

## **A Celebration of Lasallian Association**

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*Then I heard the Lord say, "Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?"  
I answered, "I will go! Send me!"  
Isaiah 6:8*

Thank you for inviting me to be with you and share some thoughts on association – a concept fundamental to the birth of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. I congratulate the leadership of the District of Eastern North America for calling us to this assembly. Our gathering is a concrete example of association: together we belong to something larger than our own educational community. We are Partners in a global mission that brings hope to young people in Ontario, Michigan and New Jersey and one million other students in 80 countries. To each of you I express my heartfelt gratitude for your untiring dedication to the children, young people and adults entrusted to your care.

In an environment permeated by the loving presence of God, you provide your students and clients a trusted space to express their anxieties and dreams. You are mentors, teachers, guides, companions and older sisters and brothers, helping others to increase their awareness of their innate dignity as children of God. This is perhaps the finest expression of our Lasallian association: to generously provide places where the marks of the Reign of God – inclusion, peace and respect – are lived out in a trusting and secure environment. Places where cultural diversity is not an occasion for conflict, exclusion, or destructive tension, but rather where being different is an enriching component of community life.<sup>3</sup>

By way of introduction, I would like to emphasize that Lasallian association for human and Christian education is part of our DNA, our Lasallian story and our charism. Studies of the beginnings reveal to us a priest, some women and a small group of men committed to the education of the sons of the artisans and the poor. We see that from the beginning the Lasallian mission has been a shared mission.

Why association? ". . . because it was [and is] only by being together for a project that we can manage to change a situation for the better. Together we can do more than doing something by ourselves."<sup>4</sup>

Association "was born to make universal, in space and time, [the] experience of a community for the education of the poor. Association is the guarantee that the community will continue beyond its concrete existence in a given place and at a given moment."<sup>5</sup>

At the start of these remarks it is necessary to briefly speak on the origins of this word "association" and why it is significant for our Lasallian story.

An early biographer of De La Salle succinctly described a crisis that threatened the creation of this new educational movement:

This was the sad situation in which the pious teacher found himself at the end of 1690, after so many crosses and so much persecution, after so many apparent successes, he found himself in almost the same situation that he had been in ten years previously, with few Brothers, making hardly any progress in his work and fearful of seeing it perish.<sup>6</sup>

De La Salle and two Brothers made the historic vow of association on November 21, 1691, in the midst of a crisis described as the sad situation in which the pious teacher – John Baptist de La Salle – found himself. It was their response to the “sad situation.” In doing so, they committed themselves to a future still to be realized. The vow of association also determined the structure of the fragile community in the midst of this crisis.

From the experience of the previous ten years, De La Salle also realized it was not enough to professionally prepare his teachers. He had to create men of the Spirit. The project would only be successful if it was built on a firm spiritual foundation. After the crisis of 1691, he would dedicate the rest of his life to creating men firmly attuned to the Holy Spirit. “The strength of the Holy Spirit is displayed in human weakness, and the creative force is seen in shaky, often tentative achievements which are sometimes tainted with ambiguity.”<sup>7</sup> De La Salle’s deep faith in Divine Providence allowed him to live with this ambiguity.

At your District’s Mission Assembly in 2011, former Brother Superior General Álvaro Rodríguez, FSC, drew attention to De La Salle’s last will and testament where he identified the Brothers of the Christian Schools as his associates. He had walked with them with the understanding that together they had been called by God to association for the mission. Brother Álvaro then cited De La Salle’s last recommendation to these first Brothers: to maintain close union among themselves and blind obedience to their superiors . . . . This was not some pious advice to the Brothers; rather, in the beginning

There was a passion for the education of the poor. At the intersection of the cries of the poor and the attention of a present loving Father, those first Brothers experienced a new way of understanding and judging their social context, and a new way of responding to urgent educational needs of the poor, defending their rights and their dignity.<sup>8</sup>

It was to this they were to be obedient, to listen to the call of the Spirit. More than a commitment to become a member of an organization, the vow speaks to “a way of life; it is a dynamic of relationship; it is a way of being; and it is a distinctive sign which constitutes the identity of the emerging community.”<sup>9</sup> By this vow, these three persons committed themselves to constructing a future.

We cannot, therefore, speak of association in isolation. It is an awareness of one’s social context and responding to that context with others. Association is the result of establishing relationships and building a community with a very clear purpose in mind: the wellbeing of those who are

poor and, indeed, all young people. Lasallian association is for mission, and it is rooted in Christian spirituality.

