

## BUILDING A COMMON PROGRAM LASALLIAN EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT

This conference presents the guidelines of the Lasallian Research & Resources Service for the next seven years. Participation at 3th Symposium on Lasallian Research Minneapolis, Saint Mary's of Minnesota University, September 28 to 30, 2014.

**Key-words:** Gospel values, catechesis, teaching/learning process, Teacher identity, Teacher spirituality, citizenship, human rights, Lasallian memory.

Over the course of the next seven years, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools will experience new leadership under Brother Robert Schieler and his new General Council. Also during this period we will be reminded of some important anniversaries of events from the period of foundation:

- in 1717 Brother Barthelemy becomes the first Brother Superior General;
- in 1718 the Second General Chapter writes the Common Rules of the Brothers of the Christian Schools;
- in 1719 John Baptist de La Salle dies in Rouen;
- in 1720 the first edition of the Conduct of the Christian Schools is published;
- in 1721 Brother Bernard writes the first biography of De La Salle.

From decisions made at the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter, held in Rome from April 22 to June 8, 2014, we, the Lasallian world, will be invited to give witness in the Church and in the world of our reason for being a community of educators, Brothers and Lasallians, with a three-hundred year old program which is able to dialogue with the educational realities of today and tomorrow.

To accomplish this, it is the hope of the *Service of Lasallian Research & Resources* of the Generalate to promote an ambitious project of publishing five collective works on the following topics. We hope to do this with the support of the University network that makes up the *Association of Lasallian Universities* (IALU):

1. Promoting Gospel values and catechesis in Lasallian institutions.
2. The Lasallian teaching/learning process for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
3. The Identity and Spirituality of Lasallian teachers.
4. Citizenship and Human Rights in Lasallian institutions.

## 5. Lasallian memory and educational journeys.

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Each topic corresponds to a challenge that we Lasallians have identified as being essential in order to understand the present and the future of our educational mission. This mission needs to be renewed continually in order to be faithful to its founding purpose. During this presentation we would like to discuss the opportunities for the Lasallian universities that will be participating in the production of these publications. The goal is to present them to the whole Institute in 2020.

### *1. Point of departure: Building Lasallian thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

We Lasallians were born in schools and for schools. John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers constructed not only a community experience and common plan for life, but also an educational discourse proper to them which gave them consistency and personality. As Brother Maurice-August stated in the first volume of *Cahiers lasalliens number 1*, the term *Lasallian* is not a dubious neologism; on the contrary it points out "...what in history, literature, education and spirituality is centered on the person, the written work and the social results of the Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, Saint John Baptist de La Salle" (CL 1).

With the development of the human sciences and epistemology, we feel challenged to look deeply at this heritage, to a time of education and spirituality, and to reconstruct it based on scientific reflection, for the purpose of showing that today Lasallian thinking continues to have pertinence in the world of education in general, and in the world of Christian education in particular. This is how we stated it in speaking about Lasallian education:

To make Lasallian education today an object of study could mean opening the possibility of recovering our educational memory, subject to the ups and downs of a school pragmatism that has marked us as recognized educators. It would be interesting to offer evidence concerning for what and for whom Lasallian education came into being; what were the educational practices that gave it origin and, finally, what future projects did it promote. These three dimensions could serve as a crossroad between what we hope to find in the Lasallian educational discourse: the encounter between a scientific rationale and a historical program, both elements indispensable for understanding a journey that still continues (Munoz, 2011, p.8).

This has to do with: constructing thought, in dialogue with the realities proper to our century, for the purpose of being faithful to the original impetus: "Take care that the school always runs well" (C 57, 11).

### *2. Our way of organizing ourselves: it has to do with re-creating Lasallian research from a perspective of association*

The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools has made tremendous efforts in the last two decades to understand the process of association that gave consistency to the plan of its founders, De La Salle and the first Brothers.

In our case, it's not about theorizing about Lasallian association but about living it out in the

framework of scientific research where Brothers and Lasallians from all Regions of the Institute meet together while overcoming our linguistic barriers, in order to construct a discussion about an era both common and diverse – based on what identifies us as an educational Family as we make known the diversity of who we are. 89

To be associated in a common project, then, we offer the framework so that the diverse voices of the Lasallian world can be made present, express themselves and contribute to the common discussion about who we are and what we do in the field of research that we would like to propose. Above all, and taking into account the option of the Institute, we need to listen to those who work directly in service of the poor, because they are the first and principal educational and ministerial option of Lasallians, and starting from that option we understand ourselves as an educational family with a common horizon.

