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The Lasallian Experience of Interreligious Dialogue in Pacific-Asia

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*God is so good that having created us he wills that all of us come to the knowledge of truth.*⁵

Lasallians in Pacific-Asia

The life of John Baptist de La Salle speaks of ongoing participation in God's salvation story of love, compassion, and mercy toward all, especially those who are poor. By the time of his death in 1719, the foundation established by the Founder and his companions was present in many cities throughout the predominantly Catholic country of France. Three centuries later the Brothers and their educational communities are in eighty plus countries, serving the youth in contexts that differ radically from its foundation years.

Since 1852, we have countless men and women in many countries in Pacific-Asia that followed in the footsteps of Saint La Salle. Not only are they from countries that are not Christian, many are also from predominantly Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim nations, with Catholics as a tiny minority. We, men and women, are now called Lasallians. We come from different backgrounds and of varied religious traditions, and some of us do not even practice any religion at all. In spite of the diversity, we have shown that we can work together toward the common good, as well as collective intentions and goals.

The most recent *Rule* of the Brothers acknowledges this: "The Lasallian mission, at both the national and international level, is expanding in secularized, pluri-religious, and multi-cultural contexts." It then advises: "In these contexts, the Brothers strive to enter into a respectful dialogue with the persons they are called to serve."⁶

This brief paper attempts to elaborate on what the *Rule* prescribes and will be guided by the experience and reflections of Lasallians in Pacific-Asia. It will also identify ways in which the Gospel can be preached through respectful dialogue and presence with those who adhere to different religious traditions or to no religion at all.

Lasallian Theology of Dialogue

We, Lasallians, have always been working in religiously plural and secular contexts across 16 countries in Pacific-Asia. We strive to provide quality education and formation that helps people become better persons, respectful of the variety of cultural-ethnic backgrounds and religious traditions. In fact, our Lasallian educational communities, by tradition, have been spaces where inclusive fraternity and communion are experienced. There is a deliberate effort on our part to help

build relationships that cut across faith traditions and other belief systems that are more secular in nature.

In a sense, our Lasallian educational communities are laboratories of communion. Apart from imparting a quality holistic education, we acknowledge how varied religious traditions and other belief systems that are secular, if it's ever to live up to their potential good, can educate and empower people to generate action and witness that promotes peace, justice, genuine human development, communion, and unity in diversity that makes a society better for the good of the future generations. One can say that Lasallians witness to the values of the Gospel primarily through the promotion of *with-ness* among all persons, irrespective of culture, creed or religion.

This is in keeping with Catholic teachings, as clearly spelt out in the 2013 Vatican document entitled *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*, which insists that Catholic schools

must give voice and reality to an education truly based around the human person, in line with Christian humanist culture and tradition. There must be new commitment to the individual seen as “person in communion” and a new sense of his or her belonging to society.⁷

Thus, altruistic values in harmony with the Gospel are the basis for collaboration.

Moreover, the document stresses, that Catholic schools

are to be open to encountering other cultures. They have the task of supporting individuals so that each person develops his or her own identity in an awareness of its richness and cultural tradition.⁸

Thus, rather than seeking to convert persons to Catholicism, our Lasallian educational communities aim at helping persons of different faith traditions live up to the most humanizing and positive elements of their own faith traditions or other means by which they find ultimate meaning and transcendence in life. In this sense, our Lasallian educational communities help Buddhists become better Buddhists, Muslims better Muslims, and Hindus better Hindus. The theological basis for this is the teachings of the Second Vatican Council which asserts that:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men . . . The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.⁹

Lasallian Practice in Pacific-Asia

It is in view of this theology of inclusiveness and communion that our Lasallian educational communities have been welcoming of all persons regardless of religious affiliation or secular attitudes. For those who practice and live the Catholic faith, they are called to ongoing growth and renewal. For those who are nominal in their practice, they are called to renew and deepen their commitment. For those who have stopped practicing their faith, they are called to a deeper understanding of their differences or conflicts with Catholicism.

