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## **Ethiopian Catholic University – La Salle: For Ethiopia, Africa, and the World**

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Dear friends, we are gathered here today because of several important happenings related to the Ethiopian Catholic University – La Salle. As we celebrate the feast of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, our Founder's Day, we are also putting in God's hands the installation of a new president and Brothers' leadership team.

Four words define the responsibility we will hold from now on: *Ethiopian*, *Catholic*, *Lasallian*, and *University*. Three adjectives and one substantive. These words, then, are going to define what we are expected to do and the way I want to address them.

Let me begin with the substantive: *University*. This is a word easy to pronounce, but it is timely to recall the rich history that it represents. The university is one of the oldest institutions in history, only preceded by the Church. Born in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, universities for almost one thousand years have played important roles in places and times they have been and served. Of course, there is a big difference between the original curricula – centered in the Trivium and Quadrivium of the Middle Ages – to what we have in our institutions nowadays. However, there is a constant, a kind of conducting line, that connects today's university mission to those in Bologna, Oxford, Salamanca, and Paris: from the very beginning, a university has been the place where knowledge is created, discovered, transmitted, reshaped, rejected, enriched, and revered.

Primarily, a university is the place where professors and students learn together with the constant goal of searching for the truth. Then, not only "having knowledge" is important but "being concerned about truth" is essential. A university is a referent of truth; thus, it becomes a very important place to learn, unlearn and think, to ask questions, argue about everything, and propose solutions to the main problems that our societies face. In such a manner, universities serve their countries and peoples as references in most aspects of life such as politics, human development, economics, ecological sustainability, science, and technology. Likewise, a university must be aware that its mission deals with persons, that is to say, with forming good human beings, men and women with ethical principles, social responsibility, professional competencies, commitment to society, and trustworthy citizens. The search for truth and its defense is essential nowadays in the kingdom of fake news, post-truth, lies, and professional liars. Repeated lies tend to become pseudo-truths that many eventually will believe. It is a huge responsibility that universities must scrutinize and create the means to discern and critically analyze news, happenings, and social-media and say a word in this regard.

If the substantive tells us about the nature of something that exists, adjectives are not mere accessories or decorations. They qualify what exists and express the particular conditions of how something is and can exist, that is to say, the attributes that define the essence and what makes one different from the other.

Being *Ethiopian* not only connotes a geographical place but a fascinating history, a challenging present, and a promising future. Nevertheless, as in many other developing countries, we have to work hard to build more equitable societies, places where all may have good life conditions, better education and the possibility to reach the dreams of the young, fairness, solid democracies, transparency, trust among the citizens and in political, economic, productive, and social institutions. An Ethiopian university signifies knowledge, social impact, transformation, dreams at the service of the country and its development. Although university means as well a universal scope, which visualizes and takes into consideration the world where a university project is incarnated, it also takes into account both the local and the global, the personal and the common. Then, Ethiopia, Africa, and the World.

Being *Catholic* implies having clear references and horizons pointed out by the Church that drive our work, inspire our educational project, permeate our vision, mission and strategy, and imprint the character of the institution and what distinguishes us from other universities. Currently, there are several non-renounceable characteristics that provide us convictions, tasks, commitments to convey in our educational project, and particular ways of doing what we are entitled to do. Thus, theoretical, practical dimensions, and concepts such as human and sustainable development, integral ecology, universal fraternity, defense of human dignity, participation in the Global Compact on Education to which Pope Francis is inviting us, are aspects to consider in our daily operations and curricula offerings.

The Catholicity of our university is transmitted by the explicit announcement of Jesus Christ and, at the same time, among other responsibilities, as Pope Francis teaches, we need

to be committed to finding new ways of understanding economy, politics, growth and progress that can truly stand at the service of the human person and the entire human family, within the context of an integral ecology.<sup>3</sup>

Being *Lasallian* means enriching the Catholic tradition by underscoring values like faith, fraternity, and service. A Lasallian university favors the dialogue needed between science and ethics, encourages critical thinking, fosters research aimed at solving problems, provides quality education, and offers an experience of fraternity that permeates the institutional culture to leave a mark on the life and professional work of the alumni.

