated and committed Lasallians are making in the lives of many youth and adults.

Unilasalle, Canoas, Puerto Alegre, RGS, Brazil: Thirteen years ago, this University initiated a project entitled “Citizenship in the Plaza.” This project was designed to promote human values such as respect, friendship, cooperation, brotherhood and responsibility. The program’s main goal is to bring about change by promoting social inclusion and effective exercise of citizenship particularly among children and adolescents from socially vulnerable families. Specially designed workshops and collective sports stimulate their creativity and social participation.

The same university has designed another project entitled “Learning with Adults.” This program creates opportunities for elementary and secondary education of adults who did not have access to education when they were children or adolescents. The project attempts to facilitate access to higher education for young people and adults. These two projects have had a huge impact not only in the social environment but also within the university community. For example, university students have had significant life experiences and research has been fostered.

Universidad de La Salle, Campus El Yopal (Utopía), Colombia: UTOPIA is a project built to meet the needs of young people from low-income families who dwell in rural zones of deep Colombia, where educational opportunities and progress are practically nonexistent and consequently, their only way of making a living is joining guerrilla groups. There is an urgent need to rescue young people whose lives have been negatively affected by violence and to restore their faith in a better future for themselves and their country.

The UTOPIA project drove the creation of a techno-agricultural research park. This park is a space for promoting hands-on learning and innovation. The park is also a proposal for reinventing agricultural Colombia and a place where educated youth commit themselves to build a new Colombia.

The project has several transcendental goals. The first one is to offer the best possible education to young people from rural zones affected by violence so that they become Agronomists. The second one is to prepare these young people to lead the social and political transformation of their birthplaces, by promoting productivity. Additionally, the project attempts to create sources of employment and by this means help eradicate extreme poverty. There are already multiple signs of the positive impact resulting from this project, for instance, transference of knowledge among Colombian farmers, removal of old, unproductive habits in peasants from the Meta and Casanare Departments, and, more important, improvement of the quality of their lifestyle.

Escuela Superior de Educación Integral Rural, Guatemala, Centroamérica: Currently, there is a growing social consensus in Guatemala regarding human rights of the indigenous population in a wide sense, and specifically the rights to life, to education, to meet and move, to run for office, as well as freedom of thought and speech.

In a discriminatory society, dominated by a hegemonic power, the Lasallian community of Guatemala contributes to the improvement of that reality by promoting education and integral development in the poorest rural communities, especially with the Mayan People. The extremely poor living conditions of the natives of Guatemala encouraged the Lasallian community to bring tertiary education to Mayan communities. Currently, the College of Integral Rural Education offers two academic programs: (1) a diploma in Bilingual Intercultural Education, with emphasis on Mayan culture, and (2) a Bachelor of Arts in Educational Innovation, with emphasis on learning processes. These two programs are accredited by Teachers' College of the University San Carlos of Guatemala.

The College developed and implemented a strategic plan. This plan gives priority to human rights, gender equity, and civil participation. It also states the school's commitment to lobbying for the establishment of policies that enhance the living conditions of natives and advance rural development.

Universidad la Salle, Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, estado de México, México: La Salle University of Nezahualcóyotl began operations in August 2006, in the outskirts of Mexico City. Nezahualcóyotl City is widely known as a conflicted area because of critical social, economic and cultural problems. The University became a new choice for young people seeking private higher education in a difficult, complex and even dangerous environment in the periphery of the Mexican capital.

By offering secondary and tertiary education, all enriched with Lasallian principles and values, the University cooperates to build a better social environment by initiating young people to productive work, to achieve better living conditions for themselves and their dependents. La Salle Nezahualcóyotl proudly claims that 100% of its student body is on

scholarship. Scholarships vary from 50% to 100% of school tuition. Nursing students are awarded an additional subsidy for materials.

Besides the social impact achieved by its graduates, the University has affected the environment in a positive way. The University's grounds were for many years a municipal dumpsite and wastewater collector. The quality of air, water and land improved significantly. Moreover, the proliferation of harmful fauna has been prevented.

The University receives support from private sponsors and from the Brothers of the District Antilles-South Mexico, and was intended as a gift to commemorate the centennial of the Lasallian presence in the country.

La Salle University, Chihuahua, México: La Salle University was established in the capital city of Chihuahua State, in Northern Mexico. In addition to being the largest state in Mexico, Chihuahua is home to a native community, the Tarahumaras (in their own language, they call themselves Rarámuris). The University proudly supports a program designed to meet the need for an inclusive and multicultural education, accessible to young Tarahumaras who have skills but lack the financial means to get professional education. In the year 2009, the first cohort of Rarámuris (9) enrolled in college; ever since, a new group comes each semester.

Taking into account the difficulties that arise from linguistic and cultural differences, the University has implemented a mentoring program to facilitate the success of this very special group of students. Each Rarámuri student meets on a weekly basis with a teacher for academic advising. They also receive support from two peers who help them to overcome other difficulties they may face. In addition to a full scholarship, the University provides room and board for these students. To guarantee continuity to this program, the University is currently looking for support from international foundations dedicated to further inclusion and social justice. Attempting to secure a positive impact in communities from where students come, the program requires its beneficiaries to return to their communities upon graduating and to commit themselves to serve there at least the same number of years they spent studying.

Conclusion

The programs described above are just a few examples of many initiatives undertaken by Lasallians in Latin America. Thanks to these meaningful actions, the Lasallian university system has become a beacon of hope for many people in our region.

God keeps calling us as partners to fulfill the salvation plan. In response to God's call, the Lasallian community continues seeking the glory of the Most Holy Trinity that is working creatively so that many may have full and abundant life. God save and help Saint Mary's College to continue its mission.