“As social beings, humans are capable of establishing meaningful relationships. As spiritual beings, they are open to transcendent reality and the search for life’s meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Every human being seeks to find meaning in life. This search is not always linked with the religious or the divine, but also can spring from the values that each person considers important and on which he or she bases their lifestyle and most decisive choices. Therefore, all who share the Lasallian mission, whether Christians or from other traditions, feel called to deepen and share the meaning of their existence. What is it that sustains us from within? What makes us overcome the difficulties of life? What inspires us to go beyond who we are and what we do?<sup>11</sup>

Could these not be the same questions De La Salle asked himself when he left his privileged status to become one with the world of the poor? We must not lose sight of this spiritual dimension when trying to understand the experience of Lasallian association.

Whether in Rhode Island, New York or Washington, DC, everything centers on establishing new relationships with our environment: persons, society, and nature. Relations and structures are the key. The task is to create new relationships and to develop them into alternatives for sharing life, work, religions, general behavior, and ethical norms. Establishing and understanding relationships in a new way are characteristics of the passage from applying reason as the organizer to recognizing our mutual need to belong.<sup>12</sup>

Association for educational service with the poor concretizes meaningful relationships for promoting “human dignity, solidarity among all human beings, and the integral development of the individual, in line with the Lasallian tradition.”<sup>13</sup>

A review of news from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Florida and indeed from around the world, clearly demonstrates that we are witnessing increasing intolerance, lack of courtesy and senseless violence. We are living in a world where feelings are more important than facts, where fake news proliferates and opinions are regarded as factual statements. How do we respond to these falsehoods? What is the best way to inspire social media-immersed young people to be attentive to the cry of the poor? At our papal audience with Pope Francis last May, he asked Lasallians to create a “culture of Resurrection.” How can we announce Jesus’ resurrection through actions that invite our students to be people who spread hope through social media with their way of welcoming, smiling and loving? Can we do more to show our students that the power of the resurrection makes us capable of loving even when the news reports that even love has lost its meaning?<sup>14</sup>

Integral to the spirit of association is the commitment to be witnesses to fraternity by creating educational communities that radiate sisterhood and brotherhood. The building of fraternity necessarily includes the desire and ability to encounter and dialogue with others, particularly those who are different. Encounter and dialogue are the building blocks of fraternity. Being builders of sisterhood and brotherhood is our response to the cries of the poor and the discordance so evident in today’s world. Meeting and conversing with others, especially those

who are different, can breakdown our preconceptions, prejudices and assumptions. Together we can find common ground for cooperation and collaboration.

As Superior of the Brothers, I have had the privilege of experiencing the Lasallian mission in 70 countries thus far. It is an experience that fills me with joy and hope. When I look at our reality today I see more and more Partners participating in the Lasallian mission; Lasallians of other faith traditions are connected and committed to the Lasallian mission; more and more educators share their own giftedness and competencies in running our ministries; our ministries are partnering with other like-minded institutions that promote the education of young people, especially the poor; and there are emerging forms of spirituality and community life centered on the Lasallian mission.

I meet so many Brothers and teachers who, inspired by John Baptist de La Salle's deep relationship with Jesus Christ, echo the Gospel according to Matthew and ask: "Lord, when did I see you illiterate and teach you to read? Bullied by mean-spirited classmates and protect you? Hyperactive and disruptive and treat you patiently and kindly? Trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and ignorance and free you through a human and Christian education? Denied an education because of your immigration status and welcomed you to my school?"

Most of these Lasallians are just like you and me. They are engaged in the day in and day out tasks of Lasallian education. They are, however, anything but ordinary. With their admirable concern for others, generous service and happy presence they awaken others to be kind, merciful and welcoming. These "fired up Lasallians" are not researchers of educational theory. They are practical, hands on women and men who really do make their educational communities experiences of affirmation, respect, inclusion and welcome. They put the economically poor students on center stage and make them protagonists of the educational dynamic.

I encountered living examples of "fired up Lasallians" at the Bamboo School. Founded by five women, the Bamboo School located on the border of Thailand and Myanmar, houses children of immigrant families who are stateless and without civil rights. The children are denied access to Thai schools, and this Lasallian educational community presents their only accessible educational opportunity. The school is free, and everyday each family contributes a small plate of rice. The rice is enriched with nutritional components and often serves as the only meal of the day for the children. The school assists in regularizing the children's immigration status with Thai authorities.

