

APPROPRIATION OF DE LA SALLE INSIDE AN INTERCULTURAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS WORLD. WHAT A SAINT OF THE 17th CENTURY SAYS TO THE BELIEVER OF OUR CENTURY.

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ABSTRACT

Educators nowadays are all concerned with, if not worried about, the uncertainties they are facing. The world is changing radically and rapidly in so many aspects that educators find it hard to focus on ways to equip their students to meet the challenges they will be facing in the 21st Century. Lasallian educators, with the grace of a very rich legacy from St. La Salle and early Brothers, have also worked very hard to ensure the vitality, relevance and sustainability of the Lasallian mission in education worldwide. To do so, Lasallian educators need to be innovative, proactive and zealous, ever responding to the changing needs of the young, especially the disadvantaged. For they all know this is will be the very same call that their Founder St. La Salle will entrust to them today.

Key words: vitality, sustainability, association, commitment.

Introduction

Before the arrival of the Brothers in 1852 to Singapore and Penang, Father Beurel had taken the usual step of marketing his new St. Joseph's Institution by advertising via a prospectus in *The Singapore Free Press* that the new school is "a school where all boys would be welcome, regardless of their religion or race and would be taught a balanced curriculum... at all times, the Masters will most carefully watch over the morals of the whole, whatever their religious persuasion may be." (The Singapore Free Press, June 22, 1848) The school has faithfully kept to these doctrines in the last 166 years and will do so in the years to come.

In 1949, when the Brothers were given permission to establish 'La Salle Gakuen' in Kagoshima, Japan, they wished to prove the people there that 'religion was not an obstacle to academic

superiority and excellent moral training that the school would provide to their students.’ (Brother Marcel Petit).

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On a plaque in La Salle Primary School Hong Kong, Brother Henry Pang, the founding Principal, reflected that:

In the schools that they conduct in Hong Kong, the Christian Brothers strive for the fusion of the two great cultures which represent the best of the East and the West in the persons of two great and eminent Educators, Confucius¹ and St. La Salle. They meet in Christ, Teacher of the Teachers. (Brother Henry Pang, 1920-1993)

After years of hard work of the Brothers and their lay partners, these schools have gained the trust and recognition from the societies they are serving. Indeed, the mutual respect to local culture and religions, and the simple dedication of providing quality education to their younger generation, especially to the poor and needy, have long been seen as the charismatic characteristics of Lasallian Education.

Over the last 300 years, similar stories have taken place at nearly every Lasallian presence in the world. However, it will be too good to believe that this harmonious appropriation process will forever prosper without the continuous effort, guided by the spirit of zeal and community, to review, evaluate and formulate appropriate pedagogies and dialogues to meet the challenges and uncertainties we are facing in a world in turmoil.

A world in turmoil

The world nowadays is changing radically and rapidly in so many aspects that educators worldwide find it hard to focus on ways to equip their students to meet the challenges in the 21st century.

A recent research by the Brothers have identified some of the major challenges²:

- A. Countries are increasingly diverse racially and ethnically, and will be so even more so in the coming years. The cause is, and will be continue to, immigration.
- B. Migration is a complex global phenomenon that does not follow pre-established patterns.
- C. Young adults born after 1980 are the key to understanding near future. Racially and ethnically they have greater diversity than their ancestors, are better academically prepared; however, this is the age group that is suffering most from lack of work.

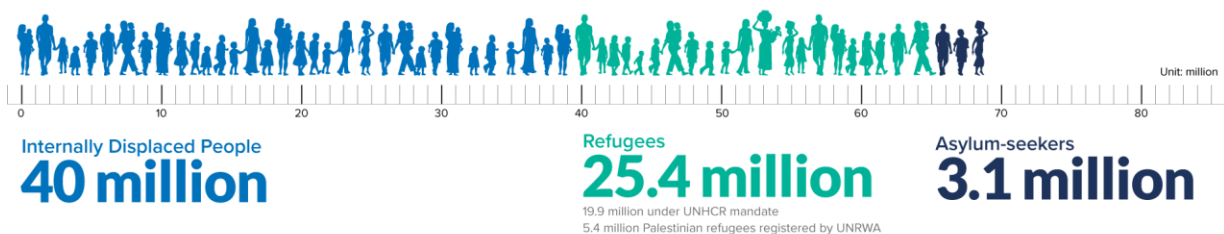
¹ Confucius, (551 BC to 479 BC), Chinese philosopher and educator. He believes that ‘*in education, there should be no distinction of classes.*’ In the time when only children from noble families were able to receive education and learn how to write and read, Confucius set up his own school to teach students from all walks of life. His philosophy has great influence to many countries in Asia, even up to the present days.

