
A Dangerous Unselfishness: A Different Way of Being in the World

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Giving glory and honor to God, the maker of heaven and earth.

Amidst the joy and thanksgiving of the De La Salle Heritage Days, I want to express deep gratitude and humility to receive such a significant and meaningful recognition from Saint Mary's College of California, and the added privilege to give speech in this sacred space.

April marks an important time in the Lasallian calendar. April 7th marks the anniversary of John Baptist de La Salle's entrance into eternal life in 1719. April 30th commemorates his birth in 1651.

Thus, we find ourselves situated between the death and the birth of our founder and patron – and today, I invite you all to contemplate the beauty, goodness, and truth in this reality. Death is in fact rebirth – both in a biblical sense, and in the everyday moments where the end of one challenge or opportunity begets another. Life is a cycle, and our mortality is a reminder that our time on earth is fleeting.

The witness of De La Salle and his first Brothers, and the moral arc of the Lasallian heritage across 342 years, signifies that the life of the global Lasallian movement endures. As Brother John Johnston, FSC, 25th successor of De La Salle, reminds us:

Few international bodies exist in education today with the kind of numerical power, long history, common heritage, a unified vision, multi-ethnic, multi-religious composition, and cohesiveness that characterizes Lasallian association.³

De La Salle and his first Brothers were confronted with the simple fact that human affairs are desperately precarious. It taught them *la mesure*, a value of humility and perseverance illuminated by the light of the gospel. In the spirit of *together and by association*, Saint Mary's institutional markers – Lasallian, Catholic and liberal arts – align with the new *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission*:

to generate opportunities that promote the transformation of lives, persons, and societies. [The Lasallian] educational perspective aims to build societies where peace, equity, social justice, civic participation, the raising up of common dreams, and respect for freedom and differences are possible.⁴

So, in this moment where we mark the passing of time – the end of an academic year, the continuation of a global health pandemic, the "backsliding" of American democracy, the scourge of violence at home and abroad – it feels necessary to ask:

What will we do with our time to leverage our Lasallian Catholic heritage and mission?

What is required of us to encounter, engage, and create a different world with the spirit of faith and zeal?

With the above thoughts as prologue, I want to explore with you the subject of “A Dangerous Unselfishness: a different way of being in the world.” This notion of “A Dangerous Unselfishness” is borrowed from Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s final sermon, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” delivered 3 April 1968.

The protests after the lynching of George Floyd arrived at a moment when many people expressed a hunger to end the moral pandemic of systemic, interlocking injustices: racism, anti-blackness, poverty, ecological devastation, militarism, homophobia, sexism, and the bankrupt narrative of religious nationalism that ignores these and other injustices.

The nation remains in the depths of anguish and despair, what King calls, “the disjointed elements of reality.”⁵ For him, these disjointed elements constitute humanity’s turn away from the vision and social hopes expressed in the writings of the Hebrew prophets and the gospel of Jesus, instructing us to unleash “the transformative faculty of unyielding, unpretentious, and unbounded love.”⁶

King urges us to embrace the ethic of love grounded in the Gospel of Matthew: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”⁷ This ethic of love—central to all the major religious and spiritual traditions – summons within us a dangerous unselfishness.

Social inequities abound in the church and democratic public, and at St. Mary’s, a microcosm of the church and the body politic. As James Baldwin observes: “To accept . . . one’s history is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.”⁸ Baldwin continues: “To do your first works over means to reexamine everything. Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it.”⁹

While recognizing the intersectionality of systems of inequities, I will spotlight the bankrupt social concept of race secreted from the European Enlightenment.

At the opening of the Twentieth Century, W.E.B. Du Bois asserts: “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.”¹⁰ Though written thirty-eight years after the end of chattel slavery in the U.S., this analysis remains agonizingly relevant today. The problem of the Twenty First Century is the problem of the color line.

Ta-Nehisi Coats, author and journalist, further punctuates our Twenty First Century reality:

[A]ll our phrasing – race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy – serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, contracts organs, cracks bones, breaks

teeth . . . You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.¹¹

To tell the true truth, as Franciscan Sister Thea Bowman would say, bodies, born of other bodies, matter. The struggle to create an anti-racist, more egalitarian democratic society impels us to grasp that your body matters.

Trauma therapist and author of *My Grandmother's Hands*, Resmaa Menakem, opens our eyes to a dimension of race often left unexamined.

[W]e have ingested the idea that the white body is the supreme standard of humanity,” he writes. “While we see anger and violence in the streets of our country, the real battlefield is inside [all of] our bodies [of every color].¹² He continues: “If we are to survive as a country, it is inside our bodies where this conflict needs to be resolved; that “the vital force [behind] white supremacy is in our nervous systems.¹³

Menakem draws attention to the need for white bodies to deal with the uncomfortableness of confronting white body supremacy and begin somatically abolishing it.

At the same time, people of color must interrogate themselves. Menakem contends people of color

have ingested the idea that the white body is the supreme standard of humanity. [E]ven within our own cultures, across cultures, across communities of color, there is anti-blackness that's woven into things.¹⁴

In other words, white body supremacy induces people of color to damage people of color.

