

EXPERIENCING THE REIGN OF GOD: RECOVERING AND RENEWING THE PROMOTION OF JUSTICE WITHIN THE LASALLIAN EDUCATIONAL MISSION

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ABSTRACT

The basic aim of this paper is two-fold: to examine the contemporary documentary history of the Brothers of the Christian Schools regarding the promotion of justice and to urge a progressive movement towards recovering and renewing the biblical call of justice as a constitutive dimension of the Lasallian Educational Mission. The emphasis on God's reign signifies that the biblical motif of the reign of God is a source of light that sanctifies participation by Lasallian educators in the Gospel mission and as a means of salvation. The author offers a narrative attending three types of normative sources of the Lasallian heritage covering the period 1967 – 2000: the Declaration, pastoral letters, and circulars. The joyful task of making the world more fit for children and young people is not something we can accomplish once and for all. Rather, with a discerning spirit, it is an ideal that we hold before us as we keep exploring and implementing an education for solidarity and justice, which orients our students and ourselves toward the common good—what the reign of God requires of us.

Key-words: experience, God's reign, justice, children's rights, youth, Lasallian heritage.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Mark 9, 33-37

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Mark 10, 13-16

Introduction

85

The task of building the reign of God never ends. The Holy Spirit moved John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers of the Christian Schools to build God's reign through the mission field of Christian education and evangelization of children and youth, especially those impoverished, abandoned, and marginalized. Disturbed by the social realities faced by children of materially poor and working class families, De La Salle "came to discern, in faith, what God wanted the mission of the Institute to be."¹ Although the Founding Story and Vision of De La Salle and his first Brothers do not change, our interpretation and appropriation do. At times, we have to reexamine the communal understanding and application of particular aspects of the Founding Story and Vision - a story and vision that comes out of and is informed by Scriptures.

The Synoptic Gospels provide a vivid portrait of Jesus' teaching and practice regarding children. When we look closely, we find Jesus welcoming children and conferring on them the blessings of the reign of God. Jesus' attitude towards children comes out of a rich Jewish scriptural identity in which "[c]hildren have a fundamentally positive significance and role in Old Testament-Jewish tradition,"² writes Judith Gundry-Volf of Yale Divinity School. "They are seen as a divine gift and sign of God's blessing, in accordance with the very blessing of the Creator upon humanity in primal history."³ Drawing on these scriptural roots, Brother John Johnston, FSC, Superior General (1986-2000), in his seminal 1999 pastoral letter, *On the Defense of Children, the Reign of God and the Lasallian Mission*, grounds his prophetic message with Mark 10: 13-16, a focal story situated within the larger Markan narrative on discipleship. New Testament scholar Daniel Harrington, SJ, explains that writers in the time of Jesus presented children "as examples of unreasonable behavior or as objects to be trained. In this passage {Mark 10}, they are taken seriously as persons and enjoys a relationship with Jesus and the kingdom."⁴ In Mark 9:30-37, a crucial part of the Markan sequence, Jesus teaches that embracing a child is embracing Jesus and "the one who sent me" (9:37 NSRV). "Jesus' teaching about receiving children as the mark of true greatness places children at the center of the community's attention as prime objects of its love and service," writes Gundry-Volf, "and requires of all who would be great in the community to serve children."⁵

What De La Salle told the first Brothers echoes today for all Lasallians; that is, the mission of Jesus that we receive "seeks to spread [God's] Kingdom." Though De La Salle makes references to the reign of God in the *Meditations* (Med. 143.3, 207.1, 67.2.), he does not focus on the concept as intensely as theological discourses do today. Signaling its significance, John Paul II devotes an entire chapter to the reign of God in *Redemptoris Missio* where he observes:

[Jesus] proclaimed that he was anointed to preach the good news to the poor. To all who are victims of rejection or contempt Jesus declares: 'Blessed are you poor.' What is more, he enables such individuals to experience liberation even now, by being close to them, going to eat in their homes, treating them as equals and friends, and making them feel loved by God, thus revealing his tender care for the needy and for sinners.⁶

Thomas Groome, a leading thinker and practitioner in Christian religious education, asserts that the meta-purpose of educating in faith is the reign of God. He writes: "For Christian religious education, it provides the ultimate hermeneutical principle for what to teach from the tradition, the

¹ *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, 2008), 2.11, 27.

² Judith Gundry-Volf, "To Such As These Belongs the Reign of God: Jesus and Children," *Theology Today* 56 no.4 (2000): 470.

³ *Ibid.*, 476.

⁴ Daniel Harrington, *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 618.

⁵ Gundry-Volf, *Ibid.*, 476.

⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (Vatican City: Papal Apostolic Letter, December 7, 1990), 4.

primary guideline for how to teach it, and the direction of its politics.”⁷ Consider numbers five and eight of the *Rule* of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Here the Institute identifies that its mission involves revealing God’s kingdom: “It is by faith that the Brothers, ‘cooperators with Jesus Christ,’ consecrate their whole existence to the building up of the Kingdom of God through the service of education.”⁸ The *Rule* states further: “Through the promotion of justice and peace, [the Brothers and Lasallian Partners] cooperate in the building up of the kingdom of God.”⁹

The emphasis on God’s reign in the above expressions concisely and vividly signify that the biblical motif of the reign of God is a source of light that sanctifies participation by Lasallian educators in the Gospel mission “... as a sign of the kingdom and as a means of salvation.”¹⁰ Discharging the grand task of responding to the educational and spiritual needs of those entrusted to our care requires the Institute to renew and diversify its ministries—it is a reflection of reading the “signs of the times.” In his April 1972 pastoral letter “It is the Church That We Are Serving”, Brother Charles Henry Buttimer, FSC, Superior General (1966-1976), maintains: “We must open ourselves to the Spirit who speaks to us in prayer, and at the same time listen to [the Spirit] speaking to us in the signs of the times.”¹¹ Reading the signs of the times corresponds, explains Union Theological Seminary Professor Cornel West, to an understanding that the Gospel is in a process of constantly unfolding. Paradoxically, West asserts, it is unchanging, yet embracing and encompassing new human realities and experiences that deepen it.¹² This analysis connotes the dynamic paradox of the Lasallian heritage.

Thus, the basic aim of this paper is two-fold: to examine the contemporary documentary history of the Brothers of the Christian Schools regarding the promotion of justice and to urge a progressive movement towards recovering and renewing the biblical call of justice as a constitutive dimension of the Lasallian Educational Mission. In Circular 412, an extraordinarily discerning text titled *Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice*, Brother Jose Pablo Basterrechea, FSC, Superior General (1976-1986), and the General Council voices hope that Lasallians develop an understanding that the educational service and the promotion of justice are wedded. They write:

Far from considering the promotion of justice as a sort of separate — and extraneous — issue, we should view action on behalf of justice as essential to the broader view of service to the poor that is desired by the contemporary Church, since it gives this service a firmer social dimension.¹³

Although the promotion of justice is a resident motif in many contemporary Lasallian texts, it is not consistently and robustly articulated and emphasized in current Lasallian educational praxis. The statements of the Church and the Institute on structures of injustice and denial of human rights demonstrate why the promotion of justice must have priority within the whole educational program of Lasallian schools and universities to advance the common good.

This paper is not intended to be a comprehensive examination and critique of the Lasallian canon.

⁷ Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 14.

⁸ *Rule*, 1.5, *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.7, 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.3., 27.

¹¹ Charles Henry Buttimer, FSC, *Pastoral Letter to the Brothers* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, April 1972), 9.

¹² Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982): 109-110.

¹³ Circular 412, *Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, September 15, 1980), 10.

Rather, this narrative maps out pivotal aspects of the Institute's recent pastoral legacy that gives voice to the notion that "action on behalf of justice" is wedded to Lasallian educational service. We will attend to three types of normative sources of the Lasallian heritage covering the period 1967 – 2000: the *Declaration*, pastoral letters, and circulars.¹⁴ We hope that the Lasallian canonical texts we selected will enable us to tap into a crucial dimension of Lasallian thought that is largely invisible—"an unknown land."¹⁵

This present historical moment requires a faith-filled vision and hope from which a prophetic Christian sensibility can underscore a revitalized, Spirit-filled movement that is an adequate expression of Christian discipleship and the Lasallian charism lived in the face of human suffering and injustices. With Jesus' way of responding to children in view, Brother John suggests that :

... the idea of the reign of God can serve as an excellent framework for deepening our understanding of the Lasallian Mission. More specifically, it can help us situate the defense of children and their human rights in a theological and ecclesial framework.¹⁶

Here Brother John puts forward the reign of God as a heuristic tool that contextualizes the Lasallian charism and mission that, in turn, deepens our commitment to the "living spirit" of De La Salle. In his letter, Brother John makes these words of Pope John Paul II our own: "We work for the 'liberation' of children and young people in all its forms."¹⁷

As a way of arriving at a holistic theological and pastoral frame for this narrative on experiencing the reign of God through Lasallian education and evangelization, the 39th General Chapter of 1976, in Proposition 1, provides support:

The Brothers must integrate personally...in community...in their institutions, the components of Christian education, the ministry of the word, the service of the poor and action on behalf of justice in the world.¹⁸

This proposition emerges as a result of the chapter's basic orientation that in turn gives shape to Proposition 14:

Each District will submit...a report to the General Council in which it will show how it has put into practice...the principles of the *Declaration* and the orientations of the present Chapter concerning the educational service of the poor and action on behalf of justice.¹⁹

The chapter delegates astutely recognized that action on behalf of justice should be positioned as an integral part of the Lasallian charism and mission. To that end, this paper contends that Lasallians must vigorously and skillfully take up the challenge to unequivocally bind Lasallian educational service with the promotion of justice, especially the fluid and demanding agenda of promoting and defending the rights of children.

¹⁴ The examined sources include General Chapter documents that are typically issued as circulars, in addition to other thematic circulars. A study is still needed of the period from 2000 until today. Brother Alvaro Rodriguez Echeverria, FSC, 26th Superior General, continues to follow in the vanguard of developing social 'teaching' in the Lasallian heritage.

¹⁵ Circular 412, Ibid., 63.

¹⁶ John Johnston, FSC, *On the Defense of Children, the Reign of God and the Lasallian Mission*, (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, January 1, 1999), 31.

¹⁷ John Paul II, Ibid., 43.

¹⁸ Circular 403, *The Acts of the 40th General Chapter* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, 1976), 74.

¹⁹ Ibid., 78.

