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## **Challenges Provide Opportunities for Greatness**

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### **Introduction**

Thank you, President O'Donnell and Trustees for this honor shown to me as a De La Salle Christian Brother. I am humbled in my association with this great institution of learning, the first institution of higher education in the Lasallian network<sup>3</sup> and one that "lays the foundation for a good life" and prepares the "good citizen" who is capable of addressing the challenges of our time.<sup>4</sup>

### **Saint John Baptist de La Salle**

When this Lasallian college began, Brother Patrick Murphy,<sup>5</sup> its first president (1863-1873), drew inspiration from Saint John Baptist de La Salle, the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and guiding inspiration for the international Lasallian educational network; and like those of you whose delayed commencement is celebrated today, De La Salle's own university studies were also interrupted.

At the end of his third semester at the Sorbonne University in Paris, 20-year-old De La Salle was called home to Rheims when both of his parents suddenly died.<sup>6</sup> His studies were suspended so he could go care for his younger brothers and sisters, a heavy cross undoubtedly but an eventual blessing that stretched and challenged and prepared him to become the man of faith revered today around the world.

Eventually, he finished his studies, although it was some eight years later than planned and at a university<sup>7</sup> closer to the family "entrusted to his care."<sup>8</sup>

A now 29-year-old recently graduated, wealthy, and well-connected Frenchman with a bit more time on his hands and beginning to get his life plans and professional career back on track, he was again confronted by the death-bed request of a valued mentor<sup>9</sup> and the persistent urging of two wealthy widows<sup>10</sup> who wanted to open, with his capable assistance, good schools for the excluded and marginalized children of poor and working-class families of his home city. These were tasks to which, we know, he again wholeheartedly and successfully dedicated his time, excellent education, social connections, and considerable gifts and talents.

You might wonder, "why is he sharing this story of John Baptist de La Salle with us today?" Well, we all make life plans; but as we all learn – some of us sooner than others – the mystery of the life journey that unfolds is rarely the one that could have been anticipated. Far too often in an imperceptible way, one life event pushing us off along some unforeseen new direction in a way we didn't foresee in the beginning,<sup>11</sup> we find ourselves in situations of necessity that are often not of our own choosing; and the question then is, "what are we going to do now?"

## Heroes of the Pandemic

Did any of you anticipate the closing of the campus in March of last year? Did any of us imagine that COVID-19 would become a global pandemic that would shutter national borders, upend our cities, and transform our lives?

A couple of leadership theoreticians in a book entitled *The Leadership Challenge* posit the following:

Name any great leader, performer, scientist, athlete, activist, citizen. Chances are that the crucible of that person's crowning achievement was some distressing crisis, wrenching change, tragic misfortune, or risky venture. Only challenge produces the opportunity for greatness.<sup>12</sup>

When I think of the crucible of our time, I think of the miraculous accomplishments of the heroes of the current pandemic:

- research scientists discovering vaccines;
- countless medical practitioners and health care professionals risking their lives;
- teachers who moved out of their comfort zones, pivoting to the virtual learning environment that was needed;
- mothers and fathers and guardians coping and sacrificing for those entrusted to their care.

This isn't just the Lasallian story; it's the human story; it's also our story.

## Conclusion

And so, graduates, although your commencement ceremony was too long delayed, today is truly your day to step up and step forward. Commencement Day doesn't come in the form you'd hoped for, but challenges and opportunities seldom do. Embrace this new beginning. Be of "good heart." Trust God. Live the "good solid Lasallian values" of faith,<sup>13</sup> community,<sup>14</sup> and service<sup>15</sup> that you've learned at Manhattan College for this truly is your time.

God bless you, and God bless Manhattan College!

## Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered on 8 May 2021 as part of Manhattan College's delayed (by the global COVID-19 pandemic) Undergraduate Commencement 2020 ceremony, when Brother William was awarded the degree Doctor of Humane Letters *honoris causa*.

2. Brother William Mann, who earned his doctorate at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, is president emeritus of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. He is a former vicar general of the

Brothers of the Christian Schools and the past president of the International Association of LaSalle Universities (IALU). He has served on the board of trustees of Manhattan College since 2008.

3. Concerning the pioneering role of Manhattan College, see “That We Might Be a Bright Beacon of Light” by Gustavo Ramírez Barba FSC in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (2016), page 65. “Manhattan College initiated one chapter in this [Lasallian] story of salvation; it was the first Lasallian College established in the US, and probably in the Institute. This fact makes Manhattan College a real pioneer, transforming the long story of Lasallian education from its well-established success in elementary and secondary education into the transformative and diverse world of higher education. After Manhattan College ventured forth into Lasallian higher education, many other institutions of higher learning were established, especially in the [final] decades of the last century.”

