

The Catholic Church and Lasallian Ministries: Does Ecclesial Geometry Matter?¹

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Next year is the 300th anniversary of *In Apostolicae dignitatis solio*, the Bull of Approbation by Pope Benedict XIII in 1725, which officially recognized the ministry of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Admittedly, as we consider important dates in the Lasallian calendar, this anniversary is far less well-known than many others including the birth and death of the founder as well as the anniversary of the "heroic vow."² Nevertheless, the significance of the Bull of Approbation is described in the first chapter of *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*. The purpose and spirit of the Institute is "to provide a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor, according to the ministry which the Church has entrusted to it."³ As the final clause emphasizes, the Institute and, by extension, all Lasallian ministries are essentially linked with the Catholic Church. The relationship between the church and Lasallian ministry, however, can also be a source of tension, particularly in the context of educational ministries.

I recall a story told by a colleague from a Lasallian university about the construction of a new welcome sign on their campus. As the wording for the sign was being finalized, some at the university felt that "Lasallian" should appear before "Catholic" because Lasallian clarifies the type of Catholic university. Others wanted to emphasize the Catholic identity of the university and suggested that "Catholic" is more well-known than "Lasallian." The dilemma also included whether a comma or coordinating conjunction should sit between the words, that is, whether the sign should read "Lasallian, Catholic" or "Catholic and Lasallian." Those who work in Lasallian educational ministries today understand that this tension is not simply a matter of word order and punctuation. Indeed, the tension between the Lasallian charism and the Catholic Church can even become polarizing in educational ministries. A Christian Brother who served in university leadership shared his observation that:

Among our Catholic students, there are a fair number who are devoted to a traditional, devotional expression of the faith while others are more inclined to seek opportunities to express their faith through service, community experiences, and social gospel precepts. Unfortunately, it appears among many that the first is considered 'Catholic' and the latter 'Lasallian.'⁴

In speaking with other Lasallian university leaders as well as leaders of Lasallian schools, this observation seems to represent the experience at many institutions. For some, "Lasallian" is experienced as more inclusive and approachable than "Catholic," particularly for teachers and students who are not Catholic. For others, what counts as "Lasallian," whether it is being inclusive, generous, or compassionate, has increasingly lost its Christocentric foundation and ecclesial dimension. Why are these polarizing caricatures of Lasallian and Catholic increasingly present and influential?

My overall argument is that the relationship of Lasallian educational ministries with the Catholic Church, as the anniversary of the Bull of Approbation reminds us, continues to be absolutely essential. One expression of this relationship is the juridical reality that the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is governed by the Code of Canon Law⁵ and Lasallian universities are subject to ecclesiastical authority.⁶ Historically, we also know that John Baptist de La Salle was ordained to the Catholic priesthood, founded a Catholic religious congregation, and the schools that eventually became known as Lasallian have always been Catholic. But my argument here is not primarily juridical or historical. In what follows, I am more concerned with the lived experience of this essential relationship, particularly the ways in which the relationship between Lasallian and Catholic can be mutually enriching and life-giving for educational ministries today. In his first significant document, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis proposes that a polyhedron, rather than a sphere, is a more suitable image for how tensions are harmonized in the church.⁷ This shift in ecclesial geometry, I argue, provides a model to preserve the most distinctive elements of the Lasallian charism and, at the same time, maintain the essential unity between Lasallian ministries and the Catholic Church. For this argument to be compelling, it must include, first, an honest assessment of the sources of tension and polarization.

Sources of Tension and Polarization

There are several factors that make it challenging to claim a Catholic identity today. In addition to the sexual abuse scandal, Richard Gaillardetz identifies several cultural currents affecting the Catholic Church, particularly in the context of the United States, including the general distrust of institutions, suspicion toward religious doctrine, and resistance to ecclesial authority, all of which challenge ecclesial belonging.⁸ Leaders of Catholic schools today must also navigate between the growing acceptance of LGBTQ+ issues and the church's moral teaching. The stakes are incredibly high, as the firing of gay teachers and implementation of new gender policies draw national scrutiny as well as disagreement among trustees, alumni, and benefactors.⁹ At the same time, the daunting financial and enrollment challenges facing many institutions have the potential to increase the influence of financial benefactors about how the school handles controversial issues—or, at least, the perception of this. Currently, and certainly even more so in the near future, Catholic schools depend upon a growing number of lay administrators, faculty, and staff while the number of priests and vowed religious—who have hitherto served as the embodiment of the relationship with the church—continues to diminish. For all of these reasons, it is challenging to make the case for the ecclesial dimension of the Lasallian charism and, even more challenging, how it enriches educational ministries today.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis seems aware of this challenge. “At times our media culture and some intellectual circles,” Francis writes, “convey a marked scepticism with regard to the Church’s message, along with a certain cynicism.”¹⁰ He cautions that this can lead those who work in church ministries to “develop a sort of inferiority complex which leads them to relativize or conceal their Christian identity and convictions.”¹¹ He warns further that this can become a “vicious cycle,” whereby “they end up being unhappy with who they are and what they do; they do not identify with their mission of evangelization and this weakens their commitment. They end up stifling the joy of mission with a kind of obsession about being like everyone else and possessing what everyone else possesses.”¹² For Lasallian educational ministries, what Pope

