

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE BROTHERS

**A Gospel Adventure:
Outside the Camp**

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We are living in a time of grace, a time of transition, a time to return to the heart of our charismatic and Gospel-centered history. It is a time that inspires us to return to the freedom, audacity, and creativity of the first mystical experience. We face this moment as a call for a personal and institutional conversion toward the world of the vulnerable and impoverished (45th General Chapter, no. 1.15).

Introduction

Moses used to take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp; at some distance from the camp. He called it the Tent of Meeting. Anyone who had to consult Yahweh would go out to the Tent of Meeting, outside the camp (Exodus 33:7).

Dear Brothers,

If we desire that the vision for ourselves and our Institute presses on to its fulfillment¹ we must take the time to ponder the horizon that is rushing at us. From what vantage point are we viewing that horizon? Where are we standing? While I was pondering this question for myself an article by Dominican Father Chris McVey directed me to the above quotation from Exodus. McVey wrote:

“outside the camp” is where all of us come from. Our lives as religious began “outside the camp”. It is written in Exodus that “anyone who wished to consult the Lord would go to the meeting tent outside the camp” (Ex 33:7). “Outside the camp” is where we meet God: outside the institution, outside culturally conditioned perceptions and beliefs. “Outside the camp” God speaks to us “face to face” (Ex 33:11). It is “outside the camp” where we encounter the other who is different – and discover who we are and where our home really is.”²

¹ Theme of the 2014 *Pastoral Letter*.

² McVey, OP, Chris, *Encountering the Other: First Commitment of Religious Life Today* in *The Priority of Interreligious Dialogue: A New Commitment from the Consecrated Life*. Union of Superiors General, Rome, November, 2003, p. 35.

With this brief reflection in mind, I invite all of us to take a moment and step outside our personal camps and in all humility ask God to speak to us.

Part A

I. 2015 in Review

The chosen theme of this past year was *The Work of God Is Also Our Work*. During 2015, I have been privileged to witness the realization of the theme: it is the joy of our mission. I share some of the year's highlights that give reason for this joy.

a. PARC

Visits to Singapore and Malaysia in March marked the beginning of my pastoral visit to the Pacific-Asia Region. In August I met with the PARC Visitors' Conference in Japan and in October I visited the District of Colombo in Sri Lanka. The PARC pastoral visits will continue into 2016.

Existing in a pluri-religious and multi-cultural environment, the Lasallian mission in the Pacific-Asia Region is well-known and well-respected. St. Joseph's in Singapore, St. Francis Xavier in Malaysia and St. Benedict's in Sri Lanka are three examples of schools established by missionary Brothers in the 19th Century; they are still flourishing today. Alongside these traditional works are new non-formal educational programs founded by Brothers and Partners in response to contemporary needs and calls to serve the poor. Forced out of formal education by strict government retirement laws in some of the countries in the region, senior Brothers have found creative ways to spread the Lasallian mission through literacy centers, boarding hostels and technical training programs.

Creativity and innovation continue to be a hallmark of our charism.

b. International meetings

In March, I participated in *Encuentro XI* of the International Association of Lasallian Universities in Bogotá, Colombia. My presence in Bogotá also afforded me the opportunity to participate in the celebration of the arrival of the Brothers to Colombia 125 years ago. A particular joy for me was to witness two young Brothers pronounce final vows. The 6th Congress of the Union of Former Lasallian Students (UMAEL) was held in Beauvais, France in June. The congress attracted over 120 participants. In September, I attended the Fourth Annual Lasallian Research Symposium at Saint Mary's University in Minnesota, USA. Once again, this event attracted researchers from our International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU). Also in September, the General Council held a workshop for new Visitors. The program was well-received by the participants. And while the General Council was in session, the Association of Lasallian School Directors for Europe and the Middle East met at the Generalate.