Concretely, we hope to form five work teams, each one made up of:

- a coordinating council, composed of three persons: two researchers from Lasallian universities and the Coordinator of the Service of Lasallian Research and Resources of the Institute;
- five specialists in an area of study that can offer discussion starting from Lasallian tradition and in dialogue with current reality;
- five Lasallian groups that will offer an original contribution based on the definite plan of their own educational experience.

We are thinking of the number five, understanding that the Institute is made up of five Regions, and from each one of them we can get an original and valuable contribution. There is no doubt that there would be many more experiences and the coordinating team will have to opt for the most significant ones in order to assure the consistency of each publication.

### *3. Five facets of our common experience: this has to do with systematizing what we have experienced.*

As we were organizing work proposals we were thinking about five lines of thought that might give us, overall, a clearer horizon about what we understand by Lasallian thought going forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These lines of thought are as follows:

#### *3a. Promoting Gospel values and catechesis in Lasallian institutions*

The 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter, held between April and June 2013, was aware that we Lasallians came into being within a school that was committed to the evangelization and Christian formation of children and young people.

French society in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was undergoing a time of deep crises. It is there where we Lasallians began to offer a new vision of humankind and of the world, taking the Gospel as a reference point as our first and principal Rule. From there we were able to understand with a new perspective what it means that in a school such as ours there would be daily dialogue between faith and culture.

It seems that John Baptist de La Salle and his associates traveled on their journey during one of the most dramatic transitions in history. Their journey appears to have coincided with the passage from a pre-scientific, medieval worldview, albeit humanistic and influenced by the Renaissance, to a secular, scientific, modern worldview stubbornly committed to its project of discovering new knowledge, freed from the *a priori* preconceptions imposed by authority. In fact, between 1650 and 1700, a fundamental intellectual transformation affected the presuppositions on which Western thought had been based for centuries. De La Salle was born in 1651, and his formative years were guided by a medieval worldview that was already dying and giving way to a new view of human nature, of society, and of history (Sauvage and Campos, 2014, page 12).

Our Lasallian schools today are immersed in a multi-cultural and pluri-religious world that would have been unthinkable for our first Brothers. Nevertheless, today we share with them the experience of a modern world that has lost its reason for being, along with the traditional models of Church and society, and the irruption of something new that is still perceived as something vague. It is in this transition that we find ourselves, to analyze how, in the Lasallian School, the faith-culture dialogue takes place:

- how do we promote Gospel values,
- how do we train the young in their sense of the transcendent,
- how do we encourage interreligious dialogue and ecumenical respect,
- what is catechesis for the Brothers and educators of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,
- what significant experiences can we learn about the Lasallian world,
- what perspectives does the Lasallian school provide in order to live the joy of the Gospel, while following the invitations of Pope Francis...

These are some of the many questions we can ask ourselves in this area. We hope to be able to identify the richness of the discussion that the Institute has maintained over the course of more than three-hundred years.

### *3b. The Lasallian teaching/learning process for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers together wrote a school manual for classroom teachers, over the course of nearly forty years. It was called the *Conduct of the Christian Schools*. Today we could say that it was the result of a participatory process of reflection and action; this is how it is expressed in the *Preface* to the *Conduct*:

This guide has been prepared and put in order... only after a great number of conferences between... the oldest Brothers of the Institute and those most capable of running a school well, and after several years of experience. Nothing has been added that has not been thoroughly deliberated and well tested, nothing of which the advantages and disadvantages have not been weighted and, as far as possible, of which the good or bad consequences have not been foreseen (*Conduct of the Christian Schools*, 1996, page 45).

Of course, the simultaneous method of teaching, systematized by the first Brothers, remains as an historical reference and the Institute today develops a diversity of teaching/learning processes that are surely opening new educational possibilities as we face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many questions could be asked:

- how is Lasallian education in dialogue with current education and, at the same time, how can Lasallian education re-create its voice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century;
- what are the current pedagogical models present in the Lasallian school today;
- what type of educational practices are Lasallians innovating the world over;
- what successful examples (good educational practice) can we get to know;
- what are some new perspectives on education in service of the poor in the current world context...

If the Institute came into being within a school, it would be interesting to state how the school itself continues to be an immense source of activity and reflection for Lasallians today and future Lasallians.

### 3c. *The Identity and Spirituality of Lasallian teachers*

De La Salle not only saw to the external practices of his Brother teacher. Personally he took charge of their deep spiritual sense, their identity and their associative commitment in order to respond, *without looking back*, to the challenges of the school. In order to do that, he left us as a testimony of his reflection a book called the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*.

Throughout the foundational journey of the Institute, the Brothers experienced serious crises. In that way, they understood that the life of a teacher demands the construction of a strong identity and, above all, a profound spirituality. The Institute journey over the course of more than three-hundred years has ratified this initial conviction.