For all persons, it is a call to be formed into being good persons, developing through one's own faith life and religious background. Thus, Lasallians of other Christian denominations or faith traditions or of no religion at all are invited to appreciate the fullness of the Gospel message and knowledge of Christ Jesus without necessarily becoming Catholic. This has been the prevailing practice in our Lasallian educational communities throughout Pacific-Asia ever since its beginnings. One is reminded that the French priest Father Jean-Marie Beurel, MEP, who had invited the Brothers to establish a mission in Singapore in 1852, had made the following announcement in anticipation of the Brothers' arrival:

The principles upon which the Brothers' school is based will be as liberal as possibly can be: thus it will be open to everyone, whatever his creed may be; and should, for instance, a boy of a persuasion different from that of Roman Catholics wish to attend it, no interference whatever will take place with his religion, unless his parents or guardians express their wishes to have him instructed in the Catholic religion.¹⁰

The 1966-1967 Institute document *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* affirms this as a reality applicable to the entire Institute:

Not all those who come to the Christian school are looking for an education that is explicitly Christian. A contemporary sensitivity to the demands of religious freedom obliges us not to impose indiscriminately the same catechesis on all of our students, especially when dealing with adolescents.¹¹

Elaborating on how the Good News can then be preached in an increasingly secularized, pluri-religious, and multi-cultural context, the 2015 *Rule* of the Brothers advises:

In their contact with people with different religious traditions, or in highly pluralistic or secularized countries, the Brothers seek inventive ways to announce the Gospel: the witness of a Christian presence and fraternal relations, gratuitous service, the experience of prayer in common, interreligious dialogue, and sharing with one another the story of Jesus Christ.¹²

Announcing the Gospel through Dialogue

Thus, we Lasallians, announce the Gospel, firstly, by witnessing to God's love through the ministry of presence and by promoting fraternal relations. This ministry is often referred to as the interfaith "*dialogue of life*," where Lasallians who come from very diverse religious and secular

backgrounds relate to one another and live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations. In simple terms it means reaching out to one's religious or secular neighbor to be with them, talk to them, and just get to know them as fellow human beings. These are occasions where bridges are built between persons who adhere to different religions and secularist views and, in the process, prejudices and misconceptions about the religious/ secular other are reduced, if not altogether removed. This is greatly facilitated when our Lasallian educational communities actively enroll students or employ teachers who adhere to other religions and secularist views not because there are not enough Catholics taking up those positions but because they are convinced that inclusiveness and having the diversity of faith traditions/ secular views within our communities is integral to what it means to be Christian.

Secondly, Lasallian institutions announce the Gospel through providing gratuitous service. When persons of different religions and secular backgrounds engage in this together it is also referred to as the interfaith "*dialogue of works.*" The *Rule* establishes this as very much in line with the Institute's mission:

When they work with Partners with different beliefs and religious traditions, the Brothers seek to establish common ground for cooperation on the basis of the promotion of human dignity, solidarity among all human beings, and the integral development of the individual, in line with the Lasallian tradition.¹³

Many of our educational communities do provide avenues for the students to be of service to the community, especially since the virtue of service is one of the cardinal traits of the Lasallian charism. In the context of pluralist societies, our Lasallian educational communities explore opportunities where we can engage in these acts on behalf of society in partnership with institutions belonging to another religion. Such opportunities of collaborative action are then seen not only as occasions for rendering community service but also as occasions for interfaith cooperation, bringing persons of different religions and secularist backgrounds together for the sake of the common good.

Thirdly, our Lasallian educational communities announce the Gospel through the formal activity of interreligious dialogue, which includes the telling of the story of Jesus. This is often regarded as the interfaith "*dialogue of theological exchange.*" They are occasions for the honest and authentic sharing and exchange of one's faith. This, of course, is a reciprocal process where both parties share and both parties also learn. The *Rule* points out that this dialogue "presupposes openness and a willingness to listen, to learn, to witness to Gospel values and, as far as possible, to announce the Word of God."¹⁴ The study of the world's religions assists this dialogue tremendously as it helps the various parties understand and appreciate the beliefs and practices of their religious, as well as, secular neighbors. A necessary dimension for Christians of this dialogue is the telling of the story of Jesus of Nazareth, with a similar invitation to one's dialogue partner to tell the story of their religious founder or other saintly figures. Important elements in the Gospel story would be how Jesus reached out to the suffering, lepers, Gentiles, and sinners, how he was concerned about the widow and the sick, and the way he responded to and taught about people who were outcasts. For Jesus, being inclusive of all persons was a priority and so, for him, salvation was understood as the ability for the outcast and downtrodden to be accepted in love and be able to live again and, indeed, have life and have it to the fullest.¹⁵ This is the story that has to be

communicated to one's dialogue partner, in view of inviting them to appreciate Christianity's respect for their religious traditions or secularist views.

