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## **Lasallian Women: Participative & Compassionate Agents of Transformation**

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Good afternoon! Thank you for inviting me to share a brief reflection with you at the beginning of this Lasallian Women's Symposium.

This is a Symposium by, for, and with women who are fully involved in the Lasallian ministry of human and Christian education. Gathered in solidarity with one another, you have identified five aims for the Symposium. It is, therefore, your challenge and responsibility to describe the specific contribution of women to our common mission and to envision new and invigorating modes of participation. Your task is to help me and the rest of the Lasallian Family appreciate the "women's perspective" and the particular experienced-based "women's impact" that you contribute to Lasallian educational communities.

As the Brother Superior, I have come primarily to listen attentively to your shared wisdom and experience. My desire during these days with you is to listen, reflect, and learn. I hope to leave this Symposium inspired, motivated, and challenged by your questions and insights.

The Symposium belongs to you. My reflection will, therefore, be brief; and I hope it will serve you as an invitation to prayer, conversation, and action that benefit a spirit of Lasallian sisterhood that joyfully and effectively witnesses to the Reign of God and the liberation of the poor. Like Mary of Magdala, the preeminent witness to the resurrection, you are called to tell your students, colleagues, families, and friends: "I have seen the Lord!"<sup>3</sup>

Through a careful reading of the Gospel, we see that "Jesus takes advantage of every opportunity to present women as models of faith, generosity, and selfless commitment."<sup>4</sup> These are the kind of people we need to be involved at different levels of decision-making. In contemporary studies of leadership, we read ". . . women manifested a somewhat more democratic (or participative) style and a less autocratic (or directive) style than men did."<sup>5</sup> Can you suggest areas of mission-governance that would benefit from the "women's perspective," from a more "participative" style?

Globally, the majority of Lasallian Partners are women.<sup>6</sup> In PARC, RELAL and RELEM,<sup>7</sup> women are the majority of partners; and RELAN<sup>8</sup> is not far behind. In RELAF,<sup>9</sup> female Partners make up about a third of the Lasallian workforce. In some of our educational communities, the majority of students are women. It is with this in mind that one of the results of a Symposium by and for women is to provide you with a unique opportunity for networking and sharing so that your voice may be heard and you can enrich the entire Lasallian Family.

Just think of the potential for impact that Lasallian women have. Inspired by the ideas of author Thomas Friedman, I believe that assisted by social media and the hard-to-believe power of the cloud, all of you working together “now have the power to do good at a speed and scope we’ve never seen before: to reverse environmental degradation or to feed, house, and clothe every person on the planet,”<sup>10</sup> to wipe out illiteracy and give hope to children everywhere, if we ever pooled our collective wisdom and decided to do it.

All Lasallians – Brothers and Partners – are united in our response to God’s one call that we announce the Good News to the poor. We are all motivated by the one spirit of faith and zeal that impels us to go beyond borders to provide poor children and young people with a life-giving and liberating education. We know, however, that “[T]here are many different gifts, but it is always the same Spirit. There are many different ways of serving, but it is always the same Lord.”<sup>11</sup>

What are the many gifts that women bring to our shared ministry? What are the different ways of serving through which women provide poor children and young people with a holistic human and Christian education? Do women have a distinct way of interacting with the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable? How do we create structures and opportunities that will affirm the role of young and gifted professional women and encourage them to make a long-term commitment to our mission?

Enriched with insights from Leonard Doohan, a noted professor of leadership studies, and the contemporary theologian José Pagola, I share with you my conviction that the Lasallian mission needs leaders with human integrity, spirit, and heart – leaders of hope who bring their hope to the mission and find and fulfill their students’ search for hope.<sup>12</sup> We need Lasallian educators who wake up their colleagues and students to the already present Reign of God. We need educators who introduce compassion into all human life, a compassion like God’s.<sup>13</sup>

Do women (single, married, mothers, religious Sisters), because of their lived experiences, witness to hope and behave compassionately in a different way, a way that makes a significant difference in their human relationships?

Contemporary leadership studies tell us that inspired leaders, and I quote, “. . . transform organizations, leaders transform people one at a time, and impact society as a whole, leading it to a vision of promise, and they do this within the context of organizational success and development.”<sup>14</sup> How do you envision women as transformational Lasallian leaders? Can you suggest concrete ways to incorporate more women into mission-related governmental structures at the local, District, and Institute levels of transformational leadership?

