

University Education within the Lasallian Mission

Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC²

Introduction

My presence among you is a sign of the importance that our Institute gives today to higher education and an act of faith with respect to the enormous possibilities of these institutions. The growth of the Lasallian universities in the history of the Institute in practically all regions of the world goes without precedent and is a sign of the times³ that cannot be ignored.

I express my thanks for the invitation to be present at this important meeting of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU) because I believe that this meeting is extremely important for the reflection and projection of a university that can, by adopting common plans of action which will strengthen the worldwide Lasallian university system, respond today to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

I think it important that we start with two questions; and that in the face of the extraordinary growth of higher education in the Institute, especially in the last forty years, we ask ourselves:

1. Can we really confirm that the mission and vision driving our universities in the world responds fully to the Lasallian mission to promote a Christian and human education?⁴
2. What support can these tertiary institutions guarantee within the extensive network of Lasallian educational projects at District, Regional, and Institute level?

I do not intend to give an answer to these questions, but merely to throw out ideas for continued reflection. Therefore, I will look back to the past to point out our initial memory in common which enlightens and prophetically criticizes our present and opens up horizons and utopias for the future.

Our Roots: Aim and Spirit of the Lasallian Mission

I think it important that we look back at our past to decipher what were the motives behind the birth of our Lasallian mission and which continue to enlighten our educational and evangelizing activity. This to me is fundamental because if our universities do not respond to this inspiration it will be difficult to consider them to be Lasallian. The motive behind our origins should continue to enlighten what we do today.

In the words of the Founder, the aim of this Institute is to give a Christian education. And such is the aim of our schools, for children to be morning and evening under the supervision of our teachers who teach them how to live well, instructing them in the mysteries of our sacred

religion, inspiring them with Christian maxims, and in this way giving them the education that they need.⁵ And the Founder added, endeavoring to provide the children of the artisans and the poor with this benefit has been the motive for the institutionalizing of the Christian schools.⁶ The Founder with his wording brings us back to the beginning of our expression of vows: to procure the glory of God.⁷ I think that from this we can see that for the Founder the greatest glory of the *Lord* is in serving the young people who are educated by the Brothers, particularly the poorer ones.

In the same way, we should insist on free education and make it possible for poor people to attend school. The Brothers all over will provide schooling for free, and this is essential for our Institute.⁸ This charity status does not only have economic connotations. It also relates to a spiritual attitude as the ministry of the Brother consists in a gift of kindness from the *Lord*, which should take the form of a charitable and unselfish dedication where children and young people experience the *Lord's* charitable love.

On the other hand, the Founder is worried, as expressed in some of his letters, whether or not things go well for the school.⁹ Charity does not imply a lack of efficiency. On the contrary, the Founder is known for an efficiency which led him to produce revolutionary and bold changes such as the use of the simultaneous method in elementary school, the use of the mother language instead of Latin, a practical pedagogy which prepares one for life, and finally, his overwhelming desire to respond to the needs of the period with a sound pedagogical realism.

Essentially, it is about making salvation available to the young. Therefore, the spirit of faith which brings the Brothers to their evangelical values should take the form of a fervent commitment to save those in their care and educate them compassionately and in a true Christian spirit, that is in accordance with the rules and maxims of the Gospel.¹⁰

I understand that to some people this language may not seem appropriate when we refer to Lasallian higher education centers. Nevertheless, I think that we can discover quite a number of intuitions which can clearly be applied to this type of teaching. Is it not the calling of our higher education centers to provide a Christian education? Should they not have a special vocation for children and young people? Is it not our aim to help others to live in a comprehensive manner? Should helping the poor to live in a dignified way not be of essential concern? Is it not the glory of the *Lord*, and our final purpose,¹¹ to procure the welfare of our brothers and sisters, especially those who most need it? Is not our calling to unify charity status with historical efficiency? Is the Gospel not our source of inspiration to live our educational vocation with a profound faith and fervent commitment and in this way participate in the *Lord's* work, as the Founder liked to say?¹²

However, I feel that there is another Lasallian facet that is particularly apt for our universities. It is a fact that the Founder dedicated more time to the education of teachers than to the direct education of children. In one way, we could say that higher education in the Institute was born with the Founder and his concern for the education of teachers, today a responsibility in the universities and higher education centers in most countries.

