
The Spirit of Faith as Foundational to Lasallian Education

Gery Short, AFSC²

It is an honor to be the first lay Lasallian to receive this award and to be in the company of many of the greats from this Region: Brothers Luke Salm, Miguel Campos, Fred Mueller, Bill Mann, Jim Gaffney, Larry Goyette, and Father Kenan Osborne. It is like being inducted into the Lasallian Region of North America Hall of Fame.

Being among these greats and being honored with this award, I feel a special responsibility to say something challenging and hopefully inspiring to you.

I want to pose a critical question for us to address as we look to the future. I want to propose a question that will greatly impact the future of Lasallian education and those coming up behind us.

From the introduction, you know that I have had significant opportunities over the past 30 years to participate and lead at the District, Regional, and International levels.

As a result of my vantage point, I followed and at times led in addressing certain critical questions facing the District, Region, and even the International Institute.

I want to offer some examples of these critical questions. In the 1980s when Superior General John Johnston declared that we needed to describe our schools as Lasallian schools rather than Brothers' schools, it raised the question among many – many in the trenches – “what is a Lasallian school?”

It became one of my important tasks to figure a way to help define what we mean by Lasallian education and communicate these characteristics. Safe to say, even though the work continues, the definition and characteristics of a Lasallian school, university, or program are pretty well known today.

In the 1990s, an issue or critical question we had to face was how do we share this mission with the growing number of lay men and women in our schools, universities, and programs. To offer some context, in 1990 essentially every first line administrator in the Region was a Brother.

Today, for example, less than 30 years later, of the 40 presidents and principals in the District of San Francisco New Orleans, there are 3 Brothers, 3 of 40 chief administrators. Much has been accomplished over the past 25-30 years to address the issue and challenges of shared mission. New formation programs, new governing structures like boards, lay leadership at all levels are now commonplace.

In the late 1990s and into the first decade of this millennium, one of the critical questions we faced was addressing the question of service to or with the poor. It appeared, more and more, that most of our educational programs were not accessible to the poor.

The focused question became, “If serving the poor is at the heart of our mission, then what do we need to do? How do we authentically serve the poor?” This led to great efforts to provide tuition assistance, set up programs in our existing works, and the opening of well over a dozen new schools and programs across the Region exclusively for the poor.

Therefore, as Lasallian educators, we have a history of posing critical questions, raising significant concerns, and addressing them internationally, as a Region, District, and locally.

I might add here a couple of observations. First, in addressing these critical questions, it has always been a collective effort. Individuals made contributions. I know I had some ideas. Others had ideas about what we needed to do, but the answers always came from a collective response.

Second, even though there was a focused question for a period of time, the responses to these challenges or questions continue. We continue to ask or we should continue to ask, “What do we mean by Lasallian education? How do we advance this shared mission? How do we most authentically serve the poor?” The responses are ongoing.

Now, I want to put a stake in the ground and pass on to you a critical question and challenge for our future that is as significant as any we have had to face over the past 30 years.

So, here is the challenge going forward, the stake in the ground for the future:

We must commit ourselves to firmly establish the spirit of faith as a foundational and effective reality in each and every one of our works.

We must ask, “How do we make prayer and spirituality – the spirit of faith – the core of who we are and what we are about? How do we make prayer and spirituality real for ourselves as educators and for our students in an authentic, understandable, and deeply significant way?”

This challenge is at the heart of the work of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and Lasallian education.

This Institute was founded on prayer, De La Salle’s relationship to God, and his urging to the Brothers to stay grounded in their prayer and trust in God. Prayer and the spirit of faith was as important to De La Salle as the educational mission, the association among the Brothers, the community itself.

For many reasons, this commitment to prayer and spirituality – the spirit of faith – has taken a back seat or has not been as prominent for many Lasallian educators as it has been for De La Salle and the Brothers.

I know it. I lived the challenges of addressing the many tasks and responsibilities in my role, as well as raising a family and all that requires. I watched the Brothers with their daily morning and evening prayer, regular experiences of Eucharist, and wondered, “How can I live up to their example?”

The challenge has become more complicated for our students and fellow educators with the lack of credibility, support, and guidance that many fail to receive from the institutional church today and the growing number of NONES, students, parents, and even fellow educators, who claim no affiliation with a church or religion.

However, I think there are signs of hope. It has been recognized that our students, alumni, and parents are more spiritual today than many think. They are seeking meaning, purpose, and asking deeply spiritual questions. So, I believe we are working from a welcoming place.

In addition, the multi-religious environment in which we live, experiences of diversity, openness, and tolerance of diversity have become almost normative for our students and fellow educators.

I'd like to share another sign of hope, a bit more personal. Some of you may know that I returned a few weeks ago from walking the Camino Francés across Spain,³ 500 miles over 34 days. Recently, I have come to describe the experience as a 34-day retreat, a great deal of time for contemplation, solitude, and reflection.

I was amazed at the expressions of spirituality among many of my fellow pilgrims who, it is fair to say, are not church goers. One such moment was at what is called the iron cross. About 400 miles into the walk there is this 30-foot pole with an iron cross on top of it, situated on a hill. The iron cross is recognized as the location where you call to mind someone or something or leave behind a picture or memento of someone dear to you, often loved ones who have died.

It is a quiet, very reverent place filled with great emotion. We witnessed people weeping as they approached the cross or walked around it. I found myself just hugging this woman who I had met a few days before as she wept.

My partner on the Camino, Pat Rawson, and I sat near the cross for close to an hour, having our own time and observing others. At one point Pat said to me, “This is church.” During the walk, Pat and I had been discussing the disengagement of so many of our friends and family from the church and how best to respond. This is a much longer conversation; but I hope we can embrace our students and fellow educators, and acknowledge their deepest experiences as an important part of this journey.

So, there is the critical question or challenge for you. We know that we cannot claim to be Lasallian educators without a committed and practiced spirit of faith. If we do not live this spirit of faith, our work will become more and more superficial. We will miss the heart of the mission.

I want to emphasize what I said earlier. Our responses must be authentic and meaningful for our students and fellow educators. I have some ideas about this, and I suspect many of you do too.

I hope to come back in ten years and learn how you have taken this challenge to heart and answered this critical question. This is my prayer for you.

Thank you for this honor. Thank you very much.

Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered on November 17, 2018, at the Distinguished Lasallian Awards Banquet on the final evening of the 45th Huether Lasallian Conference that was held in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

2. Gery Short, a long-time member of the leadership team of the District of San Francisco (now San Francisco New Orleans), was honored with the Brother John Johnston, FSC Award in recognition of his significant service to the Lasallian educational mission. He served as a lay consultant to both the 1993 and 2000 General Chapters of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, as a member of the International Council on Association, and as co-chair of the 1st International Mission Assembly of 2006. He was affiliated to the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (AFSC) on September 16, 2017, at Mont La Salle in Napa, California. He earned a master of divinity degree from the Franciscan School of Theology, master of arts degree from the Graduate Theological Union, and master of science degree from Golden State University.

3. Camino Francés, or French Way, “is the most famous of all the Camino de Santiago routes.”