
Promoting Lasallian Higher Education through Shared Mission

John Johnston, FSC²

Saint Mary's College of California has been for many years a veritable "center" of activity for the Lasallian mission, not only of the District of San Francisco, but also of the United States / Toronto Region and of the entire Lasallian world. Each time I visit Saint Mary's College, I experience vitality and a spirit of communion among the teachers, staff members, and students, as well as among the board members, benefactors, and friends. Furthermore, I marvel at the beautiful campus and at the steady growth and improvement of the physical facilities. I have the impression that you, members of the Saint Mary's College family, are striving to be a community of persons committed to the never-ending process of creating and re-creating an institution of higher education that is of great quality and genuinely Catholic. I also think that you are fostering the realization of the special traits that have characterized Lasallian education for more than 300 years.

Brother Craig³ has asked me to address the theme: Promoting Lasallian Higher Education through Shared Mission. In other words, he is asking me to talk about my hope for Lasallian education. Commenting on my vision, author James Burtchaell writes, "the hope of this otherwise very sober man might seem at best visionary, and at worst illusory."⁴ My dictionary says that a "visionary" is either a person of unusual foresight or a dreamer given to impractical ideas. You can decide which definition is more appropriate. Burtchaell himself finds my "hope" solidly grounded in the Second Vatican Council, but, of course, difficult to realize. I am an idealist and never apologize for it. But I am not an expert on Catholic higher education in the United States today. The pertinent issues are many and highly complex. What I can do is offer for your consideration some reflections from the perspective of Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, drawing upon the extraordinary rich international experience I have had during the past twenty-three years.

The Lasallian Mission Today

We have to situate our colleges and universities within the Lasallian mission of human and Christian education in general.⁵ In more than eighty countries of the world, we are striving to challenge and help young people and adults to develop their God-given capacities as human persons and to learn to live as sons and daughters of God, as brothers and sisters among themselves, and as brothers and sisters to others.

We have some 800,000 students in more than 900 educational institutions: preschool, elementary, middle, secondary, technical, engineering, agricultural, teacher training, and university. We have programs for the illiterate, migrants, itinerants, physically and mentally

disabled, youth with learning impediments, and youngsters with behavioral problems. Pastoral centers are offering a variety of religious and apostolic activities.

Among the 800,000 students are infants, children, adolescents, young adults, adults, and veteran adults. They represent a striking variety of cultures, races, ethnic heritages, and languages. They are not only Catholic, but also Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Shintoist, Confucianist, members of traditional religions, and of no religious faith.⁶ Some countries in which we serve are well developed or moderately developed economically, while others are extremely poor. Most of them enjoy relative peace; but division, violence, and war ravage too many. Political realities range from highly supportive of our educational mission to totally opposed to it.

From “Brothers’ Schools” to “Lasallian Schools”

More than 67,000 administrators and teachers are engaged in this worldwide mission. Ninety-two percent of them are lay men and women. Two percent are priests or religious of other Congregations. Six percent are Brothers of the Christian Schools. These statistics express graphically the extraordinary change we have experienced during the past several decades in the manner of living the Lasallian mission.

For some 250 years, the Brothers of the Christian Schools were the “agents” of the Lasallian mission, aided by a small number of lay men (literally). I describe the operative model of that long period by an inverted triangle, the large number of Brothers at the inverted base and the small number of lay men at the inverted pinnacle. These lay teachers helped the Brothers conduct “Brothers’ schools.” During the post-Second Vatican Council years, however, the number of Brothers markedly decreased while the number of lay men and lay women notably increased. Moreover, the Church – and the Institute – which previously had “tolerated” lay personnel as “a necessary evil, officially recognized that God calls laity to participate in all aspects of Church life.

For these reasons, the triangle began to change shape and gradually came to resemble a normal, rather than inverted, triangle. Moreover, it quickly became apparent that this “Brothers’ school” model no longer made sense. During several years of confusion and frustration, a new model evolved. Today we accept it officially and call it the “Lasallian school” model. The change of language is important. A “Lasallian school” is a school that is “animated,” not by the Brothers with lay men and women in a supportive role, but by the entire educative community, in which the Brothers participate. I describe this model not by a triangle, but by a circle that is parallel to the ground.