Today, Lasallian teachers are not exclusively the Brothers. We are talking about more than seventy thousand men and women who, coming from diverse cultural and religious worlds, share a common identity as *Lasallians*.

- what new paradigms can help us to understand the spirituality of men and women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, able to commit themselves to an educational program like the Lasallian one;
- what meaning does a Lasallian identity have for teachers today;
- how do we continue to promote Lasallian teacher training for the Lasallian school of the 21<sup>st</sup> century;
- what specific contribution does the Lasallian woman make in the education that we provide;
- what is the contribution of the Lasallian teacher to world education overall...

Aware that the experience of a Lasallian school came into being thanks to a community of men and women who were committed to a concrete program, we value the discussion that is centered around the person of the teacher as an essential subject for the construction of a common educational program.

### 3d. *Citizenship and Human Rights in Lasallian institutions*

Since the 1990s, the Institute has opted clearly for the defense of the rights of children and the young:

At the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter held in 1993, the Brothers from Asia drew our attention to this Convention [of the Rights of the Children]... and then in 1999, Brother John Johnston, Superior General at the time, appealed to the Institute in a letter that was widely read and commented on, to let itself be touched by the widespread suffering of the children and young people of our times, and to set out on the path traced by the international Convention and by national and international organizations which fight for them and with them. The 43<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter of 2000 gave an immediate and reasonably enthusiastic welcome to this appeal... (Bulletin 247, 2000, page 4).

Starting from this Institute commitment and facing the new challenges that the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have thrown at us, we wonder about the role of a school, such as a Lasallian one, in defending the rights of children and the young, not only from the perspective of its daily life (the quality of relationships, the centrality of the student, participatory management...) but also its critical ability as it confronts the society that surrounds it (a prophetic voice, citizenship formation, participation and social transformation). Therefore, we wonder:

- about the inner workings of the Lasallian school, how the rights of the children, young people and the adults it educates are defended;
- about the outer surroundings of the Lasallian school, what process is promoted to defend the rights of the children and the young people in the society in which it finds itself;
- what citizenship formation options are proposed in the Lasallian school as it faces the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century;
- what new areas of opportunity does the Lasallian school present to build up a citizenship that is attentive to the rights of children and the young...

De La Salle, a man who was attentive to the needs of his era, left us some clues in writing about the need for the school to form citizens who are useful to the State and to the Church of his time. Today, more than three-hundred years later, we re-assess those clues in dialogue with the complexity of the world from which the school positions itself as a builder of citizenship. From that commitment, we ask the school for its reason for being in the midst of society.

### *3e. Lasallian Memory and Educational Journeys*

John Baptist de La Salle left us various *memoirs* that he was writing over the course of his life. They have remained as a testament of his personal way of reading God's passing by his existence and that of his Brothers. After his death, the Superiors wanted to keep alive the memory of the Institute and they drew up a first biography with the help of Brother Bernard, who wrote the first version in 1721. Later on, two more biographies appeared from the hand of the Maillefer, a Benedictine monk and nephew of De La Salle (two versions, 1723 and 1740) and from Canon Jean-Baptist Blain (1733) who knew De La Salle in his final years in Rouen (cf. Letters, 1955, pages 13 - 15).

The history of the Institute has been gathered in a not very extensive number of books. Nevertheless, this section is about the recovery of the memory of the Institute in the last one-hundred years. What is involved in working with Lasallian "memory?" Placed within the framework of cultural history, we become aware that the Brothers, from their origins,

developed a collective memory of their life journey through a symbolic code that gave them identity (cf. Graeff, 2014, page 114) and especially, this collective memory allowed them to save the past by understanding the present and envisioning the future (cf. Le Geoff, 1988, page 177).

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After the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and now living in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we ask ourselves:

- what oral memories of Lasallians can we gather and systematize to understand the life journey of the Institute in the last century;
- what processes of representation, what collective images were shaped around and by Lasallians in the last century;
- how do these processes of the construction of memory influence the Institute's gaze towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century...

It is our conviction that in recovering Lasallian memory from the past one-hundred years we will find new reading keys to understand the present and to envision the future of the mission and of the identity of Lasallians.

#### *4. Point of departure: motivating others to have their say in the Lasallian "concert"*

In this research we hope to initiate a more formal and systematic dialogue with the Lasallian Family overall and the world educational community.

At the discussion opens by means of new reading keys, perhaps we can help others to express their particular voice. This point of departure becomes, in turn, a point of departure to advance towards a more inclusive reflection. This would be an exceptional contribution that we could offer to the next International Assembly of the Lasallian Educational Mission in 2020.

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