

The Impact of Lasallian Universities: Three Touchstones to Identity

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Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to share a brief reflection on the impact of Lasallian universities. It is a pleasure to be with you again. Congratulations on the 20th anniversary of your association.³ You have evolved into a significant presence in the global Lasallian Family.

I acknowledge and thank you for your international programs for student leadership, the Rome formation program for university professors and administrators, and most recently the Lasallian Universities Center for Education (LUCE) pilot program.⁴ These programs give a human face to our Lasallian global mission. As noted by the young people who participated in the March pre-Synod meeting on youth,

despite living in a hyper-connected world, communication among the young people remains limited to those who are similar to them.⁵

Your programs, including the Lasallian Research Symposium at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, highlight the one human family that we are. Equally important, the structure of these programs allows for informal conversation and learning about the Lasallian vision, philosophy, and mission.

I would like to begin from a global perspective. Last month in Rome, I attended the semi-annual Assembly of Superiors General. Anticipating next October's Synod of Bishops on the topic of "Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment," the Assembly's theme was: Listening to Youth. A sociologist who gave the opening presentation informed us that 16% of the world's population is between the ages of 15 and 24. Sixty percent of those young people live in Asia, 19% live in Africa and 9% live in Latin America and the Caribbean; 7% are in Europe, and 4% are in North America. With the exception of the Philippines, the majority of our universities are in North and South America. These statistics challenge us to consider the possible future impact of Lasallian universities in Asia and Africa. I thank the board of IALU for your support and advice leading to the Institute's assuming responsibility for the Ethiopian Catholic University – La Salle and assisting the District of West Africa to move forward with the proposal for a Lasallian university in Burkina Faso.

Finally, thank you for encouraging the presence and participation of the leadership of our African university and institutes of higher education at this Encuentro.

According to the UNESCO report

prepared for the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education, tertiary education is being influenced by five main factors: the impact of globalization, the phenomenon of massification, increasing inequalities access, increasing student mobility, and information and communication technologies.⁶

Obviously, each one of these five factors could be the topic of a dissertation or a week-long workshop. Also, each of the factors, it seems to me, is the object of a particular field of study.

In addition, a consideration of the factors would necessarily be conditioned by one's cultural perspective. So were we to spend time mulling over the challenges confronting higher education, should we speak as an Asian or Pacific Islander? As a European? As a French or English speaking African? As a Latin American or Anglo American? And then we would have to determine if we are going to approach the topic from the female or male perspective or from the viewpoint of the precariously poor or of the socially secure.

I confess that it is beyond my competence to address these issues in depth. Rather than giving you a clear recipe for your universities to effectively impact the lives of your students and local societies, I will offer you some ingredients that I hope will contribute to your own recipe.

I recently completed my pastoral visit to Europe and the Mediterranean. Time spent with the Brothers, Partners and students in Poland, Spain, Malta, Lebanon, England, Egypt – to name just a few of the many countries I visited – remind me of the cultural complexity of our world and Institute.

Let us look at just one example of the practical implications involved in creatively and effectively responding to the impact of information and communication technologies. La Salle – Universitat Ramon Llull in Barcelona, where I presume just about everybody has 24/7 access to some sort of technology, will certainly respond in way that would be neither possible nor practical at the Centre Lasalliene Africain in Abidjan, where access is sporadic and not universally accessible.

I hope you can see where I am heading with all of this. To me it is clear that each Lasallian higher educational community is challenged to address the impact of globalization, massification, unequal access, student mobility, and information and communication technology. There is no “one size fits all” response. There is no universally applicable Lasallian solution. Universidad La Salle in Mexico City, De La Salle University – Manila, and Ethiopian Catholic University – La Salle in Addis Ababa will each have its own recipe.

A matter of particular concern for us is not listed in the UNESCO report I quoted earlier. The issue I refer to transcends borders, describes our reason for being, and influences our responses to the multiple challenges facing twenty-first century tertiary education.

This morning I would like to offer for your reflection and conversation some food for thought about the Catholic and Lasallian identity of our educational communities. A clear understanding

of our shared corporate identity will inspire your strategic plans to address the impact of the factors confronting higher education. One of our particular challenges is to clarify and proclaim our distinctive identity.

Many of your universities prepare young women and men to be educators in Catholic schools. This is certainly one area where you impact both the Lasallian world and beyond. However, just as the identified factors are influencing higher education, so too the pressures of post-modernity impact primary and secondary education.