If we are to reckon with the pandemic of racism and anti-blackness, we cannot pretend we do not see color because, as Washington University's Kimberly Jade Norwood contends,

[I]t results in a divisive society . . . It [wrecks] havoc within families. It challenges friendships . . . it feeds stereotypes, tensions, bigotry, and hate. The purported blindness to color hurts; it harms; it kills. We cannot begin to detangle this problem if we won't recognize it.¹⁵

Socrates says in line 38a of Plato's *Apology*, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Martyred Guatemalan Bishop Juan Gerardi believed: “Unless we know the truth the wounds of the past will stay open and cannot be healed.”¹⁶

Saint Mary's curriculum and co-curriculum architecture must not constitute a mere “pleasant poetics of charity” but a “prophetic praxis of educated solidarity and social transformation” sedimented in what the ancient Greeks called *paideia* – the grammar of deep education, not mere schooling.

As Cornel West contends, education is not an abstraction. It is something to be enacted every day. Education is a formation to attention, attending to the things that matter not superficiality; it is a

cultivation of self so that one knows who they are based on honesty, integrity, and decency; it is mustering the courage to witness love and hope.¹⁷

More than 50 years ago, Brother Charles Henry Buttimer, FSC, the first American Brother to serve as De La Salle's successor (Superior General 1966-1976), offers this striking insight:

[Attacking injustice at its core] consists in educating our students in a sense of justice, in imbuing them with a thirst for justice, in forming their consciences to be sensitive to sins of injustice, in educating them to use the instruments that promote justice and cast out injustice, in educating them to take seriously their future civic, political responsibilities. This requires a carefully prepared curriculum¹⁸

The Catholic social tradition affirms not only the inviolable dignity of all people, but also emphasizes the responsibility to protect the human dignity of each person, especially those who society marginalizes, minoritizes, and disinherits. Likewise, the Catholic intellectual tradition promotes the development of an authentic community – a community comfortable with and capable of investigating, questioning, and celebrating differences. Catholic higher education, therefore, ought to help us see through other people's eyes, as theologian and educator Monica Hellwig states, "other people from other times in history, from other cultures and societies, and other types of experiences."¹⁹

Saint Mary's can commit to structural equity, diversity, and inclusion from the center of its character and identity – a distinctive charism, heritage, and educational mission. These are resources to answer why we take up this mission-driven imperative to make the College a better place to learn, work, live and play.

Because of our Lasallian and Catholic character, it is possible to advance an anti-racist orientation, to support gender equity, to welcome and love LGBTQ+ persons, to create accessibility to the campus and classrooms for those who face both physical and mental disabilities, to fully embrace the religious pluralism among us. When we harness the power of faith and zeal, as did Saint La Salle, we can welcome all with sensitivity and compassion, in a spirit of association. To recreate ourselves – a different way of being in the world – considers each other's flourishing, bound together to achieve *Ubuntu*, the Southern African expression that means, "I am, because you are."

To conclude, it is strangely holy that this Convocation is sandwiched between De La Salle's death and birth. It's an occasion to reflect not simply on how our time is passing, but more keenly on how much time remains before us – whether short or long. What we do with that time makes all the difference.

My fellow Lasallians, we must remain committed to this work for the long haul. The struggle for justice and the struggle for peace is a long-distance run. A new time presses upon Saint Mary's College of California for a "Dangerous Unselfishness: a different way of being in the world."

Giving glory and honor to God, the maker of heaven and earth.

Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered on 27 April 2022 at the academic convocation held in the chapel of Saint Mary's College of California during which the author was awarded an honorary doctorate.

2. Brother Ernest J. Miller, who earned his doctorate at Chicago Theological Union, is the founding director of the Adrien Nyel Project of the Lasallian District of Eastern North America (DENA), a new ministry to encourage in youth the vocation for teaching within the Lasallian charism. Until recently, he was vice president of mission, diversity, and inclusion at La Salle University in Philadelphia; and he currently serves on the board of trustees of Lewis University, Manhattan College, and Saint Mary's College of California.

3. John Johnston, FSC, "Jesus Was Indignant . . . Are We?" Address presented at Huether Lasallian Conference, Chicago, IL (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2001), page 11. See also, *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 2, no. 1 (2011), pages 45-50.

4. *The Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission* (Rome, Italy: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2020), pages 116, 121.

5. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Towards Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

6. The African American Lectionary, "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday (Beloved Community Day) Lectionary Commentary." January 20, 2013. <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=307>

7. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Loving Your Enemies." Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, November 17, 1957, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>.

8. James Baldwin quoted in Eddie Glaude, Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York: Crown, 2020), page 26.

9. James Baldwin, page 196.

10. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, "Of the Dawn of Freedom" (New Haven: First Yale University Press Edition, 2015), page 12.

11. Ta Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), page 10.

12. Center for Compassion Studies at the University of Arizona, "Resmaa Menakem on Why Healing Racism Begins with the Body." Interview. <https://compassioncenter.arizona.edu/podcast/resmaa-menakem>

13. Menakem interview.

14. Menakem interview.

15. Kimberly Jade Norwood, “‘If You Is White, You’s Alright’ Stories About Colorism in America” in *Washington University Global Studies Law Review*, volume 14, issue 4 (2015), pages 606-607.

16. Amado L. Picardal, CSsR, “The Martyrs of Quiche (Guatemala).” July 6, 2021. <https://www.usgroma.org/l/the-martyrs-of-quiche-guatemala/>

17. Cornel West, “The Historical Philosophy of W.E.B. DuBois.” Dartmouth College, 2017. <https://english.dartmouth.edu/undergraduate/courses/historical-philosophy-web-du-bois>

18. Charles Henry Buttimer, FSC, *Pastoral Letter to the Brothers* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools (December 25, 1972), page 4-5.

19. Monica K. Hellwig, “The Heart of Catholic Higher Education: The Liberal Arts” in *Sacred Heart University Review* (2010), volume 18, issue 1, article 5, page 3. <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=shureview>