Francis describes can manifest itself, for example, through emphasizing the Lasallian charism over and above the school's Catholic identity or foregrounding the social dimension of the Lasallian charism over and above its explicitly Catholic spirituality. Indeed, it is necessary for Lasallian educational ministries to engage contemporary culture, advances in thinking, and social norms, but the touchstone to judge the truth and goodness of all of this must remain, as it did for John Baptist de La Salle, the Catholic faith as it is lived in the church.

In addition to these cultural factors, there are also lingering ecclesiological tensions that affect every institution that claims a Catholic identity. Although the Second Vatican Council accomplished the most significant reform and renewal of the church in centuries,¹³ earlier understandings of the church continue to exert influence in both perception and practice. Recall, for example, Robert Bellarmine's (1542-1621) perfect society model. Bellarmine's model did not assert the church's moral perfection, but instead that the church, as a perfect society, contained everything essential within itself. Prior to Vatican II, as Catherine Clifford explains, "the basic stance of Catholicism toward modernity, toward other Christians, non-Christian religions, and movements of theism was for the most part defensive, confrontational, exclusionary, and at times triumphalist."¹⁴ Believing that it required nothing from outside itself, the church appeared static and isolated. Internally, the church was divided and unequal. Consider the following description of the church by Pope Pius X (1835-1914): "It follows that the Church is essentially an *unequal* society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock...the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors."¹⁵ This top-down model, following the Council of Trent, preserved an exclusive teaching class within the church for nearly four hundred years.

Whether it is understood as a "paradigm shift"¹⁶ or new "ecclesial imaginary,"¹⁷ the church's self-understanding changed at Vatican II. The council's most significant ecclesiological shift is the priority given to the "people of God," a foundational category comprising all of the faithful.¹⁸ Commenting on this reordering, John O'Malley writes, "The symbolism of the change was potent: the first reality of the church is horizontal and consists of all the baptized, without distinction or rank. Only then comes the vertical reality, hierarchy."¹⁹ In contrast to the unequal society of Pius X with a clear distinction between the *ecclesia docens* (teaching church) and *ecclesia discens* (learning church), *Lumen Gentium*, the council's dogmatic constitution on the church, affirms that the whole people of God participate in the church's teaching office.²⁰ Similarly, the council's pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* no longer described the church as a self-sufficient society—ignorant or suspicious of the rest of the world—but instead as the people of God living in solidarity with all people of this world.²¹ Clearly, the teaching of Vatican II marked an epic reform of the church, and yet both the perception of the church today and its actual practice can continue to reflect earlier understandings. Indeed, Yves Congar, a chief architect of the ecclesiology of Vatican II, affirms the far-reaching implications of the priority given to the people of God at the council, but suggests that these implications "will be discovered only with the passing of time."²²

The history of religious orders in the church is yet another source of tension. When Pope Benedict XIII recognized the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 1725, the Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, and several other religious orders were already active in the church. Each religious order represents a particular expression of the Catholic faith

through its charism, a Spirit-filled gift for serving the church and the world, which typically developed from the founder's own life, ministry, and spirituality.²³ The hallmarks of the Lasallian charism include fraternity, faith in divine providence, and education of the poor. In recognizing the various religious orders and their distinct charisms, the church acknowledges diverse expressions of the Catholic faith and multiple pathways toward holiness. Saint Francis was not Saint Benedict any more than Saint Ignatius was Saint Dominic. Saint John Baptist de La Salle represented yet another way of living the Gospel as did Saint Angela Merici, Saint John Bosco, Saint Teresa of Calcutta, and countless other holy women and men. With the successive founding of each religious order, the church could have decided to curtail new expressions, but instead, it enlarged its tent believing that the various parts were necessary to the whole. Dr. Maya Angelou once said, "We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color." In addition to contributing to the church's "rich tapestry," the religious orders serve as a critical reminder that genuine expressions of ecclesial diversity as well as authentic forms of ecclesial leadership by the non-ordained, including women, exist in the church.

