

## THE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL COMMITMENT OF LASALLIANS

### INTRODUCTION: THE INTERNATIONAL, LASALLIAN INSTITUTE

As you are very well aware, this year we celebrate the anniversary of the birth of our Founder, Saint John Baptist de La Salle. The Congress in which we take part reminds us precisely of the 350 years of educational presence which began in Reims in 1651. This anniversary invites to look at our past and be aware of our roots, but also it is an invitation to look ahead in order to see our itinerary and, above all, to plan how we can live today our founding educational charism boldly and creatively.

John Baptist de La Salle's sole intention was to put the means of salvation, a comprehensive salvation that included various human aspects, within reach of young people, especially those who were far from it. This was the basic purpose that has inspired our Institute, with its pluses and minuses, throughout these last three centuries of human history. Personally, one of the things I most admire and which has impressed me concerning our Founder is to see how he was alert to and how he let himself be impressed by the reality that was his. I think that the best way to honor and be faithful to his spirit is not so much by preserving the educational works we have inherited but by responding creatively and boldly to the educational needs that the world presents to us today.

Therefore it seems important to me to position our Institute within the historical context that we are living today. This is a particularly significant time that we are going through not so much as an era of change but as a change of era. The world situation is marked by a considerable number of tendencies and events. Among others, there are ethnic, racial and religious conflicts, world economic growth and market expansion with its great contrasts, information technology, great problems related to poverty.

Enrique Iglesias, President of the Inter-American Bank for Development, said that the century which has just begun will be "*a cruel and fascinating century.*" In fact, the scientific world, the technical world, the world of communication and the consumer world are all fascinating. The down side is that this fascination is not for everyone. Therefore the century will be cruel for those who are excluded and for the less competitive. Their poverty and their marginalization will increase, unfortunately, as can be seen by the indices of international organizations. The United Nations Program for Development (UNPD, in its last annual report, speaks to us of how more and more poverty has the face of a child, of how indices of recurring defections in primary schools are on the rise in many countries, of how youth unemployment is becoming commonplace. This translates into the fact that a large portion of the youth population remains outside the educational system and outside the labor market.

As Lasallians the first and most important thing to do is to be alert and to allow ourselves to be impressed by this reality as our Founder did in his own reality. This ought to be the sap that nourishes the tree that grew from the small mustard seed. As an international Institute we are called not to shut ourselves in our small world but to feel that we are part of an organization that opens our heart to the world. The Brothers' *Rule* presents this objective to us, an objective which transcends any type of border, whether of time or of space, without beating around the bush: "*The Institute is concerned above all for the educational needs of the poor as they strive to become aware of their dignity and to live and to be recognized as human beings and children of God. The Institute establishes, renews and diversifies its works according to what the kingdom of God requires*" (*Rule 11*).

And it seems to me to be a sign of what I am trying to say the fact that I, coming from a small third-world country, am today sharing this reflection. Three-hundred years later, the Institute which was born in France has a more multi-ethnic and multi-cultural face today. I am a prime example of that fact. One of the greatest treasures today of the Lasallian Institute is its internationality. This international openness had its first expression already during the Founder's time when he sent two Brothers to Rome and it achieved its maximum expression at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Institute ceased being French, paradoxically thanks to the French Brothers themselves, and it became a universal Institute. In fact, in 1904 there were 10,626 Brothers in France and 4,806 in all other countries combined. Today the proportion according to the latest statistics as of December 31, 2000, is 988 to 5,337.

On September 8, 1990, the Institute, in the person of Brother John Johnston, Superior General, received the NOMA award from UNESCO for the teaching of literacy, not only for the many non-formal and adult literacy programs that we have sponsored on every continent, but also for the fact that every year between 75,000 and 90,000 boys and girls learn to read and write in our establishments. The fact is that today in 82 countries and in 1,037 schools at all levels, there are being educated 897,625 students thanks to the ministry of Christian

education being carried out by 2,548 Brothers and 75,901 lay persons, who are aided in this process by the 704 priests and men and women religious who work with us.

If these numbers are impressive, no less impressive are the variety of educational works that they represent. From kindergartens, primary and secondary schools to institutions for higher or special education, such as those for young people in trouble with the law, street children, physically challenged, youth at risk, agricultural or technical schools, initiatives for popular education...we run them all.