² cf. Lasallian without Limits, *Lasallian Reflection* 3, 2017-2018.

- D. Family Structure is changing. In richer countries, two-parents' households are in decline, while divorces, second marriage and cohabitation are on the rise.
- E. The role of women as an economic and social force globally has grown and will continue to grow dramatically.
- F. The number of adults who do not identify with any religion is growing.
- G. For the year 2050 the religious map of the world will be very different. The continuous migration of population of Muslim religion to Christian countries will change the current proportions.

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68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide



Where the world's displaced people are being hosted

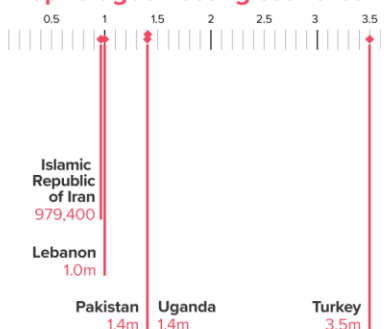


85 per cent of the world's displaced people are in developing countries

57% of refugees worldwide came from three countries



Top refugee-hosting countries



10 million stateless people



102,800 Refugees resettled

44,400 people

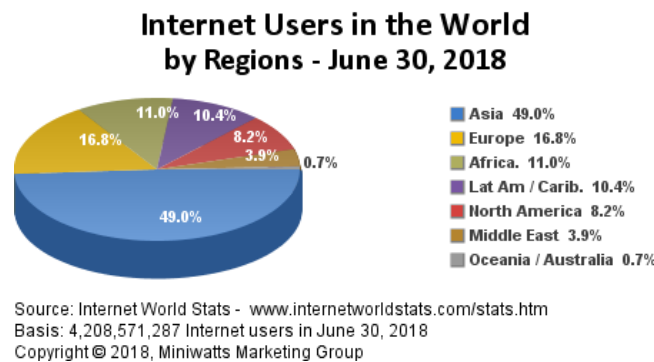
a day forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution

Source: The UN Refugee Agency, June 19th, 2018.

Indeed, the refugee/migrant issue has already brought forth significant impacts to the existing intercultural and interreligious settings to many of our schools, such as the *Bamboo School* in Thailand and schools in South Sudan. The Lasallian legacy of serving the poor and needy has encouraged a number of big and small local initiatives, like the *Fratelli Project* in Lebanon, open wall school in Sabah... to address to the educational need of refugee children, disregarding the cultural and religious constraints from the host countries. Providing education to refugee children may be seen as a new 'pasture' to the worldwide Lasallian Mission in the future.

Another battlefield to Lasallian Educators would well be the widening gaps among countries and nations related to the fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between digital, physical and biological spheres.

It is widely accepted that we are at the dawn of the fourth industrial revolution, or as some suggest, already well into one, in a speed people do not even notice. To address to this development, teachers and students may need to possess mobile devices with unprecedented processing power and storage capacity. Major role of the school is to equip our students with knowledge about artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, robotics, 3D printing, nanotechnology, and quantum computing etc.



Students will need a flexible skill set that can enable them to adapt to the changes in the labour market and the school must also prepare them as a lifelong learner. This has led to some drastic changes in the school setting. Some schools in Singapore have already started ‘home learning’ scheme for certain subjects. Lessons may no longer limited to the classrooms. How to continue to instill core Christian values to our students and how to strengthen evangelization in the future school setting will be a big challenge.

Access and equity in education is the core element of our Lasallian Education. Initiatives to address the need of the marginalized and bring hope to them under constraints like connectivity and hardware availability will be a big challenge to Lasallian educators.