Our educational proposal is an expression of humanism because its objective is integral formation. Consistently, in our proposal, intellectual development, the development of faith, the understanding of science, and the living out of values, are not understood as isolated dimensions, but as dimensions that involve and feed each other. Therefore, the objective of Lasallian education is to form people of mature and robust faith, with clear ethical criteria, who exercise leadership through service and who are committed to working for the common good and the building up of more just and peace-promoting societies.<sup>4</sup>

Ethiopian Catholic University – La Salle is called to play an important role here and now. We all should be committed to make this true. Our institution has several issues to face in order to strengthen its vision, clarify its mission, and act coherently with the principles that inspire it. Aspects like making it sustainable, increasing the number of students, expanding its academic

offerings, cultivating a research environment, fostering a culture of planning, enhancing social impact and engagement, creating a Campus Ministry program, and positioning it as one of the most well-recognized university projects in Ethiopia are some of the big challenges that are ahead of us.

Yet sustainability, and self-sustainability, are what will allow us to move forward. I know it may be painful, but there is no other way to go ahead. Thus, the main principles to bring it about and that are going to mark our way of doing things are: responsibility, transparency, planning, accountability, austerity, creativity, and hope.

These are the main issues that we are going to address in the months and years to come. There are many things we can do together insofar as we commit ourselves and align our dreams to what it means to be part of this university endeavor. Of course, I am not saying that it is going to be easy; but I am confident that it is going to be possible. It is up to all of us. This, then, is my invitation; and I hope you will adhere sincerely to what is needed to strengthen this institution in these difficult times when there are a shortage of international resources and critical economic situations caused by the global pandemic. Uncertainty, fear, and crises are crossing over our current world and are strongly impacting the human spirit and shaking up our economic and political systems. We are not immune to these unexpected life events.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all those who have contributed to make possible and consolidate our institution. My gratitude goes to the Founders, represented today by His Eminence Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel and His Excellency Antoine Camilleri; to the former presidents Abba Tekle Mekonnen, Brother Augustine Nicoletti, and recently Brother Getachew Nadew; to the members of the Board of Trustees and the Transitional Committee, represented by the Chair, Abba Teshome Fikre; and to those who have been very committed in getting resources and being attentive to developments: Superior General Brother Robert Schieler, Brother Amilcare Boccuccia, Cardinal Silvano Tomassi, Brother Ghebreyesus Habte, and the Brothers of the Charles Lwanga District of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Surely, I am forgetting or omitting some names – I apologize – but I want to acknowledge that I know that we are harvesting what others have planted. My gratitude and recognition to them all.

Dear friends, I come from a very faraway country, with a different culture, language, and history. However, we are close in our common challenges, searches, and possibilities. Colombia has struggled for years to overcome violence, poverty, social unfairness, political problems, divisions, exclusion, and environmental issues; and at the same time, it is a rich, beautiful, and promising land. In my life's journey, I have been worked closely with rural education and development, research, technology, and higher education administration, all aimed to help build equity and opportunities. I vow to do my best in Ethiopia, my adoptive country from now on. I thank Brother Getachew and Brother Ghebrehwot for being my companions and brothers in this exciting mission.

If I get tired, encourage me; if I break down, pick me up; if I change my horizons, put me on the right track; if I lose my joy, smile at me; if I make mistakes, correct me; if my faith wavers, strengthen me; and when I have to make painful decisions, surround me. For my part, I will be attentive to your needs; I will go with you building dreams; I will watch over you all with

solicitude; I will challenge you with new projects; I will look for new ways with you; I will try to point out new paths. Today more than ever, we need to draw on our ethical reserve to increase our moral authority.

With our eyes fixed on God, our faith in the goodness of our students, professors, staff members, and stakeholders, the strength and passion of the Brothers with whom we take this responsibility, and our commitment to work hard for Ethiopian Catholic University – La Salle, we walk forward toward the demanding and exciting horizons of this twenty-first century and toward what Ethiopia demands from us. The conviction that a better world is possible moves us; the passion for humanity brings us together; hope encourages us along the way; and commitment for this institution invigorates our vocation.

God help us and bless you all.

## **Endnotes**

1. These remarks were delivered on the occasion of the Installation Ceremony on 21 May 2021 of the new president of Ethiopian Catholic University – La Salle.

2. Brother Carlos G. Gómez Restrepo, who earned his doctorate in educational leadership at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, is the recently appointed president of Ethiopian Catholic University – La Salle in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He is a former rector of Universidad La Salle in Bogotá, Colombia, and a past president of the International Association of La Salle Universities (IALU).

3. From “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the Occasion of the Meeting Organized by the Congregation for Catholic Education: “Global Compact on Education. Together to Look Beyond” (Pontifical Lateran University, 15 October 2020).

4. *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission: Challenges, Convictions, and Hopes* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2020), pages 120-121.