The Declaration: Reading the “Signs of the Times”

On 6 December 1967, the 39th General Chapter adopted *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration*, one of the Chapter’s principal documents. It helped launch the Brothers and the Lasallian Educational Mission into the modern age. Writes Brother Pedro María Gil, FSC, “The *Declaration* offers a reading of the Lasallian present from the viewpoint of the future.”²⁰ To this day, the *Declaration* remains deeply compelling for understanding the Lasallian Educational Mission. Why? Almost forty-six long years later, the *Declaration*’s remarkable proclamation is no doubt a prime reason for its enduring appeal: what it proclaims about the Founder’s inspiration, about the signs of the times, about the integration of our religious consecration with our apostolic commitment, of the place of religious instruction in our apostolate of education, of the important question of renewal of the educational apostolate.²¹ In the “Foreword” to the *Declaration*, Brother Charles Henry writes:

It appeals to us to renew our patterns of thought... Let us receive this *Declaration* as an appeal... to go forward to the renewal by the light of the great documents of Vatican II. Then we shall understand that this text here presented to you is something other than one document among many. This document imparts the spirit that should animate our renewal and invites us to undertake it.²²

The challenge of this foundational text, “the charter of our adapted renewal”²³ as Brother Charles Henry portrays it, is not merely to think differently, but also to act differently.

The *Declaration* provides the “stage-setting” for constructing the Lasallian orientation to the promotion of justice, peace and human rights as distinctive marks of the Lasallian educational apostolate. This pastoral text is grounded in its contributions to discovering the core message of Vatican II and connecting that message of God’s presence in the struggle for the reign of God, which is to say, the struggle for justice and peace, freedom and reconciliation. Reading this important Lasallian volume, we find that it draws on two documents in particular that shape the long process of completing the *Declaration*’s pronouncements on educational service of those who are poor and the promotion of justice. The two documents are: *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), one of four principal Vatican II documents, and *Populorum Progressio* (On Promoting the Development of Peoples). Pope Paul VI’s pastoral letter on development came out two years after the council, but just nine months before the *Declaration* was approved. Instructed by *Gaudium et Spes* and *Populorum Progressio*, the General Chapter grasped the importance of a firm foundation for the *Declaration* rooted in the wisdom of Catholic social teaching.

With the light and strength of the Holy Spirit, these and other church sources positioned the Institute to discover fresh and anew De La Salle’s spirit “...by responding creatively to Lasallian charism and mission needs that the world presents to us,” asserts current Superior General Brother Alvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC.²⁴ In addition to the formal social teachings of the Church, the *Declaration* reminds us that the Spirit of Jesus is “heard also in the hopes and sorrows of [persons] of our day, in the possibilities and deficiencies of our changing world....”²⁵ Aware of the constant

²⁰ Pedro María Gil, FSC, *That Your School Runs Well*, Gil and Diego Muñoz Leon, FSC, eds., Lasallian Studies 17 (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, 2013), 323.

²¹ Buttmer, *Ibid.*, 11.

²² Buttmer, “Foreword,” *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* English Revised Translation (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Publications, 1997), 2.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Alvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC, “The International Educational Commitment of Lasallians,” delivered on the occasion of his canonical visit to the District of New Orleans-Santa Fe, October 20, 2011, 1.

²⁵ *Declaration*, 11.1, *Ibid.*, 7.

threats to human life, dignity, and freedom, the General Chapter makes this incisive declaration: “It is more necessary than ever that an international Institute should exist for the educational service of people throughout the world.”²⁶ To that end, the *Declaration* points to rediscovering and renewing the foundation stones of the Lasallian charism and the educational mission to encompass the promotion of justice. It sets the stage for recasting the charism so that it relates to the social context in which Brothers and all Lasallians find themselves living and ministering.

Social ‘Teaching’ within the Lasallian Heritage After Vatican II

Six years after the close of the great ecumenical council, the Synod of Bishops gave particular attention to articulating the concern for justice expressed by Vatican II. On 30 November 1971, they affirmed the important link between faith and justice with a profound analysis of the world’s situation in *Justicia in Mundo* (Justice in the World). Acutely attuned to these milestones in ecclesial history (including the social teaching texts cited above), Brother Charles Henry, writing in his 1972 Christmas pastoral letter, invites the Brothers to “unite” themselves to the Fathers of the Synod and Pope Paul VI who have asked all Christians to work for peace through the promotion of justice. The Holy Father has requested that we all work with special zeal for Justice “...each one working in the area of his vocation, each one using his apostolate as a means of promoting Justice.”²⁷ Brother Charles Henry eagerly pledges to the Bishop of Rome “the educative action of our Brothers during 1973 for promoting justice for all [people], wherever we are privileged to serve the people of God through the ministry of education.”²⁸

He articulates two paths that Lasallian educational communities can take up in the service of faith and justice. The exercise of charity, or what he describes as “alleviating the effects of injustice”²⁹ in its various forms, is one way to respond to the demands of justice. Responding “through our specialty, education”³⁰ is a second response towards creating a more just society. It is a response “that is more long range and less spectacular, but even more important than the former, because it attacks injustice at its roots.”³¹ How, then, does he describe “our specialty” in educating and evangelizing that Lasallians are called to bring to bear in the mission field? The way he impressively articulates it remains timely and significant, requiring that we quote the letter at some length.