International research shows that the curricula of Catholic secondary schools are increasingly becoming dominated by the pressures of conforming to the requirements of the nation states. These requirements are generally expressed in economic and utilitarian terms and evaluated by criteria of measurable outputs. As a result of these pressures, Catholic secondary schools are in danger of losing a distinctive religious and educational cultural program expressed in a distinctive Catholic school curriculum.⁷

In the words of Drew Gilpin Faust, president of Harvard University:

. . . we must not let the clarity and measurability of the economic case for higher education lead us to abandon the more difficult work of explaining – and embracing – higher education’s broader purposes. By focusing on education exclusively as an engine of material prosperity, we risk distorting and even undermining all a university should and must be. We cannot let our need to make a living overwhelm our aspiration to lead a life worth living.⁸

The humanities traditionally introduced students to a life worth living. Today,

. . . there is pressure on [universities] now to change fundamentally, to equip our young people to be what the Fabians used to call “brain workers.” They are to be skilled labor in the new economy, intellectually nimble enough to meet its needs, which we know will change constantly and unpredictably.⁹

Are we being pressured to educate or train young people to be laborers, or are we holistically forming individuals? Is our choice limited to providing a practical education, or is our goal to offer a liberating education? Historically, I believe, Lasallian higher education has been able to hold this tension in a healthy balance. But my focus today is not this debate. I would like to reflect with you about an issue that is at the heart of Catholic Lasallian tertiary education.

Jesus Christ is the reason for the very being of Lasallian education. This affirmation obviously impacts our educational philosophy, our pedagogical style, and our strategic plans for the human and Christian formation of young people and adults. This is why we believe that education is cooperation with God’s plan of salvation. We strive to procure the wellbeing of our students – the image and likeness of God – especially those who are economically poor and marginalized.

The centers of higher education that you represent are important members of the world-wide Lasallian Family where every day one million students, 90,000 dedicated Partners and 3,600

committed Brothers in 79 countries gather to share the joy of the Gospel – solidarity, respect, mercy and justice – in a first-class educational environment. Approximately 200,000 Lasallians are enrolled in our communities of tertiary education, almost one fifth of our total student population. “Catholic and Lasallian” is what unites us.

So, what do we mean by “Catholic and Lasallian”? What are the descriptive markers that should be perceptible in Philadelphia, Paris, Pachuca, and Palmas? What are the attitudes and behaviors that will be experienced in Beauvais, Bogotá and Bacolod? In other words, how do we express our unity in the richness of our diversity?

Certainly our Institute’s Regions and Districts have criteria for assessing the Catholic and Lasallian identity of our educational communities. Today, I would like to highlight just three touchstones that I believe are essential to contemporary and relevant Lasallian centers of higher education. As I visit the Lasallian world, it becomes increasingly clear to me that these three principles should be among the other characteristics that each of you use to describe your particular center.

The Presence of God

I believe that a conscious awareness of the presence of God is an essential dynamic of Catholic and Lasallian identity. My visits to the “four corners of the world” assure me that I can affirm that our Lasallian world is religiously pluralistic. In some Western cultures, an increasing number of people do not identify with a particular religious practice; we all increasingly hear them say that although they “believe” they do not “belong.” In African and Asian societies, the overwhelming majority of people say that they “believe” and “belong.”

Our universities and other centers of tertiary education should provide ample and non-threatening opportunities to reflect on the ultimate meaning of life and the common good. Brother Luke Salm, FSC, a past professor of theology at Manhattan College,¹⁰ wrote:

For many young people today the university is their last chance formally to address the major questions concerning the meaning of their existence, to recognize the seeds of destruction in society and in themselves, to become aware of the major inequities in social and political life, to anticipate the futility of a life centered on pleasure, wealth, and power.¹¹

With Gerard Manley Hopkins, we should inspire our students to delight in the grandeur of God revealed through creation.¹² We should develop experiences designed to show our students that

to protect creation, to protect every man and every woman, to look upon them with tenderness and love, is to open up a horizon of hope; it is to let a shaft of light break through the heavy clouds; it is to bring the warmth of hope!¹³

Enlightened by Celtic spirituality, we can lead our students to become spiritually sensitive and to appreciate “interbeing.”

In the Celtic Christian world, heaven and earth are not divided. Spirit and matter are woven together inseparably. The life of one species and the life of another are never torn apart. The well-being of humanity is viewed in relationship to the well-being of the rest of earth's species.¹⁴

In *God Is Back*, authors Micklethwait and Wooldridge, commenting on the prevalent, although sometimes hidden, world of faith, remind us that

we live in a world where fanatics strap on suicide belts and blow themselves to smithereens in the name of God.¹⁵

Our centers of higher education can invite Lasallians to strap on backpacks and joyfully serve Syrian refugees in the name of God at our "Fratelli Project" in Lebanon or teach children in the name of God in South Sudan.