All these visits and events fortify my conviction of the vitality of the Lasallian mission today and the potential of our networks. That conviction is based on: Brothers, whether retired or active, engaging in new educational ministries when a formal school setting is no longer an option for them; an increasing number of Partners embracing the Lasallian charism; the intentional efforts by

Partners and Brothers to reach the poor and marginalized; and the pastoral ministry for vocations that is bearing fruit. “Once again our founding story continues to be lived out anew...continues to move from crisis to crossroads; from discouragement to hope.”³

c. The 2015 Rule

Certainly, the approval of the revisions to our *Rule* makes 2015 a significant year in the life of the Institute. The fact that the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life practically approved it in its entirety speaks to the seriousness with which we effectively evaluated our present reality. A result of our collective discernment, the updating of the *Rule* invites us to joyfully live our vocation with love and a renewed vision in service with the poor and vulnerable. May it strengthen the contemplative dimension of our life with a passion for God and for humanity. And may it increase our appreciation of the gift of our life together in fraternal community.

Brothers, as I look back on this year, I recall that Saint John Baptist de La Salle, three hundred years earlier, in 1715, moved to Saint-Yon for the final four years of his life. He was, if you will, a “senior Brother”, yet these were years of great creativity. He continued his work on the *Meditations for Sundays and Feasts*, the *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* and retouches to the *Rule*. He mentored Brother Barthélemy who would become Superior General

³ *Circular 461, Associated for the Lasallian Mission... an Act of Hope*, September, 2010, 1.1.14.

in 1717. In his last years, de La Salle’s vision for the movement he and the first Brothers launched never diminished; it pressed on to fulfillment. We and our Partners are the inheritors of this movement, as necessary now as it was then. I am grateful for all that I have seen and experienced of the Lasallian mission this year. So I pray with the psalmist: The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy (Ps 126.3).

II. Toward the Year 2021

In last year’s pastoral letter I said that the General Council, Secretariats and Services, in the early months of 2015, would deepen our discernment of trends and directions. We have done so and shared our vision with you in *Circular 470: Toward the Year 2021: Living together our Joyful Mission*. We identified as a series of global trends that relate to our mission: global technologies, the culture of commodification, secularization, changing demography, the environment, individualism, marginalization of peoples, and divisions among peoples of different faiths. Our focus is deliberately outward looking, “from outside the camp”.

From these trends we have discerned a direction. Our tasks going forward – presented in the context of our annual themes, as outlined in the *Circular* – are to integrate technology and Gospel truths, confront the new poverties resulting from a culture of commodification, sustain spirituality amidst secularization, contribute to sustainable communities in the face of our changing demography and

environment, promote development that is inclusive, foster inter-religious dialogue and challenge individualism with the wisdom of the community for the sake of the common good. These can all be encapsulated in two over-arching themes fundamental to our charism: ***Faith** in the Presence of God among the Poor and on the Peripheries* and ***Zeal** for our Ministry of Religious Education and the Common Good*. Let us look briefly at each theme.

a. Integrating Global Technologies and Gospel Truths⁴

Wherever we live in today's globalized and pluralistic world, information and communication technologies increasingly impact and influence our lives; they impact the way we live our vocation as witnesses, catechists and evangelizers. Of course they impact the young to an even greater extent. Though there is no disaggregated data by age group, it is safe to presume that young people make up a sizeable share of the increasing number of social media users, estimated at the end of 2014 to be over 2 billion; Facebook alone has more than 1.3 billion followers. Thus, the platform for learning, socialization and more specifically evangelization has expanded the physical to the virtual and this reality beckons all Lasallians to consider how increasingly accessible information and communication technologies can best serve our mission of evangelization and education.

