

New Maps of Hope in a Fragmented World: A Pathway to Creative Fidelity, Prophetic Audacity & Inclusive Fraternity¹

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Buongiorno! Like Peter in awe at the sight of the transfigured Jesus, I am happy to exclaim, "Lord, it is good that we are here . . . in LASSCA." Not being familiar with your annual gathering, when Brother Chris first broached the idea, I thought we were visiting Alaska. I need to pay very close attention to where Chris brings me. I would still put Alaska in my bucket list, but that would have to wait until after I finish with my visits to the 82 sectors of the Institute. My pastoral visit to Argentina and Mozambique in the coming days will count as sector number 73 and 74, respectively. We're getting there.

But back to LASSCA, with respect to the men-women ratio in this gathering, I have been told that it has been increasing over the years but we still need to make sure that the odds are really good by challenging with affirmative action Alaska's outdated tourism marketing campaign, "Ten good men for every woman."

Yesterday, when Fr. John during our Sunday Eucharist mentioned that you would need to invest around \$75 million to open one school in these parts, he already framed our discussions today. From a human perspective, every Lasallian school we manage and keep afloat is precious for families, society, and the country. Thank you to our Brothers Visitor, our District Bursars and Treasurers, our school heads, and finance teams for keeping our schools open. Despite the complex problems you face, please resist the temptation to give up.

Like small boats in the open sea and as your theme reminds us, our educational mission needs to be **anchored in faith**. Pope Leo XIV's most recent Apostolic Letter, *Drawing New Maps of Hope* describes with prophetic clarity the current global context: fragmentation and violence, rapid technological change and deepening inequality, mobility and displacement, and that quiet but pervasive erosion of trust-mistrust in institutions, in narratives of progress, and often even in the future itself.

In my recent visits to our schools in New Orleans and Covington, I became even more appreciative of the investment made by the U.S. Districts and your schools in Lasallian formation programs for many decades now. That is your Lasallian anchor amid turbulent waters. You are very well prepared to meet today's challenges.

As the Holy Father insists:³

Where educational communities allow themselves to be guided by the word of Christ, they do not retreat, but are revitalized; they do not build walls, but bridges. They respond with creativity, opening up new possibilities for the transmission of knowledge and

meaning in schools, ...professional...training, ...youth ministry, and research, because the Gospel does not grow old but makes “all things new” (Rev 21:5).

I like the image he presents – **drawing new maps**. The key challenge is akin to what many business gurus call a paradigm shift from a *red ocean thinker* to a *blue ocean strategist*. We cannot simply rely on the old master plan; instead, we must begin **educating in motion** – that is, innovate and adapt in real-time, especially in navigating complex, future-oriented challenges.

This new pathway for Catholic educators requires: (a) openness and humility to embrace the journey to a land of uncertainty, (b) deep, honest listening to young people and full attention to the signs that are emerging, and (c) strengthened resolve and purposeful courage to walk in synodality towards a shared Gospel vision through collective action.

Your Squadra in Rome has borrowed a powerful image from organizational change mentor Robert Quinn – *building the bridge as you walk on it*⁴ – that is, learning new skills, adapting to novel situations, and innovating as problems appear. It is in this light that the LASSCA Conference remains as a privileged space where Lasallian educators in the country can draw new pathways for the educational ministry not with ready-made roadmaps nor with Aristotelian syllogisms but from the lived experience of navigating through critical issues and practical problems that keep you awake at night: declining enrollment and rising operating costs, Catholic and Lasallian identity, religious liberty and government regulation, evolving technology and student wellbeing, equity and access. You know these issues and eat them for breakfast. As the good pastor in Rome enjoins us, “Do not dare retreat, revitalize!” Onward, Christian soldiers!

The challenge to LASSCA and RELAN is to ensure that your conferences lead to a type of systems thinking which focuses on solving complex problems instead of just finding quick fixes. After listening to clever ideas, you cannot return home from this conference still imprisoned in the silo of your respective institution. The next two days could be a *kairos* moment when you unlock root causes, create causal loop diagrams, map relationships, and hopefully test some key solutions that just need to be teased out. Don’t look for solutions elsewhere. They are right before your eyes, but you need to pay attention and begin to seriously plan together instead of just sharing best practices so you can continue to do it alone.