The educating of the Brothers themselves as teachers and the education of teachers for the specific field. Both initiatives represent a concrete answer to the educational problems of the time. They express the Founder's undying spiritual attitude and allow room for reality's influence as a theological place in the presence and call of the *Lord*.

The Founder understood quite early on that the spiritual education of the Brothers meant giving attention to their professional education. They would not "announce the Gospel" just because they were *ministers*, but to the extent that they were competent and qualified *ministers*. The Founder is, therefore, concerned with their technical preparation.¹³

The second initiative was to have a Seminary of Teachers for small villages. It would have a concrete educational structure with an internal organization and an educational project. We know that for various reasons, although an innovative experience, this was a failure. In the *Memorandum on the Habit* written in 1689,¹⁴ this innovative experience is described as follows:

In a house separated from the community, known as Seminary, teachers receive their training for the rural schools. Those who are trained there only stay for a few years until they are completely trained in piety as well as in professional skills . . . They are taught to sing, read, and write perfectly. They are provided with accommodation and food, and their laundry is done free of charge. They are afterward posted in a town or small village.¹⁵

These two experiences help us to understand better how De La Salle is always seen as part of a contemplative two-way look at reality. On the one hand, the *Lord's* salvaging plan discovered in his Word and secondly the historical contemplation of the abandonment of the children of the artisans and the poor. Both contemplations lead to the same goal: giving these young people who most need it a chance of salvation. There are three actions: see the reality, enlighten it with the Word of the *Lord*, and commit oneself to take evolutionary action. It seems to me that these three actions should also be present in our work in higher education.

To finish this section, I think it is interesting to remember that our Founder was also a university student. First in Rheims where he obtained the title of *Master of Arts* in 1669 and where he began his theological studies. Then at the Sorbonne in Paris, but he had to return to Rheims for family reasons; and there in 1678, he obtained the degree in theology and *Doctorate in Theology* in 1680. Undoubtedly, his university background was a valuable instrument in carrying out the work of the Christian schools.

To me, the Founder's extraordinarily creative and innovative attitude is paradigmatic. He received a formal medieval education, with a classic curriculum and in Latin, during his university studies. He is successful in the research and creative process with his colleagues in starting a new educational project and is daring enough to invent a new curriculum in the vernacular and to bring education closer to life.

Our Present: University Education in Today's Globalized World

We must situate our Lasallian universities in the context of globalization. Today we are living in an era of globalization. We know that this is an ambiguous affirmation because while it is true

that there has been globalization in the areas of economic organization, social relations, models of life and culture, state and political transformation, this globalization is not so evident in the areas of solidarity, human rights, or knowledge. In the center of this phenomena we should situate the human person, active and passive subject who cannot be sacrificed to any globalizing process.

Globalization is not only a phenomenon for the integration of world markets, but should also favor a learning free from restrictions and borders and should not be one “stream of thought” that sacrifices local values and differences. The fact is our societies are rapidly and more and more converting into multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious societies. We cannot leave out the phenomenon of emigration which is changing the face of society and presents a problem to which we cannot be indifferent and which affects all those involved in the university project in one way or another.

This means that we need to educate in order to transcend our own culture and to be able to place ourselves in front of others’ differences. The challenge facing us is how much are we going to know and how can we apply that knowledge in a world which increasingly makes distinctions between those who know and those who know not, between those who have the possibility to receive education and those who do not, between those who have access to computers and those who do not. It is evident that our universities have an extraordinary importance in this context.

For the first time in our history, our last two General Chapters have clearly and directly called out to our centers of higher education. This call asks us to respond to the problems we are living at world-level today. Indeed, the 42nd General Chapter of 1993 in its recommendation #3.4 invites Lasallian universities and higher education centers to work for the following in accordance with their possibilities:

- the scientific study of the roots of poverty and social injustice as well as in the search for solutions;
- preparing the experts and professionals committed to preserving the ecosystems;
- collaboration with recognized international bodies.¹⁶

Ten years after this petition we could ask ourselves, “What have our universities and higher education centers done in this perspective?”