Fourthly, as Lasallians, we announce the Gospel by facilitating the experience of prayer in common between persons of different religions. This is often called the interfaith "*dialogue of religious experience*." There are occasions where the community worships together by participating in prayer services where no one feels excluded. We witness to a Christian faith which is respectful of the other religious traditions, valuing them as contributing to the spirituality of the world and holiness of all beings. Our Lasallian schools introduce this dialogue by engaging in little steps such as encouraging their students to visit the places of worship of their religious neighbors. Or, we encourage our Christian students to participate in fasting along with our Muslim friends during the month of Ramadan so we can experience our neighbor's religion. Our educational communities also conscientiously adapt school policies and requirements so that our students and staff of different religions are able to practice their faith authentically and give witness to them. We also educate our students on specific religious observances of their Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu students the same way we make announcements about Christian observances such as Lent, All Souls Day, Advent, or Easter. Of course, where these feasts can be celebrated together they are the perfect occasions for facilitating the experience of common prayer and celebrate our unity in diversity.

These are the four kinds of dialogue that the *Rule* and the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) invite Lasallians to be conscious of and to employ as the method for announcing the Gospel in pluralistic contexts. Many of our Lasallian educational communities in Pacific-Asia are engaged in the first and second kinds of dialogue. This is the *dialogue of shared life* and the *dialogue of shared works*. The third kind of dialogue which involves *theological exchange*, or shared discourse, may not be seen as something immediately felt in the primary and secondary schools. Yet dialogue does take place at age appropriate levels. Furthermore, a higher level of shared discourse does happen in tertiary educational communities where the demand for greater appreciation and understanding goes through more rigorous academic processes and standards. In some instances, such as youth gatherings involving students of different faith traditions, there are also some experiences of *shared worship and prayer* characteristic of the fourth kind of dialogue. Where feasible, all our Lasallian educational communities do strive toward making all four kinds of dialogue a living reality. At all levels, mutual respect is a condition; and at the same time, our aim is to build a culture of dialogue as a way of life based on universal rights: right to life; physical integrity; and fundamental freedoms, namely freedom of conscience, of thought, of expression, and of religion. They can be read as symbolizing our readiness to accept and respect fully the faiths and religious practices of our students and teachers who are not Christians or the secularist views and attitudes of some students and teachers who have no religion at all. Such meaningful gestures can go a long way in enabling them to feel a sense of belonging to the Lasallian educational community.

At the end of the day, as Lasallians, we believe in promoting the Gospel by living the spirituality and charism of Saint La Salle in today's world. We believe in discovering and arriving at "the knowledge of truth" by being a humble presence (*with-ness*) and witness (good example) coupled with a simplicity of life and communion with the poor, other cultures, religions, and other belief systems that are secular in nature.

Endnotes

1. This paper is the result of a Symposium on Lasallian Pedagogy and Interreligious Dialogue held from 25 to 29 July 2017 at La Salle College, Bagna, Bangkok, Thailand.
2. Brother Ricardo A. Laguda, who is a former president of De La Salle University-Manila, serves as general councilor of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools for the Pacific-Asia Region (PARC). He earned his doctorate in education from De La Salle University in Manila.
3. Brother Michael M. Valenzuela, who holds a doctorate from De La Salle University in Manila, served as a member of the *Rule* Commission of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (2009-2012).
4. Edmund Chia, who earned his doctorate in intercultural theology at the University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands, is a senior lecturer in the department of theology of the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, Australia.
5. Meditation #193.1 of *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arandez FSC and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994).
6. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2015), #14.1.
7. *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love* (Vatican City, 2013), #46.
8. *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools*, #50.
9. *Nostra Aetate: Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (Vatican City, 1965), #2.
10. *The Lasallian Mission of Human & Christian Education: A Shared Mission* by Brother Superior and General Council (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1997), page 24.
11. *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1967), #39.2.
12. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, #17.2.
13. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, #17.2.
14. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, #14.1.
15. Cf. *John* 10:10.