Today we popularly call the Lasallian mission a “shared” mission. We refer to participants as members of the “Lasallian Family.” They are not only administrators and teachers – whether Brothers, lay men and women, priests, other religious – but also all the other persons associated with us: parents, former students, board members, school staff personnel, benefactors, friends, and, of course, the students themselves.

Higher Education in the Lasallian World

Among the 900+ institutions in the Lasallian world are more than seventy devoted to higher education of one kind or another. Categorizing them is not easy. Some are readily classified as universities or university colleges. Others are tertiary level centers – often affiliated with universities – which offer programs, diplomas, and degrees in theology, religious education, pedagogy, engineering, agriculture, technical training, and other fields.

Some of these institutions have a long history. Others are of more recent origin. I think it is safe to say that all of them came into existence because concrete needs existed and because the Church and / or parents wanted Catholic institutions to meet those needs. During the second half of the last century,⁷ in the United States for example, when Catholics suffered from mistrust, fear, and discrimination, parents, many of them immigrants, many of them poor or lower middle class, wanted Catholic education at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels to help young people grow and persevere in their faith and receive the training they needed to compete successfully in United States society. In several countries today, for a variety of motives, parents, as well as students themselves, are asking that we extend our services to the tertiary level.

Nevertheless, although higher education has a long history in the Institute, some Brothers have questioned – and question today – our involvement at this level. They have reservations about Lasallian commitments in higher education because they say – probably correctly – that John Baptist de La Salle never envisaged higher education as an apostolate of the Institute he founded. Other Brothers, more open to the dynamic rather than static interpretation of the Founder, question the apostolate of higher education on the grounds of its effectiveness. They hold that the difference between Catholic institutions of higher education and those of the state is neither substantial nor significant and that we could use our resources of personnel and finance more effectively at the secondary or primary level. Still other Brothers question our involvement in higher education, particularly in universities and university colleges, claiming that we are educating the intellectual and financially elite. They say that this service may be appropriate for other religious Institutes, but not for an Institute founded to respond primarily to the needs that the economically poor have for Christian education.

I think that we have to take such objections seriously. I personally agree that if our institutions do not manifest characteristics that distinguish them from state or non-sectarian institutions, they are not worth the trouble.

The questioning of Church involvement in higher education is not limited to our own Institute. In his presentation ten years ago to more than 700 Jesuits and lay colleagues at the bicentennial celebration of Jesuit education in the United States, Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, Superior General,⁸ acknowledged that many Jesuits, because of the General Congregation decision that the service of faith and the promotion of justice must be a priority in every Jesuit apostolate, were questioning the commitment of the Order to higher education. Kolvenbach insisted, however, that far from calling into question the value of education as such, the General Congregation decree,

in spite of erroneous interpretations, actually asked that the educational apostolate be intensified! The decree describes the power that the educational apostolate has to contribute to the formation of “multipliers” for the process of educating the world itself.⁹

I agree with Father Kolvenbach’s reasoning. The Church should and must continue to accord a high priority to the apostolate of higher education. More to the point, I think that where needs exist and circumstances permit, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools should participate actively in this important dimension of the mission of the Church. Young adults are searching for answers to profound religious, moral, and philosophical questions. They are searching for meaning. They need highly competent teachers who will meet them not only as mentors, but also as brothers and sisters, men and women who will take them seriously, walk with them, listen to them, and share with them the meaning they personally have found in their own lives.

Characteristics of Lasallian Education

De La Salle did not leave us a definitive list of the characteristics he considered essential for the Christian schools he founded. Consequently, published lists of characteristics can vary in content, order, and number. I have a list of seven¹⁰ and, for practical purposes, usually place them in a certain order. Still there is nothing absolute about either the list or the order. In practice the characteristics are interrelated. It is the integration of these characteristics that gives the school its “Lasallian” identity.

A school is Lasallian when there is a profound reverence for each student as a unique person, when there is a spirit of community, when the school offers “quality education,” when it really merits the adjective “Christian,” when it promotes solidarity with the poor and the quest for justice and peace, when its administrators and teachers have made their own the characteristics of Lasallian education, and when the school community is formed in reference to the story of John Baptist de La Salle. For the sake of clarity, let me state that it was not for ecumenical reasons that De La Salle used the expression “Christian.” He identified the term “Christian” with “Catholic.”

In light of these characteristics, I propose four statements of principle.