A unique feature of American Catholic higher education is that all but a handful of the approximately 220 Catholic colleges and universities were founded by religious orders rather than dioceses. Religious orders also established many Catholic high schools as well as countless hospitals, social service agencies, and more. In general, episcopal oversight of Catholic education in the United States has been indirect and limited as the religious orders served as the primary link between the educational ministry and the church. As James Burtchaell's study of American faith-based universities concludes, "Catholic colleges and universities have always been more independent from church authorities in their governance, finance, and intellectual initiative than any of the other traditions we have studied, including even the Congregationalists."²⁴ Today, the crucial link between the educational ministry and the church is more fragile as fewer numbers of men and women religious are actively involved in educational ministries. To understand the effects of this demographic shift, Melanie Morey and John Piderit conducted a study of 124 senior administrators at thirty-three Catholic colleges and universities across the United States. They report:

Administrators of Catholic colleges and universities say they want their institutions to remain Catholic. For the most part, however, they lead with words like Jesuit, Dominican, Mercy, Franciscan or Lasallian, instead of Catholic. Mission statements refer to Mercy or Jesuit institutions in the Catholic tradition. Congregational identity trumps Catholic identity. This approach puts the cart before the horse; it is a strategy that undermines vibrant Catholic institutional identity. It is not possible to be Jesuit, Franciscan, Mercy or Dominican without first being Catholic. Religious congregations offer a particular way of living out a radical commitment to the Catholic faith; they are not an alternative to it.²⁵

Indeed, Morey and Piderit's study underscores the fragility of the ecclesial dimension of religious charisms such as Lasallian, particularly if there is not a critical mass of administrators, faculty, and staff who understand, embrace, and are able to articulate the Catholic identity of the educational ministry in compelling ways. Admittedly, religious charisms can be more attractive and accessible to individuals who work in Catholic universities, particularly if they are not

Catholic or Christian themselves.²⁶ The risk, however, is by attempting to be inclusive, the religious charism is detached from the life of the church and becomes a vague and generic concept that is hard to define.²⁷ On the other hand, Susan Sanders rightly points out that “charisms can become important avenues for conversations about Catholic teachings such as human dignity, the common good, sacramentality, vocation, and social justice—conversations that can enhance a college or university’s Catholic identity.”²⁸ Religious charisms, in this way, function as a sort of entryway to welcome faculty and staff into a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Catholic school. These types of conversations require courage, curiosity, and humility; time and trust are also necessary if these conversations will be mutually-enriching and life-giving for Lasallian educational ministries today.

This section is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all the possible sources of tension between the church and Lasallian educational ministries, but rather to identify several cultural, ecclesiological, and historical factors as illustrative. Even more important for the lived reality of this relationship today is whether this tension is creative or polarizing. It is to this question that we now turn.

The Enduring Call to Fraternity

The 46th General Chapter of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was held in Rome in May 2022. In his address to the participants of the general chapter, Pope Francis named “the challenge of fraternity” as one of the “great challenges of our time.” He described this challenge as primarily educational and, thus, affirmed that the Institute is “part of this construction project...in the front line.”²⁹ Francis also encouraged the Institute to remember that fraternity is not only a distinguishing feature of the Lasallian charism, but a foundational responsibility of all Christians, a theme that he had developed at length two years earlier in *Fratelli Tuitti*, his recent encyclical letter on fraternity and social friendship.³⁰ As we consider the relationship between the church and Lasallian educational ministries, one important reason to continue to stick together, despite the possible sources of tension, is because fraternity is central to what it means to be Lasallian. Indeed, fraternity is a hallmark of Lasallian education and Lasallian schools have been called “laboratories of human acquaintanceship and Christian fraternity.”³¹

Even so, the relationship between the Institute and the church has never been without difficulty. Consider the founder’s own fraught relationship with ecclesial authorities including his silent decision to leave Reims for Paris and his insistence that the brothers chose a superior general only to have the election overturned by the Archbishop of Paris.³² Despite various setbacks for the Institute and personal disappointments for De La Salle himself, the founder remained in the church and led others to commit to the same, even though he must have realized that their ecclesial fraternity would be tested again and again. Richard Gaillardetz would often speak about the need to be willing to “wrestle with the tradition.”³³ His point was that if we are truly members of a faith community, then the tradition and teaching of the faith community has a genuine claim on our lives and obliges us, at the very least, to wrestle with it. Following the example of De La Salle, we can neither simply dismiss out of hand what we initially disagree with nor blindly conform to it, for there are church teachings that we will struggle to accept (and perhaps only accept after struggling with them).