4. All of these are descriptive phrases shared by graduates of Manhattan College, in referring to the values inculcated during their undergraduate experience, at the March 2021 meeting of the college’s board of trustees; other descriptive phrases that were shared are also to be found in the last paragraph of these remarks.

5. Concerning Brother Patrick Murphy, see *The Christian Brothers in the United States: 1848-1948* by Brother Angelus Gabriel FSC (New York: The Declan X. McMullen Company, 1948), pages 174-176. “Brother Patrick (John Patrick Murphy, 1822-1891) was born in Nenagh, Tipperary, Ireland. The penal laws drove his father into exile and the family emigrated to Ottawa, Canada . . . and John Murphy donned the habit of the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers on May 15, 1844, in Montreal . . . In 1861, Brother Patrick was transferred to the Academy of the Holy Infancy, New York. Convinced that there was a rich field for Catholic higher education in the archdiocese, he secured a charter for Manhattan College, in 1863, and held the office of president for twelve years . . . Brother Patrick also was one of the foremost sponsors in founding the New York Catholic Protectory [along with Manhattan College trustee L. Silliman Ives and La Salle University founder Brother Teliow Fackeldey]. Because of the Civil War, many children were orphaned and the dire poverty of the Irish immigrants made them victims of the various proselytizing agencies . . . Brother Patrick was a man who saw in his time the great needs of the Church in America, particularly in education, and he set himself resolutely to spread the kingdom of God upon earth . . . An heroic figure of faith, zeal, and charity, his name is inseparably linked with the great leaders in the Church in the nineteenth century.”

6. Cf. Luke Salm FSC, *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989), page 25. “John Baptist de La Salle was in the final weeks of his first year at the seminary in Paris when he learned of the death of his mother in July 1671. Less than nine months later, during the Holy Week retreat at the seminary, word came that his father had died on April 9. After only 18 months at Saint Sulpice De La Salle had to leave the seminary [and the Sorbonne] for good in order to attend to family affairs back in Rheims. He arrived home just before his twenty-first birthday in April 1672.”

7. Cf. Salm, *The Work Is Yours*, pages 28 and 35. “It was in the spring of that year, 1680, that John Baptist de La Salle successfully passed the examinations for the doctorate in theology at the University of Rheims. Both the subject matter and the significance of this degree would suggest

that De La Salle had long-range plans far removed from the concerns of the barely literate teachers [with whom he was associating] in the schools . . . .”

8. This is an expression dear to John Baptist de La Salle. For example, see in Meditation #180.3: “You can perform miracles by touching the hearts of those entrusted to your care.” Also, see Meditation #37.3, Meditation #133.2, Meditation #198.2, and Meditation # 201.1 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arnandez FSC and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994).

9. Concerning Canon Nicolas Roland, see Salm, *The Work Is Yours*, page 29.

10. Concerning Mme de Maillefer, see Salm, *The Work Is Yours*, pages 31-33; and concerning Catherine Lévesque, Mme de Croyeres, see Alfred Calcutt FSC, *De La Salle: A City Saint and the Liberation of the Poor through Education* (Oxford, England: De La Salle Publications, 1993), page 131-133.

11. Cf. Gerard Rummery FSC, “The Memoire on the Beginnings: Text and Context” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 8, no. 1 (2017), page 37. “Indeed, if I had ever thought [wrote John Baptist de La Salle] that the care I was taking of the schoolmasters out of pure charity would ever have made it my duty to live with them, I would have dropped the whole project. For since, naturally speaking, I considered the men whom I was obliged to employ in the schools at the beginning as being inferior to my valet, the mere thought that I would have to live with them would have been insupportable to me. In fact, I experienced a great deal of unpleasantness when I first had them come to my house. This lasted for two years. It was undoubtedly for this reason that God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. God did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.”

12. James Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (1987), page 76.

13. Concerning *faith*, see *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission: Challenges, Convictions, and Hopes* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2020), pages 64-65. “*Faith* . . . is, without doubt, the first source of the Lasallian educational legacy” that is grounded in the experience of God and inspires “a life that is strengthened by human values which build solidarity, fraternity, respect for difference, ethical values that strengthen the social fabric and peaceful coexistence in responsible and committed citizens.”

14. Concerning *community*, see *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission*, page 65. “The cornerstone that sustains the construction of this [educational] mission has been and will always be *community* . . . To be Lasallian, by definition, is to belong to a community and to commit oneself within that same community to a common task.”

15. Concerning *service*, see *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission*, pages 117-118. The Lasallian tradition “is rooted in the preferential *service* for the poor, the excluded, those considered irrelevant, that is to say those children and young people for whom their vulnerable

condition is an obstacle to the building up of their dreams for the future and to their having a dignified and happy life.”