This consists in educating our students in a sense of justice, in imbuing them with a thirst for justice, in forming their consciences to be sensitive to sins of injustice, in educating them to use the instruments that promote justice and cast out injustice, in educating them to take seriously their future civic, political responsibilities. This requires a carefully prepared curriculum that will be graded and progressive through the years of secondary and higher education. It cannot be the work of an enthusiastic Brother alone. It must be the cooperative venture of all the school staff, both in planning and implementation.³²

He states further that in order to achieve these noble ends Brothers [and all Lasallian educators] must have an adequate education in the academic and pastoral fields relevant to providing an

²⁶ Ibid., 2.

²⁷ Buttimer, *Pastoral Letter to the Brothers* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, December 25, 1972), 4-5.

²⁸ Ibid., 5.

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

³⁰ Ibid., 6.

³¹ Ibid., 6.

³² Ibid., 6.

education in faith and justice. “One of the first steps in promoting justice will be to assure our young Brothers an adequate training in the subject of justice,” he asserts, “and to assure to our older Brothers an opportunity for a short orientation on the subject.”³³ Given the recent arrival of the 1971 Synodal Statement, he urged a re-reading of it, especially the section as regards educating for justice.

While his 1972 Christmas pastoral letter was his most voluminous on the promotion of justice, based on our analysis, Brother Charles Henry continued to give attention to the subject of justice in his later pastoral letters. However, he shifts attention in his 1974 and 1975 pastoral letters to religious education and catechesis, another major concern for the Lasallian mission that corresponds to educating for justice. Still, in one of his last letters as Superior General, he observes that many dioceses and some of our own Districts have established justice and peace commissions. Then, he makes this salient point:

To be alien to these ideals and programs [of these commissions] would be tantamount to being alienated from the gospel ideals and from the doctrine enunciated by the Sovereign Pontiffs, the Vatican Council II, the Synod of 1971, and the Pontifical Commission on Justice.³⁴

Amidst a turbulent decade for the Roman Catholic Church, the Institute, and the larger society, Brother Charles Henry maintained a steadfast focus on listening to the Spirit to sustain the priorities of the *Declaration* for the Lasallian Educational Mission today. While recognizing the ecclesial loyalty that the Brother Superior General expresses to Pope Paul VI and to the heritage of Catholic social teaching, Brother Charles Henry renders a major contribution to the Lasallian discourse on the intersection of Christian education and the promotion of justice. He acknowledges that the interplay between faith and justice contextualizes our vocation and apostolate, rendering the signifier “justice” fresh and vital for Lasallian discernment and discourse. Collectively, his pastoral writings testify to an understanding about Jesus’ invitation to experience the reign of God by serving the “least among us”.

With his first two pastoral letters in 1977, Brother Jose Pablo continued his predecessor’s focus on religious education and catechesis—a major topic of the *Declaration*. Yet, the Brother Superior General returns to the promotion of justice a year and half after the 40th General Chapter. One of the attractive features of his 1978 Christmas letter is that it opens by directing attention to the 1979 International Year of the Child adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. This pronouncement, he recalls, comes twenty years after the 1959 UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child. Expressing the Roman Catholic Church’s support of the International Year, Pope Paul VI observes: “Our great contribution will be to dedicate ourselves—more intensely and in the spirit of fidelity to the Gospel—to the needs of the child....”³⁵ Brother Jose Pablo calls attention to why “this [focus of this International Year] is of interest to us.”³⁶ Describing the Christmas card he sent to the Brothers, he states that it symbolizes “the relationship between the feast of the Child par excellence and the child of today. This child is stretching out his arms towards us a sign of his aspiration and rights....”³⁷ He points to the Brother’s vocation—and now the wider Lasallian vocation—as the basis for what should be our critical awareness and active promotion of the rights of children. Contributing to the promotion of justice and peace — connecting the reign of God with

³³ Ibid., 7.

³⁴ Buttimer, *Pastoral Letter to the Brothers* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, December 25, 1975), 4.

³⁵ Pope Paul VI (Vatican City: Papal Apostolic Letter on the United Nations International Year of the Child, June 1978), quoted in, Jose Pablo Basterrechea, FSC, *Pastoral Letter to the Brother* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, December 1978), 17.

³⁶ Jose Pablo Basterrechea, Ibid., 3.

³⁷ Ibid.

children — begins when individuals within community voice interest in situations of injustice and stand in solidarity with those affected, leading to a firm determination to confront unjust global situations.

In his pastoral writings, Brother Jose Pablo consistently embraces both the rich tradition of Catholic social thought and the unambiguous directions set by the 39th and 40th General Chapters. Like his immediate predecessor, he appropriates the 1971 Synod document —the chapter on education for justice is of particular interest— to inform Lasallian identity and mission in the post-Vatican II era. At the same time, the proceedings of these two chapters provide the warrant for Brother Superior General's emphatic commitment to developing a Lasallian perspective toward the problems of injustice and to become involved in long-term solutions.