⁴ Description of themes suggested by Prof. Ronald Homes of De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines.

b. Confronting New Poverties and the Commodity Culture

While urbanization has created more wealth for a new set of middle class, other less positive trends are not sufficiently attended to: homelessness, migration crises, rural to urban dislocation, loss of family cohesiveness, plight of street children, child labor, delinquency, prostitution, low wages and human trafficking. Concomitantly, in our postmodern world the dignity of the person made in the image of God is being undermined “as human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a ‘throw-away’ culture which is now spreading.”⁵

Where is the Good News in all of this? How can the Gospel speak to these realities or how can we proclaim the Good News in our postmodern world? The Gospel Adventure calls us to go to our sisters and brothers living on the peripheries and to penetrate these new poverties and the culture of commodification with life-giving Christian hope. It calls us “to replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, an asceticism which ‘entails learning to give and not simply to give up...’”⁶

c. Sustaining Spirituality amidst Secularization

Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, reminds us: “The urgent

⁵ Francis, Encyclical Letter *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, No. 53.

⁶ Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, No. 9.

challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change.”⁷ Pope Francis’ call is an invitation for a dynamic, global moral conversation that entails conversion and transformation on all levels from the individual to the societal. Catholic social teachings on stewardship, solidarity and sustainability also invite all to act and advocate for young people, especially the poor, “our forgotten neighbor”. Both Catholic social teaching and the Pope’s invitation echo Gospel mandates and Lasallian spirituality: Jesus and St. John Baptist de La Salle went “outside the camp” and they clearly expect us to do likewise. As Lasallians, this makes us wonder: What goals are being advanced today through the changing economic and social relationships of young people, especially the poor? Are those goals compassionate and just? Have political, social and economic arrangements become ends in themselves, instead of means to integral development and social well-being?

d. Promoting Inclusive Development

Many people are excluded from development because of their gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability or poverty. The effects of such exclusion are staggering, deepening inequality across the world. In a recent OXFAM Study (2015) the richest 1% of people in the world hold 48% of global wealth. Of the remaining 52%, the richest

⁷ Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, No. 13.

20% own most, leaving only 5.5% of the world's wealth to be distributed among the remaining 80% of the world's people. Again, in *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis speaks to this exclusion and notes "the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet."⁸

The challenge of encyclicals *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si'* to abandon the "economy of exclusion" is a powerful impetus that can move us to help shift the terms of the current socio-economic discussion and encourage us to model alternative behaviors that treat others as persons with dignity and inherent value rather than as objects with a price tag. "The Institute's primary concern is the educational needs of those whose dignity and basic rights are not recognized. By its mission, it seeks to make it possible for them to live with dignity as sons and daughters of God."⁹ By empowering people in this way we contribute to their inclusion in society and advance their integral development.

e. Divisions among peoples of different faiths

Two-thirds of the world's population is blessed with a diversity and plurality of the world's religious, philosophical, and socio-cultural traditions. These traditions are very much alive and influential because they are intimately intertwined with the socio-political and cultural lives of hundreds of millions of people and give meaning to their lives. Many of today's young people do

⁸ Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, No. 16.

⁹ Brothers of the Christian Schools, *The Rule*, Rome, 2015, Art. 13.

not ask about the relationship of the Church to other cultures and religions, they are searching for the place and role of the Church in a religiously and culturally pluralistic world.¹⁰

In the present climate of religiously motivated violence, our Lasallian educational communities are called to be centers of cooperation among peoples of different faith traditions. Unifying commonalities among our traditions include “shared concern for human life, extending from compassion for those who are suffering physically and spiritually, to commitment to justice, peace and the protection of God’s creation.”¹¹

f. The Individual vis-à-vis the Wisdom of the Community

Advances in global education, health, and technology are empowering individuals to make choices and are demanding transparency and accountability from service providers and governments. Two outcomes of these advances are the improving status of women and the growth in global literacy. Consequently, numerous social movements and non-government organizations (NGOs) are creating communities, both real and virtual, in ways never imagined. These and other similar communities have the potential to unleash economic development, social advancement and spiritual growth. This is good news for humanity in general and our Lasallian mission in particular.

¹⁰. Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue: An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection*, Hong Kong, 1987, No. 48.

¹¹. The author is indebted to the unidentifiable source for this quotation.