New Wine in New Wineskins?

Like all great man, St. La Salle was not only a man of his time, he was also ahead of his time, both in his religious insights and in his teaching apostolate.

Since St. La Salle founded his first school and his first Community, the Institute has survived numerous crises and has spread now to 80 countries where about 1 million students are educated. St. La Salle has given life to his educational work so that the mission that can constantly grow and respond to changes. The fundamental principles that St. La Salle set up for his teachers have allowed them to constantly enhance their faith and make innovation in the application of these principles:

The constant preoccupation with the education and empowerment needed to enable the disadvantaged to live with dignity and the spirit of gratuity and service in the training offered and received in our educational work.³ (Lasallian Formation Online – Formation for Mission, Midwest District).

St. La Salle was most progressive in his thinking. Many steps which he took and which were considered to be revolutionary changes, have now come to be accepted and are taken to be normal practices. He saw the vital importance of teaching not just as a profession, but as a vocation. Through his *Meditations* and *Letters* to the Brothers, he equipped them with the ‘Faith’ to answer the call to ‘discover Jesus under the poor rag of the child’ entrusted to their care and to achieve this with the spirit of community. The call now is shared by men and women of diverse background in religions and culture.

By virtue of the association, the vitality, relevance and sustainability of the Lasallian mission are ensured. Lasallian educators are proactive and innovative, in responding to the rapidly changing world. They have crossed borders to reach out to all, especially the poor and disadvantaged. The provision of human and Christian education is no longer limited to formal school settings, but also includes projects, learning centres, homes, etc., and we are certain that whatever forms of the arenas have become, the rich Lasallian legacy will continue.

In his recent letter to Pope Francis, Brother Superior said:

St. La Salle did not concern himself with controversies of his day... his life was consumed with training his first Brothers to be good shepherds, ambassadors of Christ and ministers of God in education of the poor and working class abandoned on the streets of France. Your vision of Church confirms the fundamental call of our Institute and Lasallian family to enter into a respectful dialogue with the persons we are called to serve, regardless of their faith or ethnicity. This attitude presupposes openness and a willingness to go to those at the borders in order to listen, to learn, to witness to Gospel values and, as far as possible, to announce the Word of God.⁴

Lasallian education is Christian in its values and principles. It is not overtly religious and it does not intend to proselytize.⁵ Lasallian educators will continue to honour the priority of educational service to the poor with the proclamation of the Gospel as our mission.

In a document to religious Brothers in 2015, Vatican suggested: Institutes of Brothers are urged to develop new structures and initial and continuing formation programmes which can help new candidates and current members to rediscover and value their identity in the new ecclesial and social context⁶ to ensure that this new wine not only is not lost, but can mature in quality.

³ *Bulletin of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* N° 234. Literacy and cultural development projects. The UNESCO Noma Prize.

⁴ Letter of Brother Superior and members of the General Council to the Holy Father. September 20th, 2018.

⁵ PARC. *Principles of Lasallian Education*. p. 2, 2017.

⁶ cf. *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brothers in the Church*, Vatican, October 4th 2015.

It goes on to point out that the present moment of great social change requires the Brothers to become “prophets for our time” which include the “prophesy of the wise use of new technologies in order to place them at the service of communication, to democratize information to include the benefit of the most disadvantaged, and to make technologies useful instruments in the task of evangelization⁷.” (*Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church*, p. 26)

For the Christian Brothers, this is not ‘new wine’ to them. New structures, new formation programmes, new rules, new prioritization... would emerge after General Chapters and District Chapters. They are forever reviewing their strength and weakness, responding and preparing themselves for challenges ahead of time. In collaboration with lay partners, they have produced excellent studies and researches. Resources for formation are abundant in quality and quantity.

Initiatives addressing specific area and need in education, in Institute and District levels, are launched from time to time. *100+ Project*, *Solidarity with South Sudan*, the *Fratelli Project*, *International Council of Young Lasallian* and the *International Council for Association and the Lasallian Education Mission* are among that which worth mentioning. The latest example would be the establishment of the *International Lasallian Advisory Research Group* to increase research collaboration among Lasallian Higher Education regarding Pope Francis’ encyclical letter *Laudato Sii*. They had first gathering in St. Mary’s University of Minnesota on September 23rd, 2018.