Contemplating the 40th General Chapter's lines of action, in particular Propositions 1 and 14 highlighted above, Brother Jose Pablo and the General Council promulgated *Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice* in September 1980, the beginning of the Tercentenary year of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This seminal document represents a significant moment in the public voice of the Institute, continuing the development of a new foundation for the Lasallian Educational Mission's embrace of the promotion of justice. This text calls for on-going reflection and response on bringing about God's reign on earth derived from the mission of Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit.³⁸ Linking the Institute's mission to provide a human and Christian education to the young, especially those who are poor, and the promotion of justice takes on new importance. Yet, the circular notes that the promotion of justice is "seldom mentioned...in an explicit manner" in the District reports requested by the 39th General Chapter:

It is obvious that little connection is made between the service of the poor and the promotion of justice. This failure to mention the promotion of justice in an explicit manner, and the fact that no analysis has been made of its relationship to service of the poor seems to indicate that the various dimensions of this perspective have not yet been fully grasped.³⁹

Anticipating the circular, Brother Jose Pablo sent out a letter on 15 May 1979, in which he offers an initial reflection on the District reports responses on the promotion of justice. He observes that the answers lack consequence. One district declares," he writes, that "we are just not ready to confront the issue."⁴⁰ Of the 63 reports received from the Districts, 33 said nothing about efforts made to promote justice. While the reports cite "numerous achievements in the area of the educational service of the poor, [they] become incomplete or even silent regarding the promotion of justice."⁴¹

In *Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice*, the horizon for the Lasallian Educational Mission is expanded to embrace new historical circumstances in light of the reports that indicate the following: "many [Districts] retain quite a narrow concept of our *service to the poor* [many Brothers] continue to voice an almost fundamentalistic interpretation of the Founder, even though the world and the Church have changed in three hundred years."⁴² This circular grounds the Lasallian educational service within the Church's responsibility "to interpret the world of its time in light of the Gospel and its call to justice."⁴³ Similarly, it pronounces "...what is important is to reproduce this spirit [educational service to those who are poor] by measures suited to a social and

³⁸ Judith A. Merkle, S.N.D. de N., *From the Heart of the Church: The Catholic Social Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 65.

³⁹ Circular 412, *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴³ Merkle, *Ibid.*, 53.

Church context requiring different activities.”⁴⁴ In Circular 412, the emphasis on Brothers acquiring a social consciousness rooted in the spiritual pilgrimage of John Baptist de La Salle is particularly strong. The Brother Superior General and his Council assert:

We must be ready...to begin a change, to embark on a journey similar to that made by the Founder, in order to better discover our responsibilities in face of the calls for more justice heard in the world today, and to make use of those means of responding that are suited to our specific vocation.⁴⁵

This new foundation to renew the Founder’s spirit in this particular context was begun at the 39th General Chapter with the *Declaration*, giving impetus to the Institute’s added focus on becoming effective change agents for God’s reign.

To further discern and comprehend what are the fabrics of developing social consciousness, Circular 412 puts forward four principal objectives toward which the Brothers [and now all Lasallians] should work: 1. Grasping the wide dimensions of social justice problems and engaging in activities that promote justice; 2. Becoming conscious of our own prejudices: ethnic/cultural, socio-economic, color, practical judgments expressed about daily aspects of life; 3. Increasing awareness of Catholic social teaching and its importance through reading, contemplation, and dialogue; 4. Accepting the challenge of announcing the Gospel among the People of God.⁴⁶ These four objectives provide substance for reflection on the ethical responsibility Lasallians must bring to bear on injustice through a lens that looks at the world through the eyes of oppressed peoples.

This appeal that Brother Jose Pablo and the General Council put forward “to be ready” to discover the “signs of the times” stands as important because it epitomizes what De La Salle did. They emphasize that “it is in the name of the Gospel, then, that we must commit ourselves to promoting justice and to serving [those who are] poor,”⁴⁷ as Circular 412 affirms. The text continues: “It is this Gospel accepted and announced in its fullness, which reveals salvation and the kingdom as fruits of the death and resurrection of Jesus.”⁴⁸ Turning Christian values —educating in faith, standing in solidarity with those marginalized, advocating for social transformation of the structures that causes human misery— into liberative action for moral purposes mediates the Lasallian praxis to build up the common good, which is to say, what the reign of God requires.

Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice reflects the struggle of the Institute to render an effective commitment to the educational service of those who are poor and the call to justice called for by the 39th and 40th General Chapters. Indeed, it provides a foundation for articulating contemporary Lasallian thought that links the reign of God, Lasallian Educational Mission, and the call to justice. This momentous document endeavored to reflect the *Declaration*’s sentiment that “the context of the world today makes it possible for us to discover ...new ways in which the Brothers can exercise the ministry of the Word of God...”⁴⁹ Circular 412 signifies the Institute’s determination to live today the Founding Story and Vision; that Vision mirrors the promises of the reign of God, the heart of Jesus’ preaching and teaching: liberation (freedom), justice, peace, equality, and love.

The essence of Circular 412 corresponds to what Brother John recalls in his homily about Brother Jose Pablo on the occasion of his funeral: “He was profoundly committed to making the education

⁴⁴ Circular 412, Ibid., 85.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁶ See Circular 412, Ibid., 86-104.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Declaration*, 41.1, Ibid., 33.

of the poor and the promotion of justice through education dominant characteristics of the identity of the Brothers....⁵⁰ Throughout his service as Superior General, Brother Jose Pablo persistently conveyed to the Brothers that solidarity with the economically poor and marginalized must "...impress upon us the need for greater attention [to the problems of injustice] and a firm determination to confront them."⁵¹ Wrestling with this task, the hope is that an unyielding determination to educate for justice will enable oppressed people to find *their* voice and engage in the struggle to counter the streams of injustice.