Like these five women, in all parts of the Institute, I see that women have a special role in our ministries because, as bearers of new life, they enrich their zeal with affection, sensitivity and tenderness. We should all be attentive to ensuring that women are well represented at all levels of leadership.

I also encountered inspirational Lasallians in Roubaix, France. Unemployment and social deprivation characterize this poor, urban area populated with Muslim immigrants. The assistant director of the school described herself as a "Muslim Lasallian." She was effusive in her gratitude for the welcome the Brothers had given her as a child of parents with little financial means and for the encouragement that they gave her to continue her studies. She was grateful for

the openness of the Catholic Church (the light of Christ!) to differences; she was almost in tears as she expressed what it meant to her to assimilate Lasallian values and to transmit these values to the young people of her neighborhood.

In that neighborhood, the community of three octogenarian Brothers (our mandate to witness to the Gospel is not determined by age!) and a former Brother connected to the school was also inspiring. All are involved in a variety of activities with the parents of the students and surrounding community. They assist a group of Romani people in a nearby neighborhood, teach in a literacy program, are involved in parish activities and prepare their own meals. In the doorway to the house I noticed a bicycle air pump. It is available to the young people who frequently come to the community. These men are an example of a fraternal and open Lasallian community that impels people to experience God's loving presence.

I am sure that if you stop to contemplate your colleagues at your own school, university or childcare ministry, you, too, will be inspired by women and men who truly are ministers of God and ambassadors of Jesus Christ. These people are, in simple and unassuming ways, agents of transformation. Through their behavior, they show students that they can contribute to a world that is more compassionate and just for everyone. In their own way they heard a voice from within saying, "Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?" And they answered, "I will go! Send me!"

We often speak of our educational institutions as spaces of transformation. "To be transformed, first we must meet people who are different, not our family, friends and neighbors who are like us . . . ." <sup>15</sup> Lasallian educational communities encourage personal encounters with those who are considered to be different, undesirable, despised, beneath us or disposable. John Baptist de La Salle's encounter with Jesus prepared him for that all important, upsetting and determinative meeting with Adrian Nyel that "marked the beginning for the upheaval of the entire internal universe of De La Salle. It marked the perceptible taking hold of a process of interior and social liberation which [brought] him to a point where he had neither the intention, the desire, nor the courage to go by himself." <sup>16</sup>

Our educational ministries are built on mutual respect, and "mutual respect means service to the person of Christ. Cooperation is between brothers and sisters in Christ." <sup>17</sup> This quality of respect must spring from and be nourished by personal encounters with the other. Reflecting about the ongoing migration of human persons, Pope Francis reminds us that, "a change of attitude toward migrants and refugees is needed on the part of everyone, moving away from attitudes of defensiveness and fear, indifference and marginalization – all typical of a throw away culture – toward attitudes based on a culture of encounter, the only culture capable of building a better, more just and fraternal world." <sup>18</sup> When tolerance and mutual understanding between pupils of different religions prevails in a school, that is already a tremendous example of human fraternity and ecumenism. <sup>19</sup>

Our communities and our educational centers are called to bring people together. Pope Francis says that "Catholic schools are places promoting a culture of encounter." <sup>20</sup> Encounter with the other bears abundant fruit when enriched with dialogue. Dialogue is the search for mutual understanding and the desire of points of encounter. Essential conditions for dialogue are

attentive listening, respect, empathy, and compassion. Dialogue within the school and university community is chiefly that between teachers and students.

In relation to the social community to which your schools and universities contribute, dialogue involves listening to the needs of the community and searching for better ways to collaborate for the common good. In relation to cultures and religions, dialogue becomes the commitment to share knowledge, respect, listening, and fomenting collaboration geared toward human development.<sup>21</sup>

In our Lasallian tradition, “The ‘placing of oneself in the presence of God’ already constitutes a dialogue between the person and God.”<sup>22</sup> “To place oneself in the presence of God is not just reminding oneself of a theory; it is to re-read one’s own story in order to try to discern the passage of God in it.”<sup>23</sup> I encourage you to re-read your own story as an educator and recall the transformative moments you have had through encounter and dialogue with your students. During this year we have been celebrating the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of John Baptist de La Salle. For most of the past three centuries, the Brothers were the authors of the Lasallian narrative. Today all of us gathered in association – Brothers and Partners – are writing the Lasallian story.