It is impossible here to mention specific examples that would cover everything. Therefore, by way of broad brush strokes, I will highlight some of them. Among many others are the schools for the training of indigenous or rural teachers in Guatemala or Peru, the telephone hotline of hope for more than one million young people in Australia, the schools for Gypsies here in France, the St. Pius X Institute in Spain for the training of educators of the faith, the St. Gabriel educational radio show in Bolivia aimed at the Aymara world, our universities in the United States aimed at young Hispanics with learning difficulties, the Akwaba home in Abidjan for street children or our schools in Asia and the Mideast whose students are primarily Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Confucianist or Shintoist...

## **1. LASALLIAN EDUCATION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD.**

*"If I had to vote for on of these lists today for the twelve most important men, the ten best writers, etc.: if I had to vote for a type of martyr or symbol of our modern era, I would choose to vote for a child from Bangladesh who tried to commit suicide when Maradona was ejected from the World Cup that was played in the United States. Just imagine: a child from Bangladesh who, by means of television, sees a game, invented in England, being played in the United States, by an Argentinian player. This affected him to the degree that he wanted to commit suicide. All of us are a bit like that deep within, we all live a life that is connected to many other lives on many other levels" (Fernando Savater, Conference: Values facing the New Millennium, San José, Costa Rica, November 7, 1999).*

Based on that previous example it seems to me that the great challenge which our Institute as an international organization has today is that of knowing how to unite universal and local values in a balanced and mutually enriching way. I think that we are talking about promoting an education to service of the identity proper to each nation and at the same time being open to dialogue, respect, to searching and sharing, because reality today goes beyond national borders.

Being faithful to reality should lead us to live inculturation. One of the great challenges for the teacher is to see that cybernetic civilization does not stifle one's national, local and family identity. That is the invitation that the Institute has made to us in recent years, both to the Brothers and to lay persons who are associated to our mission. *"Inculturation is an ongoing process. For the shared mission, formation to inculturation is necessary for both Brothers and lay persons. This formation includes a study of the language of the country, insertion into the life situation of the population, getting to know the young people, etc. To discover a culture requires patience and humility, with the realization that it will always remain a mystery for a foreigner" (Circular 435, page 43).*

In this sense it seems to me that faced with the dilemma of a universal culture fostered by globalization and a particular culture called for by the necessary process of insertion, the Institute, thanks to its internationality, can opt for both of these, aware that rather than negation there should be integration, as the Brazilian educator, Regina Leite Garcia, said at the International Education Summit held in February 1997 in Mexico: *"Those who immerse themselves in their own culture cannot be but enriched by universal culture and, absorbed totally in it, one becomes capable of confronting one's own culture with other cultures, broadening it and deepening it. Only those who perceive their own culture as an integral part of universal heritage can open themselves to a universal culture, without losing their own identity. These are the ones who feel that their particular culture is part of the universal culture and that the universal culture is part of their particular culture."*

Certainly the international character of our Institute is a call to live out some basic beliefs as we face diversity; this means knowing how to welcome, respect and appreciate differences. This also supposes a change of attitude that should lead us from imposing to listening, from ordering to sharing, from thinking that we know everything to the humble and demanding task of an ongoing learning process which is always incomplete.

This also supposes assuming, not only in theory but also in practice, that in all cultures and by means of all religious demonstrations, God is made manifest. *"In every culture and every religion there can be found the seeds of the Word of God and the power of the Spirit of God. This implies a respectful stance toward cultures*

*and religions" (Circular 435, page 39). This is not easy because we are accustomed to think that we own the truth and that our work is simply to transmit what we already own, without new searches nor with any sense of openness to the truth of the other.*

And, at the same time and without denying the above, we should not give up that which is specifically Christian, which is capable of purifying and enriching all cultures. The person and the message of Jesus of filiation, fraternity, unconditional love, limitless pardon, are the major treasures that we can give to humankind in relationship with God, with others and with the world. Today, like Peter, we can say to men and women that it does not matter to what culture they belong, it does not matter how devastated they feel because of incomprehensible events:

*"I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (Acts 3:6).*

Finally, it seems important to me to point out that globalization is not only an issue that involves market integration but also knowledge integration. The dilemma of tomorrow will not be so much a matter of the haves and the have-nots, but those with knowledge and those without knowledge. The key to the future is education as Tony Blair demonstrated in his first political campaign.