The Enduring Challenge of the 'Rights of the Child'

Anticipating the 30th anniversary of the *Declaration*, Brother John Johnston marked this occasion with his 1997 pastoral letter *Being Brothers Today: The Enduring Challenge of the Declaration*. Providing a critical re-reading of the *Declaration*, he identifies four priorities that are embedded in the 1967 text. In addition, he advances a fifth priority —making salient the rights of children—which he points out is not "rooted directly"⁵² in the *Declaration*, but it, too, is an enduring challenge for "Being Brother Today." Thus, we quote the letter at some length because what Brother John writes is significant for Lasallian discernment today. He writes:

Some years ago the Jesuits decided to devote themselves in a concerted manner to the problem of refugees. I have tremendous admiration for what they have accomplished. I think that the Lasallian Family, located in more than 80 countries, including more than 63,000 teachers, 800,000 pupils, countless parents, former students, and friends, could have a very significant impact in the struggle against exploitation of children. The struggle would have to be carefully planned, organized, and implemented at the levels of communities, schools, districts, and regions. I think that our universities could be particularly helpful—as I suggested in July 1995 to the rectors and presidents of Lasallian institutions of higher education, gathered in Rome.

But I am convinced that we, Brothers of the Christian Schools, for whom a loving concern for abandoned, marginalized, oppressed children is an integral and indispensable dimension of our vocation, should play the role of catalyst.

My recommendation that the defense and promotion of the rights of children be a major priority in our life as Brothers today is personal. I propose it for the consideration of the Institute and of the entire Lasallian Family.⁵³

The narrative Brother John weaves prefigures the emergence of the defense and promotion of children's rights as a major priority for the Lasallian Educational Mission. It results from a level of courage and persistence to live the Lasallian charism—a spirit of faith and zeal actualized through mission. His witness summons Lasallians to engage in a justice-oriented struggle on behalf of poor and vulnerable children and young people.

The initial urge for Brothers and the entire Lasallian community to take up the challenge of children's rights emanated from the 42nd General Chapter. Brother John reminds us in his *Declaration* letter that the 1993 chapter called attention to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) unanimously adopted on 20 November 1989, by the UN General

⁵⁰ Johnston, Homily for the Funeral of Jose Pablo Basterrechea (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate), June 30, 1995, 2.

⁵¹ Basterrechea, *Pastoral Letter to the Brothers* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, December 25, 1985), 40.

⁵² Johnston, *Being Brothers Today: The Enduring Challenge of the Declaration 1967-1997* (Rome, Italy: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, 1997), 78.

⁵³ Ibid., 79-80.

Assembly.⁵⁴ Probing the inert response by the Brothers and Lasallian Partners to the CRC, the 43rd General Chapter offers this candid critique: “Although the Convention was recommended by the 42nd General Chapter and again in the Pastoral Letter of the Superior of 1999, its contents are little known and understood by Brothers and Partners.”⁵⁵ 94

Approaching the end of his fourteen years as head of the Institute and the global Lasallian community, Brother John commanded our attention just as the new millennium was dawning. As noted earlier, he authored *On the Defense of Children, the Reign of God, and the Lasallian Mission*, a bold pastoral letter that sheds light on the interplay of faith and justice. Informed by De La Salle’s “progressive awareness” of the human and spiritual distress of poor and abandoned children, the letter seizes on this quandary that Pope John Paul II raises in his 1996 World Day of Peace message: “How many exploited children do not even know they have rights?”⁵⁶ Because this question is pertinent to the heart of the pastoral letter, it is important to quote further from the text. The Bishop of Rome’s message:

...calls attention to the children who are victims of armed conflicts and other kinds of physical and sexual violence, and to those who live in the streets, are illiterate, becomes addicted to drugs, become involved in criminal activity, are obliged to serve as soldiers and are taught to kill. He reminds us of those who suffer the consequences of unhappy, unhealthy, and ‘broken’ homes.⁵⁷

These children, the letter avers, are our children. With an ethic of faith and love, it is for them we must take a bold stand—be a public voice—that leads us to act for justice and social transformation. De La Salle reminds us: “This God of goodness places these children in your hands” (MTR 37.3). Brother John’s vivid expressions of faith and zeal in his pastoral letter were undoubtedly a catalyst in the Institute’s decision to take up the difficult challenge of the UNCRC in the context of living today our Founding Story and Vision.

Seeing with eyes wide open, the 43rd General Chapter adopted Proposition 14 that instructs that the rights of the child become “...a major focus of concern for the Lasallian mission of education.... each District, Sub-District and Delegation should include this question in their plan of action.” The proposition states further:

[The District] will appoint one Brother or Partner who will help it:

- to cooperate with local organizations which work for the promotion of the rights of the child;
- to detect local violations of the rights of children;
- to alert local authorities when children’s rights are violated;
- to ensure that its schools and universities teach and observe the rights of the child;
- to maintain contact with the secretariat for the educational mission.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ See United Nations Children’s Fund - unicef.org/crc. The CRC is the most ratified human rights treaty in history. Only three countries have yet to ratify the agreement: Somalia, South Sudan, and the United States.