Our Lasallian anniversary year has been the celebration of John Baptist de La Salle’s encounter with Jesus Christ, which eventually turned his world upside down. On the road to a comfortable ecclesiastical career, he was ordained a priest and appointed a canon in the great gothic cathedral in Rheims. Attentive to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit and attuned to the cry of the poor, he left the security of his upper middle-class family and associated himself with a bunch of uncouth fellows to form what over time came to be known as the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Today, each one of us is invited to hear the cries of those who are poor, marginalized, addicted, illiterate, or hungry for knowledge. They are calling us to be beacons of hope and purveyors of wellbeing. Our association for the Lasallian mission of human and Christian education is a concrete response to those who are calling us.

“From the very beginning of the Lasallian story a call is heard. It is a cry that comes from ‘children of the artisans and the poor,’ and it is chanted by all children and young people who are in need of education. The cry does not abate throughout the entire narrative; in reality it is sustaining the story, it puts into action its protagonists and it attracts new actors to participate in the story. We can see to it that the story will end when that cry is no longer heard.”<sup>24</sup>

Today let us renew our commitment to the human and Christian education of our sisters and brothers, especially those who are poor. Let us once again open our hearts and respond: “I will go! Send me to bring the Good News to all God’s people.”

Thank you.

## Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered on 8 November 2019 at La Salle University in Philadelphia. The occasion was an assembly of the Brothers and Lasallian Partners of the District of Eastern North America. Some were present at La Salle; but many others participated via videoconference from Ontario in Canada and from Florida, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Washington, DC, and other parts of Pennsylvania in the USA.
2. Brother Robert Schieler, FSC, was elected Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools at the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in 2014. He earned his doctorate in educational administration at the University of Pennsylvania.
3. Brothers of the Christian Schools, *Circular 461: Associated for the Lasallian Mission . . . an Act of HOPE* (Rome, 2011), #2.3.2
4. Source unknown.
5. International Council for Lasallian Studies, *Lasallian Studies #13: The Lasallian Charism* (Rome, 2006), page 105.
6. Canon Jean-Baptiste Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle: Book Two* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2000), page 288.
7. Michel Sauvage FSC, “Lasallian Spirituality: Our Heritage” in *Spirituality in the Time of De La Salle*, edited by Robert Berger FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999), page 275.
8. Álvaro Rodríguez FSC, “Presentation on Lasallian Association” (DENA Mission Assembly: Unpublished manuscript, 2011).
9. Rodolfo Andaur FSC, “Association in the Early Days of the Institute” in *Lasallian Themes*, Vol. 1 (Rome, 1992), page 52.
10. *Circular 461*, #3.3.
11. Robert Comte FSC, *MEL Bulletin #27: Lasallian Identity* (Rome, 2006), chapter 2, pages 23-33.
12. Pedro Gil FSC, *Lasallian Studies #4: Three Centuries of Lasallian Identity*, translated by Paul Grass FSC (Rome, 1998), page 357.
13. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 2015), #17.2.
14. Cf. Pope Francis, Audience, 4 October 2017.

15. Jean Vanier, “In the Heart of the Poor” in L’Osservatore Romano, No. 22, 29 May 2015 [cited in *Pastoral Letter to the Brothers* by Robert Schieler FSC (Rome, 2015), page 28.].
16. Michel Sauvage FSC, “The Gospel Journey of John Baptist de La Salle”, in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, edited by Robert Berger FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999), page 230.
17. The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (Vatican, 1977), #60.
18. Pope Francis, “Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees” (Vatican, 2014).
19. Léon Lauraire FSC, “*Pedagogy of Fraternity*” (Rome, 2015), page 14.
20. Pope Francis. *Christus Vivit* (Vatican, 2019), # 222.
21. Congregation for Catholic Education, *New Educational Horizons: Leadership in Catholic Schools and Universities*, edited by Italo Fiorin et al. (Vatican, 2018), page 26.
22. Miguel Campos FSC and Michel Sauvage FSC, *Encountering God in the Depths of the Mind and Heart*, edited by William Mann, et al. (Rome, 1995), page 401.
23. Campos FSC and Sauvage FSC, page 395.
24. Antonio Botana FSC, *Associated for the Lasallian Educational Mission* (Rome, 2005), page 7.