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Address from the Presidents of the USA Members of the Lasallian Association of Colleges and Universities

To: Superior General Brother Armin Luistro, FSC, and Council June 15, 2023

James P. Burns, IVD, Ph.D.*

Presidents in attendance:

Christian Brothers University President David Armstrong, La Salle University President Dan Allen, Lewis University President David Livingston, Manhattan College Brother President Dan Gardner, Saint Mary's University Fr. President James Burns, Saint Mary's College, Brother President Thomas Jones.

In addition, Chairs of the Boards of Trustees of the Universities represented were present as well as the various University Mission Officers.

LACU National Chair and Speaker: Father James Burns on behalf of the Presidents.

We are grateful for the opportunity to share our thoughts and reflections, from our perspective, as leaders of Lasallian Catholic institutions of higher education in the USA. While this is not a comprehensive response, it highlights some key areas of agreement, energy, and concern. In the letter sent to us dated January 23, 2023, we were asked to focus on the purpose of the current visit; in brief:

1) fraternity and regionality
2) accompaniment with leadership
3) exploration of synergistic opportunities from a global Lasallian mission perspective

In order to flesh this discussion out more fully, we were asked to reflect on these priorities against the backdrop of the article from the Dicastery for Culture and Education, entitled *What the Church Expects From Catholic Universities*.[1] In light of this, we especially discussed the

[1] José Cardinal Tolentino Calaça de Mendonça, *What the Church Expects From Catholic Universities*, *https://mcusercontent.com/dc86d0df5434daa85dde74c4c/files/ce60997c-bfc3-9f86-7f27-d1a8e7911641/Online_Address_HE_Card_JTM.pdf*

nodal areas identified in the article, namely, 1) identity, 2) mission, 3) dialogue, and 4) pastoral care.

In our comments that proceed here, we wanted to be sure to highlight the particularity of the situation in which we exist within the United States, which at times is complementary to, but often divergent from, the broader context of Catholic higher education witnessed internationally. We also want to highlight the reality of regional differences even amongst our Lasallian schools in the USA. In many of the areas we discussed, we realized we had perhaps more questions and comments than answers.

In relation to identity, we were clearly reminded that if we don't have the four principles articulated in this article, drawn from the main points of *Ex Corde*, integrated into our institutions, we will find ourselves apart from the Catholic Church's higher education mission. As Pope Francis stated, we then run the risk of becoming merely social service agencies.[2] The Holy Father has also emphasized the importance of genuine dialogue in education, the urgency and quality of preparation for members of the academic community, and a Catholic university's commitment to be of service to the Church.[3] We acknowledged the importance of having a Christian inspiration across all peoples within the institution and for the institution itself to have such. We appreciated that there must be a reflection upon the identity of the institution enlightened by the Catholic faith, in particular, the ways this contributes to research. We acknowledged as well that there must be fidelity to the Christian message and that we are all, when we were at our best, in service to God, the people of God, and the human family writ large, which gives meaning to the transcendent value of life. This is perhaps the most critical formation issue today.

Two overarching questions, that remain critical to our very existence, are: 1) Why do we do what we do? 2) To whom and for what are we in service? These critical questions address the concern raised in the article related to self-preservation. We find ourselves in a dual role of trying to be the best universities we can each be, while realizing we are part of something much larger. We are called to serve those on the margins, in the manner of Jesus Christ, as well as those who come to us as sincere searchers for truth, goodness and beauty. We must frequently reflect upon this question of "why"; for if we no longer act in ways consistent with our identity, and fail to understand the role of evangelization as presented within this article, nor demonstrate a commitment to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, then we must ask, should we exist?

We acknowledge that simply asking questions about the "why" and reflecting upon the reality of self-preservation (how we must operate, which requires a need to balance budgets), does not mean we need to or should run our schools any less well. Rather, we see this way of discernment

[2] Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*. Vatican, 2013, paragraph 183

[3] Francis. "Address to the Congregation for Catholic Education." *Vatican*, 13 Feb. 2014, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/february/documents/papa-francesco_20140213_congregazione-educazione-cattolica.html.

as both a commitment to excellence (in all areas) while demonstrating an openness to bring others into our communities in and through our tradition. Nonetheless, in light of the question around preservation, we admit that there is a cost to run our universities and that that means facing the question, "What happens when we can't afford to do so?"

We must address the deep and penetrating reality that faces us in terms of existence. Can and should all of our schools exist, or exist in the same way they do now, even if they are mission focused? This is also directly related to how we use our resources. This is an issue of justice, realizing not all institutions or people can do everything, all the time or in the best way. At times, we must recognize that even if something no longer exists in the way it did before, we take heart from the Gospel message, that for us, amidst trials and even when depleted, that "life is changed, not ended", and a greater, more transcendent reality impels us in what we do and who we are as Christians and Christian Institutions. This understanding also calls us to think deeply about partnerships and collaborations that we believe must exist if we hope to keep the Lasallian Catholic educational mission alive in the USA. If we are able to focus our understanding around the good of a faith-based education in this context of collaboration, then it's less likely we will run the risk of mere self-preservation, but rather we begin to see more fully the incorporation of the evangelizing action of the University to a broader audience.