Education as an Act of Hope and a Work of Love

At the heart of Pope Leo’s letter is a conviction that resonates deeply with our experience: *education is an act of hope and a work of love*. Talk about hope to those who care enough to pick up the remains of around 150 girl-students who perished last Saturday in the U.S.-Israeli military attack on the town of Minab in Iran. In this august hall of eminent educators, I echo the conviction posted online by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor yesterday: “*The blood of children in classrooms marks the failure of all humanity.*”

The world continues to experience much suffering and frustration arising from the failure of political systems to address humanity’s most basic needs. There is so much hopelessness and anger, but also growing skepticism, and debilitating resignation to the way things stand now. These negative sentiments reinforce the belief that conflict, exclusion, and inequality are

inevitable, and there is no way out of the mire we find ourselves in. The question is: **how can we act locally but think globally?** For a start, LASSCA would need to connect effectively not only with the Lasallian schools in the country but also engage in a series of dialogues with the other regional associations or networks of schools outside of the USA. Sometimes, the most profound solutions to domestic problems have already been tried and tested in another local context. The other question then is: **are we ready to share our insights but also sit, listen, and learn from the experience of others?**

We are in the midst of a global education crisis. But our mantra is not to give up. Educators resist. Pope Leo reminds us: *every educational venture is an investment in hope and a work of love*. That is what we do when we reopen schools with a makeshift classroom after the devastation inflicted by a cyclone that hit parts of Madagascar. I should know, coming from a country visited by more than 20 strong typhoons every year.

When one of the strongest typhoons years back devastated five regions in the Philippines, I visited a public school site. There I met a teacher in her simple house dress and slippers standing in front of what used to be a schoolhouse. I asked her how her folks were and she pointed at the hill below where her house once stood but was now under water. She told me she came to our school to check if the students and teachers were alright. I tried to cheer her up, put my hands on her shoulders and remarked, “You seem to have lost everything, but you did not forget to put on your red lipstick.” She looked at me and said, “But Brother, with my lipstick on I can cheer up our students and teachers and encourage them to be strong and resilient.” That is **love in bright red** on someone’s lips.

Just recently, I heard the brutally honest reflection of a Lasallian educator pointing out that his excellently run school unfortunately is “offensively Caucasian” and he hopes that his team can work collectively towards greater diversity. That is **hope in bright yellow** on the façade of his institution.

The Power of the Catholic School Network

The Global Catholic Education Report of 2020 “highlights the achievements of Catholic education as ‘the largest non-governmental school network in the world’ delivered to more than 62 million students from preschool to Year 12 in more than 220,000 schools in both developing and developed countries . . .” The same report estimates that the combined efforts of the network of Catholic schools worldwide “save governments US\$63 billion in 38 countries and also contributes to human capital wealth to the tune of US\$12 trillion.”⁵ The Lasallian global network contributes 1.6% to this investment in hope. That is love in action and money put where our mouth is.

Despite our reach, the 2024 World Inequality Database (WID), report on victims of systemic inequalities in the world today where “the poorest 50% of the population consistently lags behind the top 10% of the population in every region.”⁶

It is in this light that we may need to pay more attention to Pope Francis’ dream of *Reinventing the Global Compact on Education* by creating “a broad alliance, to form mature individuals

capable of overcoming division and antagonism, and to restore the fabric of relationships for the sake of a more fraternal humanity.”⁷ His compelling vision for education draws together people of good will-across cultures, beliefs, and professions – to help transform our world and to reshape social structures in accordance with God’s dream for humanity and all of creation. When one looks at the examples of schools that have closed, one may notice that very few fail through a dramatic collapse. In most instances they rest on their laurels and get stuck in their comfort zone – supported by their past reputation or surviving through incremental improvements – until relevance quietly erodes. This kind of decline is sometimes referred to as *failing comfortably*. The schools that survive and thrive exhibit honesty to question inherited assumptions and courage to think outside the box.