1. Our identity must be unambiguously Catholic.

I must confess that when I use the adjective “Lasallian,” I frequently have the impression that John Baptist de La Salle is very irritated with me. He is probably saying this morning: “I founded Christian schools and my successor keeps talking about Lasallian schools.” The point I am making is important. A Lasallian school – whatever its nature or level – is essentially a Catholic school. There is no question of Catholic schools here and Lasallian schools there. Burtchaell misunderstood me when he says that I have opted for Catholic rather than Lasallian schools.¹¹ No. The Lasallian school is a Catholic school in which a certain number of clearly defined characteristics are in evidence.

I am insisting on this point because it happens that many institutions of higher learning profess “fidelity” to the traditions of particular religious Congregations, while minimizing or hiding, if not denying, the Catholic character. We need to be clear. An institution can legitimately call itself Lasallian only if it is unambiguously Catholic.

George Bernard Shaw¹² claimed that a Catholic university was a contradiction in terms, a position frequently held today and particularly pertinent to concerns such as academic freedom, outside ecclesiastical control, and federal funding. Yet there is nothing new about this position. A viewpoint that is perhaps more influential today is what Yale University professor Stephen Carter calls the contemporary trivialization of religion.¹³ People treat religion as an unimportant facet of the human personality, one that should be kept “private.” They presume religious convictions to be irrational, arbitrary, and irrelevant. They expect religious people to “bracket” their religious convictions from the rest of their personality.

Whatever the reasons, it is certain that some Catholic institutions have appeared defensive and reluctant to face squarely the question of their Catholic identity. Although finding a way to implement in the United States society some of the norms proposed in the papal document *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*¹⁴ is not an easy task, the document has helped to bring the question of identity “out of the closet” and is serving as a catalyst for very pertinent and productive reflections.

Catholic identity involves more than courses in theology and religious education, more also than campus ministry, prayer, worship, and community service. The Catholic dimension must permeate and shape every aspect of the life of the schools: tone, atmosphere, spirit, signs, symbols, relationships, curriculum, requirements, research, policies, regulations, hiring, government. Then board members, administrators, teachers, staff, personnel, students, parents, former students, and benefactors take Catholic identity seriously. They know, understand, accept, and internalize the mission statement of their institutions. Of course, many members of Lasallian institutions are not Catholic and are often not Christian. Nevertheless, we expect everyone to accept the Catholic philosophy of our institutions and, at the very least, refrain from being obstacles to its implementation.

I have read with great appreciation your mission statement. With total clarity you declare that

the goal of Saint Mary's College is to be an outstanding Catholic institution of higher education . . . In seeking to meet its goals the College draws strength from three great traditions – Catholic, Liberal Arts, and Lasallian . . . The College seeks to maintain its Roman Catholic character, striving to create an environment where Christian concerns occupy a central place in learning and community life, and where questions of faith and practice inform all aspects of the educational process . . . In sustaining its Lasallian heritage, the College affirms both the Word and the World.

I congratulate you very sincerely on that excellent statement, only a part of which I have quoted. I trust that you are working systematically and effectively at making it known, understood, accepted, and internalized.

2. Structures and formation programs must be in place to assure the future of our institutions as Catholic in the Lasallian tradition.

In *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches*, James Burtchaell describes, in great detail, the evolution from Christian to secular of many United States institutions of higher education. My reading of his depiction of Saint Mary's College of California, far from discouraging me, has helped me appreciate your long struggle with the implications of "Catholic, Liberal Arts, and Lasallian." I am proud that, over the years, Saint Mary's College has confronted and grappled with the inevitable but creative tensions that the search for authentic identity generates. Father Edward Malloy, CSC, president of the University of Notre Dame, has warned that there is "no guarantee at all" that within the next five decades most Catholic institutions will not

shuck off their religious identity as they become more academically sophisticated. If it happens, it will not be by way of a vote, but simply by default.¹⁵

That default would be the result, obviously, of a failure to confront directly and effectively the issues related to Catholic identity, as well as a failure to maintain the constant vigilance required. My reading of your history convinces me that Saint Mary's College has tried to face directly and effectively its identity as Catholic and as Lasallian.

Nevertheless, these comments provoke an obvious question concerning Catholic colleges and universities in the future. Who will assure that they do not join the already long list of at-one-time-religious universities and colleges? In the past, the answer to the question was obvious: the religious Congregations that founded the schools and have guided them to the present day. That answer, however, is not adequate today.