We also discussed self-referentiality and how we can avoid this if we realize that the transformation we engage in ultimately changes lives and thus changes families and whole family systems. We are less inward focused and more external focused: saving lives, saving minds and saving souls. Similarly, if we are focused on a quality experience, and through this we are led to an internal examination of how we are with others, then we are less likely to become self-referential. Rather critical self-reflection allows us not to lose sight of what is truly important and that is the human dignity and respect we have and owe to our students (for whom we also model this behavior) and all people of good will. We discussed that for authentic renewal to take place, it is not simply about preservation or getting "ego needs" met but we must be focused on the founder's principles[4] and his proven insights.[5] In sum, this focus on what La Salle sought to do with his first brothers, means we bring into sharp focus how we are seen as brothers and sisters, one to the other, in the classrooms and on campus, where all are treated as equals, with dignity and respect.

We discussed the way that the mission of our Catholic universities is always enhanced by dialogue which is often the first place of real encounter in the university. In fact, the very reason

[4] La Salle, J. B. (1695). The Duties of a Christian to God: A Manual of Catholic Instruction. Philadelphia: H. L. Kilner & Co., 1903. La Salle, J. B. (1706).

[5] The Conduct of the Christian Schools. Translated by F. de La Fontainerie and R. J. Thompson, 1935. Christian Brothers Conference.

for a university is the dialogue and encounter between faith and reason. Pope Francis[6] rightly points out how these two always go hand in hand and that we will build a more humane and fraternal society, that is filled with God, if we focus on this complementarity. This aligns well with perhaps the pre-eminent thinker on the topic of university education, John Henry Cardinal Newman. An excellent source to understand this connection between faith and reason is the book "*What We Hold in Trust: Rediscovering the Purpose of Catholic Higher Education"* (Briel, Goodpaster & Naughton). A central premise of that book is the role the Catholic university plays in bringing faith and reason into a real and genuine encounter with each other, never mixing up immediate, apparent goods and ends for the eternal good nor our final end. Within such a context, no legitimate question, sincerely asked, in the search for truth, is off limits. In this way our universities become places of authentic dialogue and discussion creating an environment where civil discourse can happen. If we do this well, and model the way this can be done, our efforts will be accentuated by the kind of persons we are sending into the world, i.e., to be thoughtful, engaged, respectful and loving Citizens.

We discussed the fact that we are all "in this together", seeking to create an environment where all can sense and know that they belong. While incivility and lack of loving respect exist in many quarters of American society, we can be change agents through the way we run our universities. One of the areas in which this takes on significant meaning is when faith awakens the critical senses and can shed greater light on both world challenges and the local challenges we face but always with the mind of Christ. This is perhaps nowhere more evident today than in relation to one of the most polarizing issues to come upon us in the USA, and that is in the space of DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion). These conversations are often very sensitive. We must avoid the temptation to become echo chambers, of the left or the right, while allowing and affording space for sincere dialogue, avoiding the call in some quarters to promote the cancellation of divergent opinions. This is important for us to share as we believe our take on this is a uniquely American, culturally contextualized, phenomenon. And we acknowledge that while this is active within a broad American context, it impacts each of our universities uniquely as we operate in distinct parts of the country. Thus we are affected differently by the current zeitgeist and even how various States respond to this. We shared multiple examples from how we speak to one another, the language we use or are allowed to use, to who is invited and who is not to speak, etc. In addition, each of our contexts is to be considered in relation to the secular realities competing for the attention of our youth and adult learners. In fact, who we all are, sitting here in this room, says something about our own cultural context. It is critical that mission flows into dialogue because dialogue can reinforce or negate the mission.

[6] Francis. *Lumen Fidei: The Light of Faith*. Vatican, 29 June 2013, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html.

Finally, we returned to one key area in which we can enhance the possibility for dialogue. This is through our mission offices where we are creating authentic spaces for people of diverging opinions (people of goodwill), that allows them more easily to speak with one another and through this become examples of fraternal care even if there are sincere disagreements. We believe this is good for our students. This is also part of our pastoral care strategy of authentic encounter. In this, our pastoral activity should seek to model the response of Jesus, who summons all people to friendship with Himself.

In concluding our discussion, we highlighted the fact that all of our campuses are working toward good pastoral care in a robust way (recognizing that we always have more work to do). Yet, we acknowledge that any good pastoral care must go hand in hand with good mental health care. We believe that it's hard to appreciate and integrate the Gospel when one is suffering from mental health issues. At the same time, when the mental health issues are addressed, Gospel realities can become more present and can reciprocally influence, on multiple levels, even greater mental wellness. Therefore pastoral and mental health care must be seen as integral and complementary wherever possible.

Thus we offer our collective thoughts and comments on higher education in our American Lasallian, Catholic context. We look forward to continuing our work, together and by association, within the educational apostolate of the Brothers in the USA, and internationally. We thank you for the opportunity to address such important issues.

*James P. Burns, IVD, Ph.D., who serves as the 14th president of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, earned his doctorate in counseling psychology at Northeastern University.