Creative from the beginning, Lasallians, as well as other religious congregations, continue to be called “initiators” in the educational and evangelising task of the Church in today’s world.⁸

The Lasallian tradition we have received has given us reason to be proud.

Keeping our hands on the plough:

What a Saint in the 17th century says to believer of our century?

A *Hong Kong Psychological Society* conducted a study from April to May 2018, found 52.2 % of 1,836 teachers interviewed showed symptoms of moderate or serious depression, including feelings of hopelessness, fatigue and sleep disorder. Some 23 % of those polled rated their work stress as “extremely huge”, while another 58.2 % rated it as “very huge”⁹. Researchers believe this phenomenon is not unique to Hong Kong and the teaching profession has already become a highly stressful career. (cf. *South China Morning Post*, September 2nd 2018)

It is true that educators today, especially frontline teachers, are suffering heavy stress from school workload, insufficient funding, demanding expectation from public and parents, inflexible educational policies, demotivated students, political and economic uncertainties in the society. St. La Salle and his teachers faced similar problems in their schools and the health of many Brothers

⁷ cf. *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brothers in the Church*, Vatican, October 4th 2015.

⁸ Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 24. Rome 2013.

⁹ *South China Morning Post*, 2nd September 2018.

were badly affected. So, if one enters the teaching profession without commitment, it makes no difference whether he is a teacher in a small rural school or a professor in a big University, he may encounter stress and set back from time to time. This may be the nature of this career. To survive in this profession, teachers have to set for themselves a higher goal and do not forget why they have chosen the career. 15

St. La Salle, with his strong faith in Jesus, did not turn away from the difficulties in managing his free schools. Instead, he was forever seeking ways to lead his teachers to soldier on. He believes that it is only through collaborative effort of the teachers working, studying and living in a community, that they can fulfil their mission of educating the poor in a more efficient way. So, he founded the Brothers Community. To provide a good system and clear administration framework with the morale behind all settings in the school, he compiled the *Conduct of Christian School* with his Brothers. His *Meditations* and *Letters* for the Brothers are spiritual support to the Brothers. He encouraged them to see their work as a vocation, a divine call from God. These works are still relevant to the Brothers and especially, to the increasing number of lay partners today.

As we know St. La Salle put particular stress on the three core values/principles: Faith, Service and Community.

Young people today are badly in need of belief. There is a tendency to run after what is transient and ephemeral. In this context, faith is much watered down. Young people find it difficult to truly believe in the traditional ways of worshipping God, they may also find it difficult to believe in themselves or to believe in high moral ideals. St. La Salle wants his followers, his Lasallian teachers, to do everything in their power to 'safe the children confided to their care'. To do this, they will need to have a strong faith in the unique dignity of the human person.

The second core value of service speaks to the conscience of every young person. Young people can clearly see the wide gaps in wealth distribution in the world today. Challenges emerge every day to Lasallian educators in the forms of students with special educational needs, in the form of dysfunctional families and in the form of modern-day pressure. So many people are in need of help. St. La Salle's emphasis on zeal in this area is still very relevant. Young people need to be motivated and trained to a life of service.

Finally, there is the core value of community, the beautiful ideal that unity in community is a great strength. St. La Salle himself called it 'a precious gem' that which unites us it is always superior to that which is divided. St. La Salle wanted his schools to be living communities.

St. La Salle is man of action and he wants his Brothers to see their work as God's work. 300 years later, Pope Francis delivers similar message of encouragement to our young believers:

I am dreaming not just about groups that sit under trees and discuss it. Nothing else will change the world but people who with Jesus devote themselves to it, who with him go to the margins and right into the middle of the dirt. Go into politics, too, and fight for justice and human dignity, especially for the poorest of the poor.¹⁰

Let us always remember the wonderful message from Jesus “As you did it to one of the least of these my Brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

Let us keep our hands firmly on the plough.

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¹⁰ Pope Francis DOCAT 2016.