A conscious and pervasive awareness of God's presence in Lasallian universities creates oases of hope, sites of enjoyment, environments of academic success, and spaces of creativity. An extraordinary example of this is found at Bethlehem University in Palestine. The tangible sense of God's presence felt on the campus in Bethlehem springs from our conviction that all persons – no exceptions – are made in the image and likeness of God. This fundamental Christian belief calls us to reflection and action. It is indeed sobering to recall that both those we like and those we despise, for whatever reason, are inherently equal.

As we reflect on our Lasallian Catholic identity – that which unites us in Araneta, Angers, Arequipa, and throughout our entire global network – it

will not do to spend energy on what is peripheral and unessential, as if it were high summer. To survive, people of faith need to return to the center, to the inmost core that alone can nourish and warm the heart in winter. In this situation there is only one big issue, and that is the question of God.¹⁶

Our shared assurance that we encounter God in all whom we meet, both those next to us and those who come to us virtually, has a determinative effect on the way Lasallians relate, teach, learn, research, and administer. The deeply held conviction that each and every person is created in the image and likeness of God is at the heart of Catholic anthropology and is, therefore, an essential mark of Lasallian education.

Referring to new modes of virtual presence as a means of personal encounter, I note that

perhaps the most positive educational implication of all of this, for the Catholic educator, is the capacity of the new digital media to create new communities by responding to the human need for relationship and participation.¹⁷

This was brought home to me recently when nine young people – religious, lay women and men – addressed the Union of Superiors General in Rome. One panelist noted:

I have found that some of the quiet [students] in class would actually respond well online. Social media can give space to people who might be introverted and feel too much pressure in class . . . What used to be called a teacher-student relationship inside and outside the classroom has evolved into an online and offline mode of connection with the students.¹⁸

It is because of our belief that all are welcome in Lasallian universities and centers of tertiary education. Christians, Orthodox, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Animists, agnostics, atheists, and the simply indifferent are invited to reflect with us on the ultimate meaning of life and engage in our search for truth.

Experiencing others as mediators of God’s presence influences the way we treat people and, as a consequence, determines strategies to promote the fullness of life for everyone. In this regard, the perspective of women must be taken into account and highlighted. This is important not only because the majority of our students are women, but also because women by nature are endowed by God to be covenanted with life, bearers and fosterers of life.¹⁹

The perspective of the poor, the view from the other side, must also be considered when we question criteria for admissions, financial policies, and academic guidelines. This is a *sine qua non* of Jesus’ Project for the Reign of God and an integral component of being Lasallian. In responding to a young man asking why the poor across the river can’t lift themselves up as his family had done, he was answered in this way:

Which side of the river are you standing on as you ask your questions? Can you see that there are just as many unanswerable questions that you can ask from the other side of the river? Mind you, there are very different questions. They are the questions which can help us to transform our social reality and empower those on the other side of the river.²⁰

Community

Our deeply held beliefs inspire us to act. In our Lasallian context, this means that we proactively and explicitly create educational “communities” characterized by inclusivity, respect, dialogue, and accompaniment. We speak about “both of us” and “all of us together.” We put the other, especially those most in need, in the spotlight. Think for a moment about how this colors the teaching / learning dynamic. Consider how this influences our research goals.

A practical result of our Catholic and Lasallian identity should produce an experience of concordance. With “one heart, one commitment and one life” – dedicated to our mission of human and Christian education – we work for the wellbeing of our students and colleagues and we strive to make the “common good” indeed “common” and not just a benefit for some.

In the Lasallian educational community, there should be no “voiceless” members. Students, support staff, gardeners, janitors, cooks, administrators, professors, and governors all contribute to the symphony. We recognize that

Humanity's song is not played by a single flute or violin but one played by an orchestra with the combined chords of all the peoples of the world.²¹

Our educational programs contribute to the integral formation of each person and their relationship to others.

One's identity is not a solitary possession, discovered through mental introversion, through disengagement from the webs of relationships, me thinking about myself. It is given by membership of one's community – the family, the clan, the tribe or the nation.²²

This insight from African cultures invites us to see that membership in a Lasallian university community also contributes to one's identity, sense of worth, happiness, and interrelatedness with all of humanity.

Our conscious awareness of the presence of God and our appreciation of every person's inherent dignity imbues us with an attitude of solidarity and impels us to practical actions that contribute to the common good.