We could ask ourselves the following question: What are the universal values that should be present on the Lasallian level in all educational processes beyond the geographical framework? Personally I would highlight the following, although I am aware that the list is incomplete and could be improved.

- \* The Lasallian educational process is centered in the person of each student so that each is treated in keeping with his individual being which is unique and unrepeatable and attention is directed in an integrated manner to each young person.
- \* The Lasallian educational process comes from the appropriate situation so that it responds to the characteristics, needs, aspirations and cultural values of each nation. But here we are not talking about only taking on a reality, we are talking also about contributing the tools to transform it and to open it to inter-cultural dialogue.
- \* The Lasallian educational process should be participatory and democratic. From the time of the Founder in the *Conduct of Schools* an active type of education was promoted with different roles and responsibilities. Here we are talking about a type of education that promotes more horizontal communication and less coercion and paternalism.
- \* The Lasallian educational process is given to creativity, with less emphasis on repetition and keeping in mind that the most important thing is that the student arrives at an answer that is original and personal. This means fighting against our innate tendency for efficiency and closure which would wipe out any kind of originality.
- \* The Lasallian educational process is characterized by a serious academic training as expressed in one of our most important Institute documents: *"First, it is important that our schools at every level be staffed by Brothers with a quality education and serious training. This shows that we want to be professionally competent and to be at the service of young people and the civic community" (Declaration 45.2).*
- \* The Lasallian educational process trains one for life and for work that is socially productive. From the very beginning, pragmatism was one of the primary characteristics since the goal was to respond to the specific needs of the young. Today it is fundamental to help integrate intellectual and manual work; theory and practice; education and life to give each one the tools that will allow him to be an agent of his own personal and community development and social progress.
- \* The Lasallian educational process teaches about ecological commitment and defending the environment, aware that the earth is the only place where one can be fulfilled, love others, find God, and also aware of the common responsibility of passing on a habitable world to those who will follow.
- \* The Lasallian educational process culminates in a Christian commitment. It has been said that to believe today is to commit oneself and Lasallian education tries to see to it that students live a faith that is operative in the practice of love, that they are preparing themselves to be creators of relationships that are more just between peoples, that they commit themselves to action in favor of justice and peace, and that they are interested in the globalization of solidarity.
- \* The Lasallian educational process promotes growth in faith by means of explicit catechesis, Christian life groups, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. This happens by way of a reading of life and events in light of the Gospel, the celebration of life, of the ability for wonder and for gratitude, of Gospel values of love, dedication, pardon...

## **2. THE EDUCATIONAL SERVICE OF THE POOR AS THE HEART OF LASALLIAN EDUCATION WITHOUT BORDERS**

*"The world of the poor teaches us how Christian love should be. It certainly searches for truth, but it exposes false pacifism, resignation and inactivity; it should clearly be gratuitous but it ought to seek historical efficacy."* These words of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, spoken on the occasion of his receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of the Louvain on February 2, 1980, just 50 days before his assassination, seem to me to respond very well to what Lasallian schools have always desired to be. Made for the poor and open to all young people, Lasallian schools, desiring to respond to the needs of the young, have found in the poor a stimulus and a challenge for their creativity and imagination.

Our Institute came into being on the fringes of a type of dehumanization: a world of young people who were far from salvation, with no possibility of achieving human nor Christian fulfillment. Being faithful to our charism today means to respond creatively to the new forms of dehumanization, to the new forms of poverty, to the calls we receive from the world of those who are excluded. A presence of solidarity should encourage us to prolific creativity in appropriate initiatives and in collaboration in other initiatives. Aware that our Institute has as its purpose the educational service of abandoned youth, in accord with the various situations and local needs, we should look for a suitable policy by means of which this option becomes the effective priority in the different levels of the life of the Institute.

The Lasallian Institute in today's world is called on not only to offer service, as important as this may be, but above all to help find meaning. For that reason, it is important to be very alert to the new forms of poverty that the world of the young presents to us today and at the same time, to be very open to a youth culture that has a lot of universality connected to it. Today the songs, styles, rebelliousness, the ways of interpreting life, shortages and criteria for activities of the young are very similar the world over. To know and to understand their world from the inside is a theological and a pedagogical requirement if we want to touch their hearts, which is what Saint John Baptist de La Salle called us to do. This means that we should make greater efforts in inculturating ourselves in their world. Our international dimension can be of great help to us in this regard.