⁵⁵ *Documents of the 43rd General Chapter* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, 2000), 9.

⁵⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Let Us Give Children a Future of Peace* (Vatican City: Papal XXIX World Day for Peace Message, January 1, 1996).

⁵⁷ Johnston, *On the Defense of Children*, Ibid., 8.

⁵⁸ *Documents of the 43rd General Chapter*, Ibid., 9.

Accompanying the proposition, the Chapter offers four guidelines for approaching this new dimension of carrying out the Lasallian mission of education. The guidelines are these: 1. Brothers and Partners need to be more aware of the contents of the Convention; 2. the implementation of the Convention has to be adapted to local conditions; 3. the Lasallian educational mission should concentrate on children whose rights are not protected; 4. the response of the Brothers and Partners to the demands of the Convention must be inspired by Gospel values.⁵⁹

When we look closely, this posture assumed by the General Chapter towards the CRC —children's rights are among the urgent educational needs of our day— is rooted in the prophetic tradition of Catholic social teaching, and it echoes De La Salle's commitment to proclaiming the reign of God by providing a human and Christian education. The chapter delegates, listening to the movement of the Holy Spirit in their discernment, made the defense and the promotion of the rights of children not simply an activity of the Institute, but part of the very fabric of the Lasallian mission itself.

More than thirteen years later, *On the Defense of Children* still reads as a compelling piece of ethical reflection and 'teaching' from the Lasallian heritage. In his letter, Brother John ponders the Lasallian movement taking greater advantage of its numerical power to "... respond with love and creativity... to the struggle against the destitution, injustice manipulation, and exploitation that prevent children from being children and make a mockery of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*."⁶⁰ Brother John fervently believed, as did De La Salle, that Lasallian educators first "reveal" God's goodness and mercy to those confided to our care not merely as teachers but as witnesses. Speaking ardently to the Brothers, he writes:

Like Jesus we have to be men who are attentive, loving, compassionate, men who reach out effectively to the needy, men who defend the rights of the poor and oppressed, who 'bear witness with the boldness of a prophet who is unafraid of risking even his life.'⁶¹

Here we sense Brother John's profound understanding of the prophetic character intrinsic to the vocation of a Brother of the Christian Schools because he, says Brother Gerard Rummery, FSC, studiously "searched for the Founder's own understanding of the Brother's vocation."⁶²

With the 43rd General Chapter's consequential resolve to constitute children's rights as a major priority of the Lasallian mission in view, Brother John remained steadfast in his effort to apprise Lasallian audiences about the rights of children as an important element of Lasallian education today. Building on his 1999 pastoral letter, Brother John addressed the opening session of the Huether Lasallian Conference on 15 November 2001, in Chicago.⁶³ A major contribution to Lasallian discourse on educating for justice and political engagement (advocacy), he titled his address "Jesus Was Indignant...Are We?" Framed by this provocative question, this reflective yet challenging narrative vividly illuminates the Markan episode in which Jesus' welcomes and blesses the "little children." Recalling that the apostles were slow to understand the meaning of Jesus' teaching about God's reign, Brother John provides a succinct interpretation of the biblical text:

⁵⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁰ Johnston, Ibid., 8.

⁶¹ Ibid., 6-7.

⁶² Johnston, Address to the 40th General Chapter, quoted in, Circular 458, *In Memoriam Brother John Johnston* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, September 13, 2008), 13.

⁶³ This Huether Conference's whole focus was the Rights of the Child.

This Kingdom welcomes everyone, regardless of power, or lack of power, status or lack of status, race, ethnic heritage, culture, economic status. It welcomes children. In this Kingdom, God takes children seriously, reverences them as human persons, and welcomes them as full participants.⁶⁴

This hermeneutical interpretation points us to the questions we must attend to that arise from the everyday experiences of children and young people—from their joys, their sufferings, their hopes, their disappointments. More than two decades after the adoption of the UNCRC, we still find in this present historical moment across many parts of the globe the pernicious perspective that children are not persons with dignity and holder of rights. Arresting this perspective requires education and advocacy.

At Huether, Brother John advances four ideas for Lasallians to consider as they work towards a “culture of action on behalf of the rights of children and youth.”⁶⁵ Though this list is not exhaustive, the intention is to stimulate concern and action:

- Create ongoing education and formation programs centered on the rights of children.
- Strengthen existing schools, centers, and programs that serve children, youth, and young adults “at risk”.
- Continue the momentum of new schools for children who are “poor, abandoned, and far from salvation”.
- Mobilize Lasallians as advocates for children and for their rights.⁶⁶

This paper does not provide the space for a detailed exploration of each idea. Nonetheless, when we join these ideas with those of the General Chapter discussed earlier, the stage is set for Lasallians to fulfill their role of fostering the coming of the reign of God on earth by promoting the rights of marginalized children. However, after almost 14 years since the Institute unambiguously focused our Lasallian orientation toward immersion in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, what do Lasallians really “see”? Do we feel indignation in the face of the conditions that too many children and young people live in our neighborhoods, in our cities, in our nations, in our world?⁶⁷ In “Jesus Was Indignant...Are We?” Brother John reminds us in a persuasive way that “the stories of Jesus and of John Baptist de La Salle led the General Chapter to challenge us to open our eyes wide, to *SEE* children and youth today who, in one way or another, are ‘poor, abandoned, and far from salvation’.”⁶⁸ With a sense of hope, he insists: “If we really see them, we will experience indignation.”⁶⁹ He recognizes the wonderful educational work Lasallians are already accomplishing “together and by association” on behalf of children and adults around the world. At the same time, he acknowledges that Lasallians alone cannot confront all the social problems in the world.