We are disciples of Jesus Christ and John Baptist de La Salle, two attractive and provocative personalities who move us to procure the wellbeing of all those entrusted to our care. Jesus, with his Project for the Reign of God, and John Baptist de La Salle, with the introduction of the Project into the world of education, were men moved to concrete and practical actions to benefit others and to put them on center stage. Their activity was preferentially (not exclusively) directed to the poor.

The Risen Christ

. . . proclaims the victory of life over death and of God's justice over our injustice, victory over all that oppresses and kills the human body and the human spirit. The Risen Christ puts newness and meaning where we put destruction, and brings life wherever we generate death and every form of death: the violent death of war, the slow martyrdom of the marginalized, the relentless genocide of peoples and ethnic groups, the inexorable annihilation that is the result of hunger and destitution, the destructive humiliation of torture, and the systematic violation of nature.²³

On that first Easter Sunday, the

proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled away-stone, but a carried-away church.²⁴

Live Jesus in our hearts is the familiar Lasallian prayer heard daily around the globe. That conviction called Saint La Salle; and it calls us to service, the third touchstone.

Service

John Baptist de La Salle, deeply moved by his relationship with Jesus Christ and the human and spiritual distress of the children of artisans and of the poor, made a lifelong commitment to God to provide these children with a human and Christian education. He reformed education to make it accessible to the poor, and to offer it to all as a sign of the Reign of God.²⁵

Inspired by Jesus and John Baptist de La Salle, the third touchstone of contemporary Catholic and Lasallian education is service intended to alleviate the anxieties and assure the basic necessities of the poor and marginalized. The worldwide Lasallian “Days of Peace,” for example, unite all of us through concrete actions of solidarity with vulnerable and socio-politically voiceless people.

Lasallian professors are united in their desire to develop curricula that awaken students to the root causes of social inequality. Campus ministers provide opportunities for members of the community to meet poor people and experience their plight. Researchers seek to discover concrete ways to revolutionize current socio-economic realities and to effectively care for the environment so that all have the opportunity to live life to the fullest.

Lasallian universities and centers of tertiary education must be united in efforts to ensure that vulnerable groups such as the economically poor, the academically challenged, migrants, refugees, and indigenous peoples are invited to full membership in our schools and provided with skills that will enable them to be full participants in our quest for a more merciful and compassionate world. Lasallian communities of higher education invite young people to “enter to learn” and expect that they “leave to serve” the common good.

Recognition of Jesus Christ as the reason for the very being of our educational communities and our shared conscious awareness of the presence of God instills in us a heartfelt appreciation of the innate dignity of every human person. Consequently, we create welcoming and inclusive communities where all have a voice. The hope-inspiring mystery of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the witness of John Baptist de La Salle inspire us to respond concretely to the basic necessities of the poor.

With Christian anthropology and Lasallian insights at the heart of our teaching and research, we come together as academic communities to seek wisdom, to discover truth, and to contribute to the common good.

Sharing Catholic and Lasallian identity transcends borders, keeps us focused, and prevents drifting from our common mission of human and Christian education. It is of the utmost importance that we frequently return to those who inspire and motivate us: Jesus Christ and John Baptist de La Salle.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I recall your five-year collaborative research plan that concludes this year. In 2013, when you launched it, you stated:

[P]roceeding from a deeply Lasallian perspective and as an expression of solidarity with the world and the societies it serves, [you] resolved to promote the alignment of some of the university-based research spread all over the world. In full cognizance of the fact that Lasallian researchers in the world can achieve significantly more by working together and by association, IALU strategically pursues research themes that directly address societal issues and needs. Each of these themes has the “human person” at its core, and society’s poor as the focus.²⁶

The three research themes identified four basic societal needs: food, nutrition and health, sustainability and the environment. Regarding your next plan, allow me to offer a few suggestions.

In my last talk with you,²⁷ I highlighted the importance of networking and spoke of four Lasallian networks. Since then, Institute networking has gone beyond the Lasallian world. The “Fratelli Project” for Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Lebanon, in collaboration with the Marist Brothers, is the most obvious example. Additionally, a new community of Marist Brothers and De La Salle Christian Brothers and Partners has been formed in Spain; and a new collaborative mission is underway in the Amazon region of South America. These efforts give credence to the words of business consultant Margaret J. Wheatley:

. . . the time I formerly spent on detailed planning and analysis I now use to look at the structures that might facilitate relationships. I have come to expect that something useful occurs if I link up people, units, or tasks, even though I cannot determine precise outcomes.²⁸

Collaboration with other like-minded congregations, with NGOs, and with the Institute’s Secretariat for Solidarity and Development increases our impact. We have increased the Secretariat’s personnel and created a development fund. Since 2014 the fund has increased our resources by 300%, enabling us to launch fifty new global initiatives. I encourage you to contact the Secretariat; they would welcome a conversation with you.