At the same time, the 43rd General Chapter of 2000 presents us with the following four educational urgent needs and explicitly asks that the Lasallian centers for higher education, taking into account their own aim in the area of research and education, should make their specific contribution to these urgent needs.

Defending the Rights of the Child

Defending children’s rights should be a characteristic of each and every Lasallian. The General Chapter of 2000 invites us to be more conscious of the content of the United Nations *Convention on Children’s Rights*, approved in 1989, to cooperate with organizations involved in promoting those rights and to be attentive in case of a violation of those rights and to alert the authorities in

such a case. There are certain situations to which we cannot be indifferent: child soldiers or war victims, kidnapped children, worker children, child victims of abuse . . . In General Chapter proposal #14, our universities are specifically called upon to commit themselves to a dedication to learning about and the application of children's rights.

Educational Reform

An educational reform is called for which will encourage the sense of community and fraternity, so Lasallian, in the face of individualism and overcrowding; which will involve us in the struggle against poverty; which will promote an education for justice, peace, solidarity, and tolerance; and which finally will make possible the education of all free and just persons. In other words, a complete program for the reform of our centers of higher education is proposed.

Announcing the Faith

The announcement of the faith such that the Good News of Jesus reaches his listeners in a comprehensive language is asserted. The characteristics that the *Rule* of the Brothers gives to catechesis are still valid for all:

lively, centered on the person of the student, in touch with life as it is, based on Scripture and the liturgy, attentive to the teaching of the Church, and concerned with an integral presentation of the Christian message.¹⁷

Ecumenical and Inter-religious Dialogue

Initiating ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue in an ever-increasing multicultural and multi-religious context is proposed. At the end of the month of January and in early February, I visited South East Asia during five weeks. The greatest impression I had was that our centers there have become centers where respect, tolerance, and dialogue are possible as a result of the opening up between cultures and diverse religions. Our universities should be more aware of this new reality.

I think we need to contemplate the reality of our Lasallian universities with respect to these issues and others related to a specific Christian and Lasallian nature. I express my appreciation to Brother José Cervantes, FSC,¹⁸ for his trans-institutional study of Lasallian universities in Mexico, which I believe is a valid sample for the whole ensemble of our centers of higher education.

Some of the results are worth further consideration. The fact that only 35% of students are concerned about poverty, or that 32% about insecurity or 22% about corruption. The fact that only 3% show an interest in politics. And that, on the contrary, being happy in life is the principal aim for 49% and only 5% demonstrate a philanthropic attitude does not mean that we should not continue to question ourselves. If we add to this what Brother José sees as disconcerting, that only 33% declare themselves as practicing their religion, we could ask ourselves just how much is the Lasallian way being transmitted and lived.

Nowadays, there is no doubt that it is more important to be able to continue learning than to know a lot; and the best university is the one which gives priority to lifelong learning. It is important that we do not conform to the tendency to reproduce structures. We must look to changing and improving them, especially those structures which guarantee a more just world and a more participatory society. It is not enough to describe events if we do not have the capacity to have some control over them and to put them at the disposal of humanity.

Our Future: Horizons and Dreams

Now we need to contemplate how we can orientate our efforts in accordance with the specific nature of the Lasallian mission. Our university praxis should be enlightened by the key elements we have identified in our roots. At the same time, they are imploring us prophetically and demanding that we think about how we can respond with farsightedness and efficiency to today's challenges.

The Aim or Purpose of our Universities' Educational Mission

Philosophy is a paradox which says that the final cause is the first cause because from the beginning the process should be enlightened and, at the same time, this is the aim to which we orient ourselves. This is why I think that what is most important of all is what it is that makes us enthusiastic and identifies us with the educational movement started by our Founder and the first Brothers involved in the initial adventure of our history. A few questions arise.