Towards a Sustainable Future

I am sure you are familiar with Quentin Wodon’s 2021 study published in the *Journal of Catholic Education* which notes that in the United States alone, Catholic school enrollment has declined for more than 50 years, falling from approximately 5.2 million students in the mid-1960s to fewer than 2 million today, a trend that has placed severe strain on the financial viability of many schools.⁸ Wodon’s analysis makes clear that affordability is a central driver of this decline. In the absence of sustained public funding, parents shoulder most of the cost of Catholic education out of pocket. The same study also points to additional factors, including competition from publicly funded charter schools, changing parental perceptions, and broader processes of secularization that have weakened traditional ties between communities and Catholic schools. These dynamics suggest that financial viability is embedded within a wider ecosystem of cultural, social, and policy-level forces. What appears, then, is not a problem with an easy or universal solution, but a persistent tension between competing directions that must be faced honestly.

I do not believe that we are anywhere near an effective strategy to address this dilemma. Would teaching congregations be ready to abandon competition in favor of working collaboratively? Would autonomous institutions, still thriving within the protected enclave of their respective national or regional systems, recognize the opportunity cost of failing to maximize the potential of the global network of Catholic institutions? This may be the first step towards resolving the problem, not as independent entities but as a network of schools with a shared Catholic vision and mission. This will transform seemingly irreconcilable pulls into a creative tension that could bring about positive change and new ways to sustain the mission.

Education Beyond Bricks and Mortar

In light of seeking new pathways and drawing new maps, there is also a need to rethink our educational strategies considering the socio-political realities and the opportunities offered by the latest technologies. It seems to me that the traditional model of education, centered almost exclusively on constructing physical campuses for students, can be very limiting, maladaptive, and inadequate to respond to emerging needs.

Can we begin to imagine schools without bricks? While educational hubs remain indispensable, can our schools create a network of interdependent units in an integrated global ecosystem of

learning and then increase our enrollment dramatically by offering hybrid programs to those who cannot physically come to our campuses?

Drawing New Maps of Hope is a pastoral invitation and an urgent appeal to Catholic educational leaders to leave our comfort zones and resist the illusion that we may remain self-sufficient and/or isolated from other educators. Pope Leo XIV reminds us that “Christian education is a collective endeavor: no one educates alone.”⁹ His predecessor, Pope Francis, reminds us that we “need to create an ‘educational village’” where we all “share the task of forming a network of open, human relationships... cleared of discrimination.”¹⁰ I trust that our LASSCA Conference will continue opening new networks of open, human relationships committed to invest in hope and act in love.

Live, Jesus, in our hearts, forever!

¹ These remarks were presented at the LASSCA Conference (Lasallian Association of Secondary School Chief Administrators), held in Houston, Texas, on March 2, 2026, as part of the conference convened from March 1-4, 2026.

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³ Pope Leo XIV. 2025. “Drawing New Maps of Hope,” Apostolic Letter on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of *Gravissimum educationis*. <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/>

⁴ cf. Robert E. Quinn. 2004. “Building the Bridge as you walk on it.” *Leader to Leader*, Wiley-Blackwell.

⁵ Marilyn Rodrigues. 2020. “Global report highlights Catholic education,” in *The Catholic Weekly*, June 12. <https://catholicweekly.com.au/exclusive-global-report-highlights-catholic-education/>

⁶ WID. World. 2024. “10 Facts on Global Inequality in 2024,” in *World Inequality Database* (WID), Nov 19. <https://wid.world/news-article/10-facts-on-global-inequality-in-2024/>

⁷ Pope Francis. 2021. *Global Compact on Education: Vademecum*. <https://www.educationglobalcompact.org/resources/Risorse/vademecum-english.pdf>

⁸ Quentin Wodon. 2021. “Declining Enrollment in Catholic Schools in the West and Insights from the United States,” in *Journal of Catholic Education*, 24 (1). <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2265&context=ce>

⁹ Pope Leo XIV. 2025. “*Drawing New Maps of Hope*,” *ibid*.

¹⁰ Pope Francis. 2019. Message for the Launch of the Global Compact on Education. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190912_messaggio-patto-educativo.html