I have described three touchstones that must be at the core of the Lasallian mission. IALU could research and develop benchmarks to assess the effectiveness of these touchstones since they must be integrated into Lasallian pedagogy for the twenty-first century. I recently had the opportunity to observe three new pedagogical initiatives in Spain, Belgium, and Austria. I am confident that more initiatives are underway in other Districts. All of us would benefit from collaborative research projects between our universities and the Districts.

Finally, I bring your attention to “2019: Year of Lasallian Vocations.” This gives us an opportunity to encourage young men to consider becoming Brothers and to invite our Partners to

deepen their understanding of our Catholic and Lasallian identity and their own vocations. We can also use the occasion to remind our Christian colleagues that

Catholic education is a vector of evangelization by means of its mission to offer a worthwhile and broad educational experience to all, regardless of faith tradition.²⁹

UNESCO's description of the five main factors influencing tertiary education calls all Lasallian communities to reflection, conversation, and strategic planning. Our shared Catholic and Lasallian identity will significantly nuance and enrich our local strategic responses to the impact of the five factors.

Thank you.

Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered 19 June 2018 at Encuentro XII, a gathering of the presidents / rectors of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU) that was held at Universidad La Salle in Mexico City, Mexico.

2. Brother Robert Schieler, FSC, was elected Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools at the 45th General Chapter in 2014. He earned a doctorate in educational administration at the University of Pennsylvania.

3. The International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU) was founded in Rome, Italy in 1998.

4. While LUCE is obviously the acronym for Lasallian Universities Center for Education, it is also an Italian word meaning "light." The LUCE program for university students is located at the Generalate for the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Rome, Italy.

5. Cf. *Final Document from the Pre-Synodal Meeting* (Rome, 2018). [www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/news/final-document-from-the-pre-synodal-meeting.html].

6. Mattia Caniglia, "The Challenges of Higher Education in the 21st Century," *BullsEye Magazine*, Number 69 (7 October 2017). [<http://www.bullseye-magazine.eu/issues/>].

7. Gerald Grace. *Faith, Mission and Challenge in Catholic Education* (New York: Routledge, 2016), page 207.

8. Frank Brennan SJ, *University as an Agent of Transformation* (Eureka Street).

9. Marilynne Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here? Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), pages 20-21.

10. Cf. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education*, Volume 8, Issue 1, (2017), pages 5-12.
11. Brother Luke Salm, FSC, “Is the Lasallian University an Oxymoron?” Presentation at Christian Brothers University in Memphis on 17 March 1998. [Cf. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education*, Volume 2, Issue 2 (2011), pages 69-78].
12. Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ, “God’s Grandeur.” [<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/Poems/44395/gods-grandeur>].
13. Pope Francis. [https://w2.vatican.va/.../francesco/.../homilies/.../papa-francesco_20130319_omelia-ini].
14. John Philip Newell, “Foreward” in *Celtic Christian Spirituality: Essential Writings Annotated and Explained* by Mary C. Earle (Skylight Paths, 2015), page ix.
15. John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God Is Back* (Penguin, 2009), page 193.
16. Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God* (Continuum, 2007), page 29.
17. Ronnie Convery, Leonardo Franchi, and Raymond McCluskey, *Reclaiming the Piazza* (Gracewing, 2014), page 63.
18. Brother Aikee Esmeli, FSC, “Testimony” (Rome, Italy: Assembly of the Union of Superiors General), 24 May 2018.
19. Teresa Okure in *The Strength of Her Witness*, edited by Elizabeth Johnson CSJ (Orbis, 2016), page 9.
20. Frank Brennan SJ, *University as an Agent of Transformation* (Eureka Street). [<https://www.eurekastreet.com.aspz?aeid=35628>].
21. Margaret Scott, *The Eucharist and Social Justice* (Paulist, 2009), page 9.
22. Timothy Radcliffe OP, *What Is the Point of Being a Christian?* (Burns & Oates, 2005), page 135.
23. Margaret Scott, pages 82-83.
24. Clarence Jordan, *The Substance of Faith: and Other Cotton Patch Sermons* (2005) as quoted in *Give Us This Day* (April 2018), page 165.
25. Cf. *The Rule* (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2015), article 1.

26. Cf. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education*, Volume 7, Issue 2 (2016), page 4.
27. Cf. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education*, Volume 6, Issue 2 (2015), pages 5-17.
28. In Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Religious Life in the 21st Century: The Prospect of Refounding* (New York: Orbis Books, 2016), page 22.
29. Convery, Franchi, and McCluskey, page 99.