In a provocative book, Gerald Schlabach, a Mennonite, recounts his entrance into full communion with the Catholic Church. He argues that the “Protestant Principle” of reform has become over time the “Protestant Dilemma” and the “the nagging dilemma of undoing.”³⁴ In comparison, Schlabach points to the Catholic Church, which, despite all of its internal conflicts, has successfully resisted splitting into separate denominations over doctrinal differences. In a world that increasingly lacks stability, Schlabach urges all Christian communities to practice the virtue of fidelity. Fidelity, according to Schlabach, requires neither blind loyalty nor rigid uniformity, but the belief that unity is critical to Christian identity. “If ‘fidelity’ sounds a bit sappy and pious to some ears,” Schlabach writes, “let me offer an irreverent definition: whatever else fidelity may be, on ordinary days in ordinary parishes, colleges, marriages, religious communities, and so on, *fidelity is the virtue that keeps us together even when we’re pissed off at each other.*”³⁵ In addition to the fidelity that we practice with fellow Christians, colleagues, partners, and community members, Monika Hellwig emphasizes the fidelity that we owe to the mission of Catholic education, even as she also acknowledges that our schools have become increasingly pluralistic spaces. “Those of other traditions who choose to collaborate with the work of a Catholic institution can be assumed to do so because they appreciate the values that are operative there,” Hellwig argues, “and indeed they are often the most committed to the expressed mission of our schools.”³⁶ Lasallian educational institutions must maintain fidelity to their Catholic mission, unquestionably, while at the same time continuing to expand the bonds of fraternity to include newcomers.

Ecclesial Communion

Communio, from the Greek word “*koinônia*,” connotes the full participation and the sharing of responsibilities in community. Even when the word “*koinônia*” is not explicitly used, the concept is operative in the New Testament, patristic writings, and Vatican II documents.³⁷ For good reason, many theologians have recognized the theological potential of an ecclesiology based on the concept of communion for defining ecclesial relationships. *Communio* is a compelling starting point for theologians who seek, for example, to affirm the equal dignity of all the faithful, recognize a wide-variety of charisms in the church, preserve unity in diversity, or develop collaborative structures for ecclesial organization and leadership. Dennis Doyle compares communion ecclesiology to a “playing field” where a range of diverse approaches exist. “All who play on this field,” Doyle writes, “are called to strive for a multi-dimensional approach that includes the broad range of dimensions of the Church associated with the vision expressed in the documents of Vatican II.”³⁸ Doyle thus defines the broad approach of communion ecclesiology as:

an attempt to move beyond the merely juridical and institutional understandings by emphasizing the mystical, sacramental, and historical dimensions of the Church. It focuses on relationships, whether among persons of the Trinity, among human beings and God, among the members of the Communion of Saints, among members of a parish, or among the bishops dispersed throughout the world. It emphasizes the dynamic interplay between the Church universal and the local churches. Communion ecclesiology stresses that the Church is not simply the receiver of revelation, but as the Mystical Body of Christ is bound up with revelation itself.³⁹

In addition to its popularity among theologians, communion ecclesiology received an official endorsement when the Final Report of the 1985 Synod of Bishops declared it to be “the central and fundamental idea of the Council’s documents.”⁴⁰

As widespread as communion ecclesiology continues to be among both theologians and church teaching, it also has limitations. Nicholas Healy is critical of certain versions of communion ecclesiology for neglecting to consider the concrete experience of the church. For instance, noting that the celebration of Eucharist is the primary image of communion, Healy asks: “How visible an expression of ‘communion’ are our Sunday Eucharists when they are so visibly divided by race, class, gender, and political ideology?”⁴¹ Precisely by overlooking the particular context and concrete experience of the church, however, communion ecclesiology can produce an account of the church that is not sufficiently critical. Indeed, in a more recent article, Healy argues, “communion ecclesiologies, whether conservative, liberal, or liberationist, exhaustive or not, avoid any substantive consideration of the sinfulness of the church.”⁴² As a result, versions of communion ecclesiology, according to Healy, “result in a more or less idealized account of the church that is too readily open to ideological and theological distortion.”⁴³ This “blueprint approach”⁴⁴ to ecclesiology runs the risk of uncritically applying the theological concept of communion to the actual life of the church. Accordingly, Healy proposes that the “empirical church” should receive greater focus in ecclesiology. Healy concludes, “by focusing on the day-to-day life of the church we will be better able to avoid the spiritualization and theological reductionism that can result from overly abstract and ideal descriptions of Christian identity.”⁴⁵ In a similar vein, Neil Ormerod also expresses concern that communion ecclesiology is susceptible to theological reduction. Ormerod argues that versions of communion ecclesiology, as a result of over-emphasizing the ideal of the church and overlooking or neglecting its concrete reality, “tend to paper over tensions and conflicts, and when they arise, those who ‘cause’ them can be accused of ‘breaking *communio*’ with the church at large.”⁴⁶ Accounts of church life that affirm equality of membership, full participation, and shared responsibility without sufficient attention to ecclesial structures and practices where this vision is not realized, Ormerod argues, “can effectively mask the real power relations that exist within the church.”⁴⁷ Both Ormerod and Healy, while acknowledging the value of communion ecclesiology, caution against forms that do not take into account the actual tensions of ecclesial life.