It is a fact that religious and clergy in both classrooms and administrative offices are steadily decreasing numerically and that those who are there are not getting any younger! Nevertheless, contrary to what Burtchaell says, I have never acknowledged that our Institute "seems headed toward extinction."¹⁶ We Brothers continue to believe in our vocation and are praying and

working for an increased number of new candidates. Still, failing to approach the problem of the future realistically and effectively would be irresponsible on our part.

We have educational institutions at all levels today that have only a few Brothers or no Brothers at all. Yet the institutions are committed to remaining Lasallian, with or without Brothers, and are totally integrated within the apostolic activities of the District.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the long range success of such arrangements is not evident. To achieve success, the District, board, and faculty must “will” it. Relationships between the Districts and boards must be clear and juridically established. Statutes must safeguard the Catholic and Lasallian identity and assure that hiring policies take it into consideration. In-service programs to promote knowledge of the tradition and commitment to it must be in place and taken seriously.

3. Our colleges must respond effectively to young people today as they search for meaning and community.

In one of your promotional brochures, a professor remarks that the love the faculty manifests for the students on this campus is “unbelievable.” He says that “caring for” and “nurturing” the students as “total persons” is what Saint Mary’s is all about. “You get caught up in this spirit,” he says, “it affects everyone.” Another professor states, “real learning takes place here in an air of intimacy.”

Whenever I list the characteristics that John Baptist de La Salle considered essential in the schools that he established, I begin with “reverence for each student as a unique person.” This profound respect that communicates to each person that he or she is “important” is a manifestation of the brotherly and sisterly love that should characterize all members of the college community. To know that this loving concern is evident at Saint Mary’s College is, therefore, encouraging. You are realizing to an appreciable extent a genuine spirit of communion. Personal attention takes many forms, one of which is that of “walking side by side” with young people as they wrestle with questions that are in reality “religious” questions, touching as they do the very meaning of being human.

Your entire curriculum is a response to this search for meaning. Nevertheless, I want to mention explicitly a few specific programs. You require all to take a Collegiate Seminar. This seminar, together with the Integral Program of Liberal Arts, is a special feature of this institution and of your particular tradition. You say in your catalogue that, “as a Catholic, Liberal Arts, and Lasallian institution, Saint Mary’s seeks to be a place where the deepest questions of the human heart are asked and pursued.” Students take at least two courses in theology or religious education, and majors and minors are available for those who choose them. The college welcomes students of other religious commitments, or none, and invites them not only to share in the Catholic heritage, but also to contribute from their own. You welcome all into your courses, “which seek not to indoctrinate but to explore” the answers our own tradition has provided and “to pursue in a spirit of dialogue” answers offered by other traditions. What John Paul II has written about the Church in general is pertinent to your reality.

The Church, precisely because it is Catholic, is open to dialogue with all other Christians, with the followers of non-Christian religions, and with all people of good will.¹⁸

It is clear, therefore, that Saint Mary's is striving to promote a vital and mutual relationship between higher education and faith and to create an environment in which young people can live and grow in their religious commitment. Your campus ministry program fosters the growth of the Saint Mary's family as a "faith community." With its help the college offers a comprehensive, varied, and vibrant liturgical and pastoral service.

I commend you very sincerely on these programs and express the hope that significant numbers of students participate actively in prayer and apostolic groups and volunteer for service at home and abroad. Over the years, I have met a number of volunteers from Saint Mary's. I want to encourage you to do all you can to promote the volunteer movement. I have listened with great interest to the testimonials of volunteers and former volunteers. They speak of the tremendous impact the experience has had upon them, almost inevitably asserting that they have received far more than they have given. Besides increasing their knowledge of and sensitivity toward the poor, some volunteers relate that they have "found themselves." Others say explicitly that they have discovered or rediscovered Jesus Christ and their religious faith.

4. Our schools must manifest and foster solidarity with the poor and the quest for justice and peace.

Earlier in this address I asserted that solidarity with the poor is integral to Lasallian education. We can manifest it in many ways. Our centers of higher education must try to help students know and understand the world, recognize their own prejudices, become familiar with the major issues of contemporary society, know the position of the Church on social issues, and have structured opportunities for volunteer service.