- Are our universities accessible to young people and adults who most need support in this globalized and destabilized world?
- Are we pleased with the prestige of universities that produce prominent men and women, elitists in society and politics?
- Where do men or women who leave our institutions succeed professionally? Did we help them to articulate their identity as individuals committed to the social and political world? Did we help them to develop a work ethic and to learn how to work and to integrate seriously and rigorously scientific conversation about the distinct disciplines in our curricular itinerary? Did we help them to discover their personal vocation in their field in a way that in their future employment they contribute to the common good and to the sustained development of the society in which they live?
- How can the different departments be integrated to articulate a common educational vision which will accompany university students in their process toward becoming adults committed to the poor?
- Have we gotten them used to learning on their own or in the community with today's technological means? Or how to respond critically with a free and clear spirit?

Together and in Partnership

I am convinced that due to the lack of Brothers that work in our universities and the high number of qualified laypeople who work there, our universities are the first and best places to live the shared mission and the partnerships that today is demanded by our Institute. This is why we can ask ourselves these questions.

- How does the university favor the experience of partnership between educators, students, and other collaborators?
- In light of the fact that the “for” in our Lasallian partnership is the education of the poor, what is it in our partnership that makes us enthusiastic and joins us together to work in favor of just social structures which favor the common good?
- Since it is people who are the most important in the partnership, do our options consider people over projects, structures, or economic interests?
- Is it not always a sign of life and hope when Brothers and associated members of the Lasallian spirit look to the future to respond jointly to the overwhelming challenges presented by the world today? Are we convinced that being true to our charism today means being associated in the same vision, responding creatively to new forms of dehumanization, to new poverties, to the calls made on us from the world of the socially excluded?
- Should we not live our charism today by making efforts to look after the children and young people who continue to be the most fragile and vulnerable link of our societies?

The Relationship between Teaching, Research, and Social Transformation

I have the impression that the teaching aspect in our universities dominates over research and change in our society. We are teachers by nature. Therefore, it is worth asking ourselves a few questions.

- It seems that the educational system, and also the university system, have always inclined more toward tradition rather than innovation. Are we trying to overcome this tendency by putting more effort into our capacity to invent, create, and innovate because it is the future of the human being and his/her survival that is at stake?
- Are we open to new research in our respective fields so that teaching can connect with today’s social and political urgent needs? What drives our enthusiasm in the field and in the discipline that we teach?
- How can we systematically and organically relate the curriculum content to the urgent needs of the poor, and how can we motivate our students to enter into contact with these urgent needs?

Accessibility to the Poor

Having been born with the aim of providing education to the poor, a permanent concern of our universities is to be available to their needs.

- In what way are the learning methods related to direct service to the poor, not just as an act of charity but as a direct requirement of our professional life?
- In what way does what we learn together influence the unjust structures of society? What programs will be applied or expanded upon?

The Relationship of the Universities with the Network of the District or Regional Educational Projects

A Lasallian university is part of a District and can contribute a valuable service in favor of the Lasallian mission to the District as well as to the Region and the Institute as a whole.

- Are our universities islands and worlds closed in on themselves? In what way do our resources touch on formal and non-formal educational projects of the District in which we live?
- And more specifically, what contribution do we make to the education of the lecturers and to the teachers of our other works and our popular education works¹⁹ in the country?
- What is the role of our education departments in helping professionalize all of the educators in our network of works?
- How do our universities collaborate with the Districts for an education shared by Brothers and laypeople in partnership for mission?

Announcing the Gospel

Our universities should be places where the Gospel is alive and can be transmitted in signs and dialogue. The world today needs more than theories, testimonies, and signs that unsettle it and open it up to transcendence. In this regard, we can ask ourselves a few questions.

- What concept of evangelization works in our universities? Do they offer a range of alternative values? Do they criticize the status quo or provide an inspirational model for a society inspired by Gospel values?
- Do our projects open onto a transcendental horizon allowing everybody to live pluralism with respect and tolerance of the cultures of the more vulnerable groups?
- Do we realize that our time, which we could characterize by its religious indifference, is paradoxically marked by an upending spiritual thirst? Up to what point do we offer aid in this search for the spiritual?

- Are we content to provide a series of services, of certain importance, and not to help our contemporaries to find a meaning for their lives?
- Are our higher education centers open to dialogue with other religions? Are we sensitive to the extension of the concepts of salvation, fraternity, and revelation? Have we made our own the call from the Pope which asks us to engage in “dialogue with the followers of other religions so as to construct a world of peace, freedom, and respect for human dignity?” Do we educate university students in tolerance and dialogue?