A Shift in Ecclesial Geometry

On March 13, 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, then Archbishop of Buenos Aires, was elected pope, referring to himself as the Bishop of Rome and taking the name Francis. As he appeared on the central loggia of Saint Peter’s Basilica and asked the crowd in the square below for their blessing, Catholics and non-Catholics alike were immediately charmed by the first pope from Latin America. *Evangelii Gaudium*, the document referred to as the “roadmap”⁴⁸ of his pontificate, suggests that Francis intends a project of ecclesial reform and renewal that goes beyond his own personal style. Francis refers to this project as “synodality,” which Ormond Rush explains is his “catch-all phrase for how he believes the Second Vatican Council is envisioning the church *ad intra*—in its inner workings—without wanting to separate the church’s inner life with the effectiveness of its outward (*ad extra*) mission in the world.”⁴⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* reveals the foundational elements of Francis’s ecclesial vision. The most obvious feature of *Evangelii Gaudium* is Francis’s repeated reference to the whole people of

God, which is a foundational category that includes both the ordained and non-ordained. Francis emphasizes that “the Church, as the agent of evangelization, is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way toward God.”⁵⁰ The priority given to the whole people of God, first, calls for a reform of ecclesial structures and practices⁵¹ and the mature pneumatology throughout *Evangelii Gaudium* also helps us to see the charismatic structure of the church as well as the multitude of charisms and ministries entrusted to the whole people of God through the Holy Spirit. Further, the recovery of baptismal significance allows us to more deeply understand the responsibility of the whole people of God to participate in the missionary nature of the church. Indeed, synodality, as it has emerged during the papacy of Francis, clearly proposes a renewed understanding of ecclesial authority, structures, and practices.⁵²

As we consider the relationship between the church and Lasallian ministries, Francis explains four principles that can harmonize differences, one of which is “the whole is greater than the part.”⁵³ Francis illustrates this principle with the image of the polyhedron, which “reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.”⁵⁴ The polyhedron is an apt image because it points toward, as Juan Carlos Scannone explains, “a higher synthesis that does not erase tensions, but understands them, makes them fruitful, and opens them up to the future.”⁵⁵ In contrast with the sphere, “which is no greater than its parts, where every part is equidistant from the center, and there are no differences between them,”⁵⁶ the polyhedron’s structural unity does not require rigid uniformity. This is a crucial point and worthy of emphasis because we can confuse unity with uniformity. Doing so results in an impoverished understanding of unity; unity is valuable precisely for its ability to harmonize differences. Reflecting on the need to revitalize the Lasallian charism for today’s global milieu, a long-serving university president reminds us, “It is we Lasallians who must discover new ways to teach that our core Christian dynamic that ‘we may all be one’ does not mean that we must all be the same!”⁵⁷

Indeed, what makes the polyhedron such a provocative image to describe the life of the church is that the polyhedron does not merely tolerate difference but actually requires difference for its structural unity. Francis’s relative comfort with difference and disagreement in the church is helpfully explained in a recent volume by Massimo Borghesi that traces Francis’s intellectual influences. In short, Borghesi argues, “The whole system of Bergoglio’s thought is dominated by the overarching idea of the polarity of life. This is its conceptual core, the hermeneutical key that fuels a ‘catholic’ system of thought.”⁵⁸ Francis is comfortable with tension caused by difference and disagreement in the church because, simply put, “Christian life is *tension*, a drama.”⁵⁹ As Borghesi explains further, “From here comes the idea of a *tensioned* thought, as Bergoglio would say, not ideological, not crystallized in abstract formulas, but tense, always, to grasp the ‘magis’ of God, the opening of God within the immanence of the world.”⁶⁰ Indeed, attempting to eliminate differences through power and coercion, on the one hand, or absolutizing differences to the point of polarization and division, on the other, are both obstacles to genuine ecclesial communion.

Borghesi points to the influence of Romano Guardini for further understanding Francis’s “tensioned thought.” Guardini’s description of two opposites that are neither annulled nor in contradiction, according to Borghesi, was profoundly formative for the young Bergoglio. As Borghesi explains in detail:

The distinction between opposition (*Gegensatz*) and contradiction (*Widerspruch*) is crucial, because it allows us to think of the Catholic *communio* not as flat, uniform unity, but as a dynamic, polyform reality, which for that reason does not fear to lose its identity. Ecclesial unity isn't to be understood as a monolithic block in which unity comes down from on high, in a fixed and direct manner. It is not afraid of accommodating different poles and reconciling them in the Spirit who unites everything, as in a musical symphony. This *communio* is realized in a *dialogical* form, in the patient development of interconnections that does not pretend to negate the accents, the variety of approaches that remain.⁶¹