Pope Francis often reminds us of the important role women – especially grandmothers and mothers – play in transmitting their faith traditions. Following Pope Francis’ line of thought, I wonder if women should be more proactive in promoting all Lasallian vocations. Can women be more direct in inviting their colleagues to consider their educational service as a vocational response to God’s desire that all persons live life to the fullest?<sup>15</sup> Can women’s intuition be a guide to inviting young men to consider the life of the Brothers of the Christian Schools?

You Lasallian women, with your diverse experiences, gifts, perspectives, tenderness, and empathy are helping all of us to convert and believe in the Gospel. Echoing Mary of Magdala, you announce to us “He is risen!”<sup>16</sup> You are assisting the Holy Spirit in the transformation of the Lasallian mission as it strives to be a beacon of hope and a witness to the Reign of God, especially to our students who are blocked from living life to the fullest.

Thank you for the gift you are to the Lasallian Family! You indeed bring wisdom, joy, and creativity to the Lasallian mission. You are building on the legacy of the women who inspired and supported John Baptist de La Salle during the founding of the Institute – Perrette Lespagnol, Madame Maillefer, Sister Françoise Duval, Madame des Croyères, and Sister Louise.<sup>17</sup>

Gathered in the presence of God, I ask the Holy Spirit to inspire your prayer, guide your conversations, and impel you to dream of new strategies designed to increase your impact on our ministry of human and Christian education.

This Symposium is yours. I am here to listen and learn. Thank you!

## Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered at a Lasallian Global Women’s Symposium that was held in Auckland, New Zealand, from 16 to 19 July 2017. Brother Robert notes, “I am grateful to the following Lasallian Partners who graciously shared with me their insights regarding the perspective and impact of women in our ministry of human and Christian education: Cheri Broadhead, Jolleen Wagner, Maryann Donohue-Lynch, Roxanne Eubank, Marianne Gauss, Ophelia Fugoso, Alisa Macksey, and Heather Ruple Gilson.”

2. Brother Robert Schieler was elected Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools at the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in 2014.

3. *John* 20:18.

4. José A. Pagola, *Jesus: An Historical Approximation* (Convivium, 2015), page 217.

5. A. H. Eagly and L. L. Carli, “From Research Gate, The Female Leadership Advantage: An Evaluation of the Evidence” in *The Leadership Quarterly* (December, 2013), page 814.

6. Cf. General Council of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, *Circular 461: Associated for the Lasallian Mission...an Act of Hope* (Rome, 2010), #1.14.

7. Lasallian Region of Pacific-Asia (PARC), Lasallian Region of Latin America (RELAL), and Lasallian Region of Europe-Middle East (RELEM).

8. Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN), exclusive of Mexico that forms a part of RELAL.

9. Lasallian Region of Africa-Madagascar (RELAF), exclusive of Egypt and Sudan that form a part of RELEM.

10. Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), page 89.

11. *1 Corinthians* 12:4-5.

12. Cf. Leonard Doohan, *Spiritual Leadership: The Quest for Integrity* (Paulist Press, 2007), page 3.

13. Cf. Pagola, page 147.

14. Doohan, page 5.

15. *John* 10:10.

16. *Matthew* 28:6.

17. *Madame Perrette Lespagnol* was the maternal grandmother of De La Salle; *Madame Maillefer*, the benefactress of the first school associated with De La Salle in Rheims, was the person who sent Adrien Nyel from Rouen to Rheims; *Soeur Françoise Duval*, originally a Sister of the Holy Child Jesus with Nicolas Barré in Rouen, was one of Nicolas Roland's Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus in Rheims; *Madame des Croyères*, the benefactress of the second school associated with De La Salle, was mentioned by him in the *Memoir on the Beginnings* as an instrument of divine providence; and *Soeur Louise Hours* was, it seems, an agent of divine providence in Parménie in the later years of De La Salle's life. [Cf. *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989), pages 8-11, 31-33, 68-69, 74, 127, & 169-172; and *De La Salle: A City Saint and the Liberation of the Poor through Education* (Oxford: De La Salle Publications, 1993), pages 22, 72, 110-111, 127-130, 131-133, 236-237, 550-552, and 553-555.].