Conclusion

As you all can see the challenges are great, but so too are our dreams to construct a future inspired by our Lasallian values. I congratulate you again for this meeting, and I invite you to move on. Of interest would be for you to advance in elaborating a network which facilitates: interdependence; the sharing of resources; collaboration in joint projects, communication for people, learning and resources; dialogue with national and international bodies; and a leading role in educational projects.

You, by engaging in dialogue with national and international bodies, can support comprehensive development projects, making more professional the whole body of actors, better preparing educators and evangelists, evaluating existing programs. Also generating new research, presenting new alternatives, helping to find financial resources for new initiatives in aid of the very poor and the deprived.

The moment which we live today invites us to solidarity. We are called to demolish all the walls of enmity and separation still in existence in our world and to facilitate a way forward for all to benefit from human progress.

As Lasallian universities, it is important that we ask ourselves if we are active agents of a sustainable, environmental, social, economic, political, cultural and religious development. I would like to invite you to live looking toward the future, of course not forgetting your roots, to imagine new ways to respond to today’s problems. I ask you to be creative in your initiatives and to offer new paths, stimulating initiatives, and alternatives to those who remain outside the benefits of globalization so as to give meaning to their lives.

As heirs to the *Great Lord* of De La Salle, I believe that you should feel deeply this call and help us to follow the footsteps of our Founder in constructing a world where every person is taken into account and is treated with respect and love. Where education and new technologies are at the service of justice, peace, and solidarity. Where we do not fear to announce Jesus as our Savior, with a spirit of respect, of dialogue, and of tolerance for other religions. Where we know how to join forces – men and women of diverse cultures and religions – in the constructing of a more fraternal and just society.

Endnotes

1. This address was delivered in 2004 in Barcelona at the 7th Encuentro of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU). The Encuentro is a gathering of IALU presidents / rectors that occurs once every two or three years.
2. Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC, served the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools as vicar general (1993-2000) and as superior general (2000-2014).
3. The expression *sign of the times* evokes *Perfectae Caritatis*, the title of the 1965 decree of Vatican Council II that focuses on renewal and adaptation in light of the *signs of the times*.
4. Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), article #3.
5. “Rule of 1718” in *Rule and Foundational Documents by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated and edited by Augustine Loes and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), chapter #1, article #3, page 14.
6. “Rule of 1718” in *Rule and Foundational Documents*, chapter #1, article #5, page 14.
7. Cf. “Formula of Vows” in *Rule and Foundational Documents*, page 204.
8. “Rule of 1718” in *Rule and Foundational Documents*, chapter #7, article #1, page 36.
9. Cf. *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Colman Molloy (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1988), #52.8 on page 159 and #44.20 on page 147.
10. “Rule of 1718” in *Rule and Foundational Documents*, chapter #2, article #10, page 19.
11. Cf. “Formula of Vows” in *Rule and Foundational Documents*, page 204.
12. Cf. “Rules I Have Imposed on Myself” in *Rule and Foundational Documents*, article #8, page 204.
13. Brothers Michel Sauvage, FSC, and Miguel Campos, FSC, *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor: The Spiritual Experience and Spiritual Teaching of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Matthew J. O’Connell (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Conference, 1981), pages 68-69.
14. Cf. “Memorandum on the Habit” in *Rule and Foundational Documents*, pages 181-191.
15. Cf. “Memorandum on the Habit” in *Rule and Foundational Documents*, article #4 and article #6, pages 181-182.
16. Brothers of the Christian Schools, *Circular 435: 42nd General Chapter* (Rome, 1993), pages 25-26.

17. Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), article #15a.

18. Brother José Cervantes, FSC (1929-2012), a General Councilor of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools from 1976 to 1986 and a president / rector of three Lasallian universities in Mexico, was strongly committed to the international network of Lasallian institutions of higher education. Cf. *Circular 467: In Memoriam Brother José Cervantes Hernández* by Brothers of the Christian Schools (Rome, 2013).

19. The reference here is more to the Spanish-language use of *educación popular* and so refers to the education of the marginalized, the unemployed, the working class, and sometimes the lower middle class.