We have seen how certain understandings of ecclesial communion that are illustrated by the sphere prioritize the center and how each part relates in equal ways to the center. While there is value in this approach, we have also seen how it can also produce an understanding of ecclesial communion that is flat, uniform, and deductive. To represent ecclesial communion with the polyhedron, on the other hand, which accentuates the various poles and peripheries, results in a polycentric image of the church.⁶² The unity of the polyhedron is formed by its various parts without diminishing the distinctiveness of each part. This approach recognizes the distinct parts that make up the whole without minimizing, eliminating, or absolutizing their differences. In all of this, we do not rely on our human effort alone and neglect the work of the Holy Spirit. As Pope Francis emphasizes:

Diversity must always be reconciled by the help of the Holy Spirit; he alone can raise up diversity, plurality and multiplicity while at the same time bringing about unity. When we, for our part, aspire to diversity, we become self-enclosed, exclusive and divisive; similarly, whenever we attempt to create unity on the basis of our human calculations, we end up imposing a monolithic uniformity.⁶³

Indeed, how unity is achieved and maintained differs depending upon whether our guiding image for unity is the sphere or the polyhedron and, even more critically, whether we believe this work is merely a human endeavor or one in which we cooperate with the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

As we approach the 300th anniversary of *In Apostolicae dignitatis solio*, the church's official recognition of the ministry of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, what is required for us to view the relationship between Lasallian educational ministries and the Catholic Church as not only essential, but also as mutually-enriching and life-giving? If this question still sounds too theoretical, we might consider more concretely what the church would lose without Lasallian educational ministries and what Lasallian educational ministries would lose without the church.

The global impact of Lasallian educational ministries is significant. For the more than one million students world-wide, their Lasallian school is likely their most substantial interaction with the church and their Lasallian educators are the visible face of the church. In these schools—at every level of education from pre-kindergarten through doctoral studies—students

are not only taught skills and content but are also formed to become a certain type of person. Indeed, Lasallian education invites students to develop a deeper awareness of the presence of God in their daily lives so that they in turn become inspired to respect the dignity of every other human person, particularly those who are poor and marginalized. Without Lasallian educational ministries, the church's mission to proclaim the joy of the Gospel to the ends of the earth would be greatly diminished. In his day, John Baptist de La Salle faithfully responded to the church's needs, even when this proved painful for him personally. An essential aspect of all charisms, including the Lasallian charism, is its "ecclesial character," which Pope Francis defines as "its ability to be integrated harmoniously into the life of God's holy and faithful people for the good of all."⁶⁴ Following the example of the founder, Lasallian educators today must also be prepared to respond to the church's needs with generosity, humility, and zeal.

As significant as the influence of Lasallian educational ministries is throughout the world, it is but one part of the church's educational outreach. Lasallian education is also a relative newcomer in the history of Catholic education. Indeed, as innovative as De La Salle was in forming teachers for his first schools, he founded these schools in the context of a Catholic educational ecosystem, and he received from this tradition as much as he contributed to it. Similarly, Lasallian schools today do not operate in a vacuum, and much can still be gained when Lasallian educators engage in the ongoing conversations of the Catholic intellectual, moral, and social traditions. Moreover, notable Lasallian hallmarks including awareness of God's presence, faith in divine providence, service to the poor, and community are grounded in the church's moral, liturgical, social, and spiritual traditions. Ultimately, without the church, Lasallian educational ministries lose a vital link to the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ, without which Lasallian education would be unrecognizable to the founder. Therefore, as Lasallian educators today, we must be prepared to both welcome our non-Catholic colleagues and students without judgement or exception while, at the same time, maintaining fidelity to the Catholic mission—as well as remaining open to how our non-Catholic colleagues and students both appreciate and contribute to this mission.

It has not been my intention, in this brief exercise, to provide an exhaustive summary of everything that Lasallian educational ministries and the church would stand to lose without the other. Instead, my hope is that the anniversary of *In Apostolicae dignitatis solio* might prompt Lasallian educators to reflect on their lived experience of the relationship between their Lasallian educational ministry and the church—and, moreover, to recognize anew how Catholic enriches Lasallian and Lasallian enriches Catholic. It is essential for us to invite honest conversations about the countless ways this relationship is mutually-enriching and life-giving while, at the same time, leaving space to name the sources of tension. Reflecting on the two-fold mission of universities to be Catholic and Lasallian, we are reminded that "where there is life there is tension."⁶⁵ As we enter into these conversations, tension can be productive and dynamic and, as the polyhedron illustrates, essential for unity. Even if the polarization that has become commonplace in our culture and politics is regrettably also present in the church and our educational communities, we must remember that it is still possible to hold various commitments in tension. Indeed, it is precisely within our present context that Pope Francis asks the Institute and all Lasallian educational partners to renew our commitment to fraternity.