⁶⁴ Johnston, “Jesus Was Indignant...Are We?”, Huether Lasallian Conference (Washington, DC: Christian Brothers Conference, November 15, 2001), 2.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 11. Brother John’s reference to “numerical power” regards the total number of persons who comprise the Lasallian community—Brothers, Lasallian Partners, and students, notwithstanding alumni, and benefactors, parents and guardians.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Reaching New Horizons

The Christian Gospel and Lasallian spirituality speak to those who are “hearers of the word” (James 1, 22), “who, through the darkness of great inequalities of our global society can see and respond to the light of God’s Kingdom about to dawn.”⁷⁰ Like John Baptist de La Salle, we must contemplate—that is, “see” and not simply have the facts about—the urgent need that children, young people, and adults have for the protection of their human dignity and human rights. Thus, the Spirit summons us to dig deep, to see how much courage and perseverance we can muster to awake the dawn of the reign of God in our time.

In God’s Providence, John Baptist de La Salle and his first Brothers established the Christian and Gratuitous Schools to signify God’s reign, and to constitute a visible witness of God’s salvation. Today, more than 1,000 Lasallian educational communities—schools, colleges, and other centers of education—strive to keep alive the legacy of John Baptist de La Salle and his first Brothers by providing a human and Christian education to those entrusted to our educational care. In this respect alone, the Lasallian charism and mission are intrinsically justice-oriented. For, as Circular 412 observes, “What does it mean to serve [those who are poor] if not to begin by establishing a minimum of justice in their regard through facilitating their access to education.”⁷¹ Faithful to the Lasallian charism and mission in our time, the *Declaration* first pointed us to the close relationship between the educational mission and the promotion of justice. The 43rd General Chapter inaugurated a significant renewal in our Lasallian orientation to the promotion of justice by making “the Defense of the Rights of the Child a *flag* of our Lasallian Family,”⁷² as Brother Alvaro describes it. He says: “The Rights of the Child invite us to make our contribution ...to a form of education that is complete and worthy of the sons and daughters of the same Father.” However, more than thirteen years after Proposition 14 was adopted by the General Chapter, we again echo its lament that the contents of the UNCRC and its import for the Lasallian mission remain little known and understood by most Brothers, Lasallian Partners, and students.

Moving forward requires a compelling vision and ethic that unleashes the potential for the justice-oriented action that our numerical power as Lasallians suggests and that the Institute desires. The measure of our efficacy is not predicated just on what Lasallians do, but who they become, advocates with a well-educated, heartfelt solidarity with the agony and anguish of peoples who are oppressed. Our commitment to keep the Lasallian Educational Mission vital and vibrant hopefully moves us to continue listening attentively to God’s invitation to transform and adapt our lives in ways that enable us to meet the urgent educational needs of our day. To move beyond mere service and exert real influence on behalf of marginalized children everywhere, we must adopt an educative, self-critical and imaginative disposition towards enacting laws and practices that protect and empower those whom theologian Howard Thurman calls the “disinherited.”⁷³ To this end, Circular 412, as a response to the 40th General Chapter, articulates a line of action that constitutes a source of light for us today. We quote at length to capture the gravity of its remarkable foresight:

...it is necessary to influence *social structures* so as to remove from them, to some extent, any characteristics which are instruments of oppression. Although educational institutions, schools or others, cannot accomplish this program by themselves, they have two obligations: the first is to establish within themselves a society free from such hindrances. The second is to prepare youth to work toward this objective and little by little to involve themselves in the organizations that are working toward this goal, whether in the Church or in society.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Merkle, *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷¹ Circular 412, *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷² Echeverria, *Message to Young Lasallians* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools Generalate, 2003).

⁷³ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), in Foreword, page not numbered.

⁷⁴ Circular 412, *Ibid.*, 112.

Once more, the significance for engaging in advocacy today emerges from this ethical teaching in Lasallian thought. Working towards this objective entails a level of engagement in the public square that requires collaboration and fellowship with civil society organizations on all levels, as well as with other religious institutes of men and women, who share in the struggle to make the world fit for children and youth.⁷⁵ Integrating our diverse educational experiences and numerical strength with others will help sustain and increase the creative tension needed to transform unjust social structures, with the particular aim of achieving the goals set forth by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Ultimately, the hope is for peoples who are oppressed to cultivate their self-agency in achieving dignity and justice, taking responsibility for their own human development as agents of social transformation in union with others.

The joyful task of making the world more fit for children and young people is not something we can accomplish once and for all. Rather, with a discerning spirit, it is an ideal that we hold before us as we keep exploring and implementing an education for solidarity and justice, which orients our students and ourselves toward the common good—what the reign of God requires of us.

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⁷⁵ Circular 412, 42nd, 43rd, and 44th General Chapters, First International Mission Assembly, Pastoral Letters, among other Institute texts, urge collaboration and cooperation with local and international organizations that work for the promotion of justice, with a particular concern for the rights of children as declared by the 43rd Chapter and affirmed by 44th Chapter.

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