While advocating that we develop programs and activities that are comprehensive in nature, I want to express my personal conviction that our Lasallian institutions throughout the world should make a major commitment to a particular issue, an issue that involves injustice of scandalous proportions, an issue to which our heritage invites us. I am proposing that we Lasallians dedicate ourselves to the defense and promotion of the rights of children. That is the theme of my Pastoral Letter to the Brothers for 1999.¹⁹

Our Lasallian schools at every level should make a concerted effort to struggle against the poverty and injustice to which millions of children are subject today. That struggle would involve confronting such specific issues as neglect and abandonment, discrimination against girls, homelessness, living in the streets, physical abuse, loneliness, despair, suicide, absence of effective schools, illiteracy, child labor, hunger, physical and emotional sickness, sexual abuse, commercial sexual exploitation for pornography and prostitution, war, children in military service, land mines, refugees, crime, gangs, arms trafficking, drugs, alcohol, drug trafficking . . . The list is, sadly, not exhaustive.

I think those of us engaged in Lasallian higher education can make significant contributions to the defense of children. We can: organize conferences and seminars on the topic of exploited children; participate as advocates at local, state, national, and international levels; recognize, by honorary doctorates or other awards, persons who are promoting the rights of children; make

certain that students in our teacher-training programs know well the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,²⁰ the Convention on the Rights of the Child,²¹ and their implications for educators.

Afterword

Members of the Lasallian community of Saint Mary's College of California, I thank you for the opportunity to offer these reflections on Promoting Lasallian Education through Shared Mission.

To conclude, I make my own the remarks of Father Kolvenbach's to the participants of the 1989 Jesuit bicentennial celebration.

The talent and dedication assembled in this room is potentially a massive resource for building the Kingdom of God on earth ... You are in a position to form the minds and hearts of people who will mold the beginning of the [new] millennium. What a marvelous opportunity.²²

Endnotes

1. This address was delivered at Saint Mary's College of California on 15 February 1999. In a "collection" of the author's writings and memorabilia in the archives of Manhattan College in New York City can be found two slightly different versions of this same address. An earlier version of the address, which was not delivered at the College on 12 March 1997 because of the author's hospitalization for surgery, is extant; and a shorter adaptation of the address, which was delivered a week earlier on 8 February 1999 at the College of Santa Fe in New Mexico (1874-2009), is also extant.

2. Brother John Johnston, FSC (1933-2007), served as both Vicar General (1976-1986) and Superior General (1986-2000) of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

3. Brother Craig Franz, FSC, served from 1997 to 2005 as the 27th president of Saint Mary's College of California.

4. James T. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), page 692.

5. Cf. *The Lasallian Mission of Human and Christian Education: A Shared Mission* by Brothers of the Christian Schools (Rome, 1997).

6. Cf. "Can a University with a Multi-Faith Educational Community Be Catholic and Lasallian?" by John Johnston in *Reflections on Lasallian Higher Education* (Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 2006), pages 81-95.

7. The second half of the nineteenth century.

8. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach (1928-2016) served from 1983 to 2008 as the 29th Superior General of the Society of Jesus.

9. These remarks were made at Assembly 1989, which was a meeting of more than 700 Jesuits and lay collaborators in higher education held at Georgetown University to celebrate its bicentenary as the first Jesuit school in the United States of America.

10. Cf. “Seven Hallmarks of a Lasallian School” by John Johnston in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 2, no. 2 (2011).

11. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light*, page 693.

12. George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was an Irish playwright, critic, and political activist.

13. Cf. *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* by Stephen L. Carter (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

14. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* [Apostolic Constitution on the Catholic University] by John Paul II (Vatican, 1990).

15. Cf. “Just Say No” by Peter Steinfels in *Boston College Magazine* (Fall 1996).

16. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light*, page 692.

17. For the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the District is a major geographical and pastoral unit of government. However, “as the ordinary expression of communion existing among its communities and the Brothers who compose it, it is more than a structure of government. It manifests and fosters the fraternal union . . .” *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), article 124.

18. Cf. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* by John Paul II (New York: Knopf, 1995), page 141.

19. Cf. *Pastoral Letter: The Defense of Children, the Reign of God, and the Lasallian Mission* by John Johnston (Rome, 1999).

20. Cf. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948).

21. Cf. *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989).

22. From the remarks made at *Assembly 1989* at Georgetown University to celebrate its bicentenary as the first Jesuit school in the United States of America.