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² For a detailed history of the Bull of Approbation, see Georges Rigault's *The History of The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, pp. 40-56.

³ *The Rule of The Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome 2015), chapter 1, paragraphs 3-4, available online at:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ChWQsVqODqdkGCe_FEek0BKXYiqcRa_h/view. "Human" was added to this definition during the 1966 General Chapter.

⁴ Brother Stephen Markham, FSC, email message to author, July 22, 2024.

⁵ See Book II, Part III of the Code of Canon Law, available online at:

https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic_index_en.html.

⁶ See *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, Pope John Paul II's apostolic constitution on Catholic universities, is universal law for all Catholic universities, available online at:

https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html. And Lasallian schools are defined as part of the Catholic tradition of educational ministry in *Lasallian Spirituality Today* (Lasallian Resource Center, 2023), p.13.

⁷ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel*, n. 222-237, available online at:

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

⁸ Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Ecclesial Belonging in the Time of Scandal," *Worship* 94 (July 2020): pp. 196-204.

⁹ For example, see Rachel Weiner, "Firing of gay Catholic school teacher could test latest Supreme Court ruling," *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2023, available online at:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/07/11/supreme-discrimination-303-catholic-school/> and Katie Collins Scott, "As Catholic dioceses release new gender policies, grassroots groups demand input," *National Catholic Reporter*, February 1, 2023, available online at: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/catholic-dioceses-release-new-gender-policies-grassroots-groups-demand-input>.

¹⁰ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel*, n. 79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

- ¹³ Richard R. Gaillardetz and Catherine E. Clifford describe Vatican II as “the most important event in Roman Catholic history since the Protestant Reformation,” in *Keys to the Council: Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), xviii.
- ¹⁴ Catherine E. Clifford, “A Dialogic Church,” in *Go into the Streets! The Welcoming Church of Pope Francis*, edited by Thomas P. Rausch, S.J. and Richard R. Gaillardetz (New York: Paulist Press, 2016), p. 92.
- ¹⁵ Pope Pius X, *Vehementer nos: Encyclical Letter on the French Law of Separation* (February 11, 1906), n. 8, available online at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_11021906_vehementer-nos.html. Emphasis in original.
- ¹⁶ David J. Stagaman, *Authority in the Church* (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1999), 3-4.
- ¹⁷ Gerard Mannion, “Magisterium as a Social Imaginary: Exploring an Old Problem in a New Way,” in *When The Magisterium Intervenes: The Magisterium and Theologians in Today’s Church*, edited by Richard R. Gaillardetz (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), p.120.
- ¹⁸ For a detailed history of this process including the critical contribution by Cardinal Suenens, see Jan Grootaers, “The Drama Continues Between the Acts: The ‘Second Preparation’ and Its Opponents,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 391-412. Grootaers describes how the council gradually shifted away from the pre-Vatican II hierarchical model of the church. For more on the concept of “people of God” including its biblical origins, liturgical use, pastoral significance, and theological development, see Yves Congar, O.P., “The Church: The People of God” in *Concilium*, vol. 1, edited by Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press, 1965), pp. 11-37.
- ¹⁹ John O’Malley, S.J., *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 178.
- ²⁰ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n. 12. All quotations from Vatican II are taken from Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992). According to the council, magisterial teaching, however authoritative, does not change the fact that the whole people of God, assisted by the Holy Spirit, contribute to the understanding and appropriation of God’s word. As Gaillardetz argues, there is a way to understand magisterial teaching authority that does not erase the active role of the faithful. I also agree with his distinction that one can respect the authority of the magisterium and be critical of the excessive exercise of teaching authority, or what he calls “magisterial activism,” in “Engaging Magisterial Activism Today,” *Horizons* 39 (2012): 230. Gaillardetz also calls attention to the different levels of teaching and degrees of authority.
- ²¹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n. 1.
- ²² Yves Congar, O.P., *This Church That I Love* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1969), p. 11.
- ²³ For a concise definition of “charism” in the context of Catholic education, see James Arthur, *Philosophies of Catholic Education: Linking Neo-Scholastic Legacies and Contemporary Concerns* (New York: Routledge, 2024), p. 32.
- ²⁴ James T. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), p. 562.
- ²⁵ Melanie Morey and John Piderit, “Identity Crisis: Dramatic action is needed to ensure a distinctly Catholic education,” *America* (October 13, 2008), available online at: <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/671/article/identity-crisis>.

²⁶ The desire to be hospitable to non-Catholic colleagues and students is yet another source of tension. Former Superior General Brother John Johnston, FSC, acknowledged this tension, writing, “While we might like to credit De La Salle with pioneering in the ecumenical movement, we cannot. For De La Salle, to be Christian was to be Catholic; to be Catholic was to be Christian,” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 10:2 (2019): p.125.