We should recall also that our orientation towards the poor comprises an integral part of the purpose of the Institute, which means that this orientation should be kept in mind whenever there is a question of a new foundations, or the evaluation of an enterprise already in existence, as well as in the guidelines for formation... (cf. *Declaration* 28.2). On the other hand, the diversity of historical situations demands that local Chapters clearly define a policy that will commit personnel and structures to the service of the poor (cf. *Declaration* 28.3).

Our research and initiatives should be guided by the most urgent needs of people and the calls of the Church (*Declaration* 33.2). Analyzing our own situation we could ask ourselves how to respond to problems that have global roots; what can we do when we are faced with the following phenomena that characterize the globalized world today: *"migratory movements, racism, urban violence, terrorism, drug addiction, loss of basic human values, crises of faith, refusal of religious education, the attraction of sects, unemployment, AIDS, hunger, illiteracy, street children, homelessness, contempt of life, broken families, school dropouts..."* (*Circular* 435, page 22).

## **3. ASSOCIATED TO CARRY OUT JUST SUCH A MISSION**

Our Institute came into being because of a group of persons who associated themselves together to carry forward the cause of schools for poor children and to place salvation within the reach of the young. Our last General Chapter in the year 2000 invites us to update that association to be able to respond to the needs of the young today; this means looking at the past which will make us plan our current and future commitments: *"The foundation event which links the Institute today to its origins is that of June 6<sup>th</sup> 1694, when John Baptist de La Salle and twelve of his followers came together to consecrate themselves for life, to the Christian education of poor boys"* (*Circular* 447, page 2).

As I recalled in Rheims on the occasion of the meeting of the Lasallian teams last June, the concept of association has a "for what" that we must not forget. I would like to apply the concept of Association to what St-Exupéry said of friendship: *"It's not a matter of looking at ourselves, but that we look together in the same direction."* And this direction can be nothing other than the educational service of the poor and, based on them, the educational service of all young people. Based on that purpose structures throughout the length and breadth

of the Lasallian world should be established that will ensure our mission and give it strength.

Up until now we have basically lived association with lay persons within our respective Districts. Nevertheless, I think, personally, that the day is not far off in which we will live it beyond our borders and that we Brothers and lay persons should feel called to be there, in that part of the world where are presence is needed most.

Another new thing about Lasallian association is female presence. This is not only due to the vast number of female students that we have but also because of the educational work that many women are carrying out. According to the latest statistics there are 37,936 girls, which account for half of our educational efforts. Their presence and the historical role which is theirs will no doubt help us build a society which is more human and fraternal, to review the way we think, to place ourselves within history in a different way, to organize our social, political, economic, and religious lives in a way that is more cordial and intuitive.

I think it important to point out that the adult world that is established around the Lasallian educational program does not exist solely as a function of the mission that is being carried out, but it finds an atmosphere of personal, family and community growth. This is why the Lasallian school is a life space that allows encounters with different groups, the confrontation of ideas, the renewal of family life, liturgical and sacramental participation, interreligious dialogue, and a response to the existential anxieties by means of shared spirituality.

### **CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGE OF THE FUTURE.**

In view of the globalized world we live in today and facing the challenges that come up we need to be witness of another dream: that of a different society, that promotes "festivals" in which all can participate. This would be a society where solidarity has value, a society that is closer to the dream of Jesus, a society where *"all may have life, and have it abundantly"* (John 10:10). This would be a society where the adventure of thinking is at par with that of imagining, being critical, and participating. This would mean being witnesses of an education with the power to transform and as the essential piece of development that would allow for inclusive progress. This is none other than the dream our Founder had more than three-hundred years ago: *"God wills not only that all come to the knowledge of truth, but also that all be saved. He cannot truly desire this without providing the means for it and, therefore, without giving children the teachers who will assist them in the fulfillment of his plan"* (Meditation for the Time of Retreat 193.3). This dream involves us as well, members of an international Institute, to make it reality for everyone.

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