²⁷ See James Arthur, *Philosophies of Catholic Education: Linking Neo-Scholastic Legacies and Contemporary Concerns* (New York: Routledge, 2024) ,p. 34.

²⁸ Susan M. Sanders, RSM, “Charism, Congregational Sponsors, and Catholic Higher Education,” *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* 29:1 (2010) : p. 15.

²⁹ Pope Francis, *Address to Participants in the 46th General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (May 21, 2022), available online at:

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/may/documents/20220521-fratelli-scuole-cristiane.html>.

³⁰ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship* (October 3, 2020), available online at:

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

³¹ Edgard Hengemüle, FSC, “The Lasallian University,” in *Reflections on Lasallian Higher Education*, ed. Craig J. Franz, FSC (Moraga, CA: International Association of Lasallian Universities, 2006), p. 50.

³² For more on De La Salle’s relationship with the church, see Brother George Van Grieken, FSC, *The Teacher’s Saint* (Washington, DC: Christian Brothers Conference, 2019), pp. 51-52; 67-68; 73 and 77.

³³ See for example, Richard R. Gaillardetz, “The State of the Church, 2011,” available online at: <https://theprogressivecatholicvoice.blogspot.com/2011/03/richard-gaillardetz-on-need-to-wrestle.html?m=0>.

³⁴ Gerald W. Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), pp. 32-33.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁶ Monika Hellwig, “Fidelity: The University as Catholic and Lasallian,” *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 14:1 (2023): p. 146.

³⁷ Christopher O’Donnell, O.Carm., “Communion- Koinônia” in *Ecclesia: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), pp. 94-95. For example, “koinônia” is used to describe life in the early Christian Community in Acts 2:42. But it is not used in 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 and Romans 12:4-8, the well-known texts describing the Christian community as one body with many members, even though these texts do express the ecclesial understanding of *communio*. For a brief and helpful New Testament understanding of communion, see John R. Quinn, *Ever Ancient, Ever New: Structures of Communion in the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), pp. 1-7.

³⁸ Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Vision and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 172.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁰ Final Report, II.C.1. The text of the Synod’s Final Report can be found in *Extraordinary Synod - 1985* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1985), pp. 37-68.

- ⁴¹ Nicholas M. Healy, “Communion Ecclesiology: A Cautionary Note,” *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (1995): p. 447.
- ⁴² Healy, “Ecclesiology and Communion,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 3 (2004): p. 274.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 276. Here Healy defines “blueprint ecclesiologies” as “the product of taking a single image or concept, such as sacrament body of Christ, *koinonia* or communion, and people of God, and making this the systematic principle governing a normative and detailed description of what the church ought to be—or already is, albeit invisible or at its deepest depths—together with the actions it should perform and the visible form it should take.”
- ⁴⁵ Healy, “Communion Ecclesiology: A Cautionary Note,” p. 452.
- ⁴⁶ Neil Ormerod, “A (Non-*Communio*) Trinitarian Ecclesiology: Grounded in Grace, Lived in Faith, Hope, and Charity,” *Theological Studies* 76 (2015): p. 455.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 455-456.
- ⁴⁸ Juan Carlos Scannone, S.J., “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People,” *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): p. 126.
- ⁴⁹ Ormond Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): p. 303.
- ⁵⁰ Francis, *Evangelli Gaudium*, n. 111.
- ⁵¹ Rafael Luciani, *Pope Francis and the Theology of the People* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), p. 143.
- ⁵² Synodality, however, ought not be confused with a sort of ecclesial democracy. Genuine ecclesial communion—not majority rule—is the aim of a synodal church.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, n 222-237.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 236.
- ⁵⁵ Juan Carlos Scannone, S.J., “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People,” *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): p. 130.
- ⁵⁶ *Evangelli Gaudium*, n. 236.
- ⁵⁷ Louis DeThomasis, FSC, “Lasallian Higher Education: A Quest Filled with Paradoxical and Ambiguous Shades of Reality” in *Reflections on Lasallian Higher Education*, ed. Craig J. Franz, FSC (Moraga, CA: International Association of Lasallian Universities, 2006), p. 65.
- ⁵⁸ Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s Intellectual Journey* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), p. 141.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- ⁶² Austen Ivereigh notes the influence of Yves Congar in Bergoglio’s understanding of periphery in *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014), 93-94. For Congar’s writing on the relationship between the center and the periphery, see *True and False Reform in the Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), pp. 237-242.
- ⁶³ Francis, *Evangelli Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel*, n. 131.
- ⁶⁴ Francis, *Evangelli Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel*, n. 130.
- ⁶⁵ Monika Hellwig, “Fidelity: The University as Catholic and Lasallian,” *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 14:1 (2023): p.146.