We must remain attentive to the sense of individualism that is fostered by technology. Social media connects us globally, while at the same time it potentially disconnects us from those in our immediate vicinity. In our neighborhoods, schools and other social communities are we really present to one another? The profound changes in family structures and the creation of mega-parishes, for example, challenge us to find new ways to safeguard and share the wisdom of the community.

These are just some of the issues raised by the global trends we have chosen. Our task may appear daunting – and it is! I would hesitate to suggest these trends as a focus for the Institute if I did not believe that Gospel inspired responses are being given to them at the local level in numerous Lasallian ministries. And those responses, given by Brothers and Partners who have gone “outside the camp” to encounter God face-to-face, are critical for the transformation needed if we as an Institute are to achieve the conversion called for by the Gospel, the *Declaration* and subsequent General Chapters. But is the roadmap we have set for ourselves feasible? One way to insure its realization is through the effective harnessing of the various networks of the Lasallian Family.

III. Lasallian Vocations, Associations and Movements: Networking for the Mission

As an Institute we are blessed today with new structures that greatly enhance networking. And, of course, we know that effective networking makes for a more effective mission. Today the various expressions of the Lasallian

vocation allow us to respond to new needs. In this new reality there are thousands of personal and communal itineraries inspired by the Lasallian charism. The plurality of Lasallian vocations and the expansion of the mission and mission-oriented formation programs complement our readiness to actualize the power of our networks and increase our contribution to the educational challenges confronting the world today.

Lasallian networks have been evolving for a number of decades. In a simple ceremony at the 40th General Chapter (1976), eleven men and women from different countries consecrated themselves before the Founder's relics as Signum Fidei members. As such, they identify with Lasallian spirituality and our charism as a means to live fully their baptismal consecration. The elements of their vocation include following Jesus, belonging to an intentional community, and committing themselves to the Lasallian mission. In doing so, they pledge themselves to further, uphold, and defend the integral human and Christian education of young people and adults. Today there are approximately 2,000 Signum Fidei members in 30 countries.

Two years after the foundation of the Signum Fidei movement, the first Encuentro of university presidents was held in Cuernavaca, México; all the participants were Brothers. At its 11th Encuentro (March, 2015) in Bogotá, Colombia, there were more than 120 members representing our 61 universities; they were overwhelming laywomen and men. Our universities and institutes of

higher education are a tremendous resource. They are places where: research and scientific thinking provide tools to improve the quality of life today, particularly for the poor; opportunities for dialogue between culture and faith is encouraged and explored; teacher training centers include research in pedagogy for the 21st century; and professional training of Brothers and Partners help to ensure the development of the Institute, society, and the Church it serves.¹²

Once known as the World Confederation of Former Students Associations, and later the World Confederation of Lasallian Associations, UMAEL, the International Union of Former Lasallian Students held its first congress in 1994 in Spain. Last June, at its 6th congress in Beauvais, France, 120 members, many representing numerous local alumni/ae associations, gathered to chart a course for the next four years.

The International Council of Young Lasallians (ICYL) held its third symposium in Rome in 2014. Recognizing themselves as the “future protagonists of the mission” they commit to: sharing in the Lasallian mission with the poor; exploring and understanding local realities in order to respond to specific needs; and, networking with service and social justice programs and projects among Lasallian schools and other educational works. Along with Lasallian youth and collegians, Young Lasallians and various groups of Lasallian Volunteers are developing their own networks.

¹² *Circular 469, The Documents of the 45th General Chapter*, 30 November 2014, 3.21.

These endeavors hold much potential and creative possibilities for the future.

These four examples of Lasallian networks emerged organically following the 39th General Chapter in 1966-67. Greater collaboration and coordination of these vast networks can be a tremendous source of hope and progress for those people entrusted by God to our care and those on the fringes of society who cry out for our presence.

Studies on networking indicate that effectiveness presupposes: shared vision and values; structuring and fostering relationships; mutual expectations, interests, learning and anticipated benefits; and a spirit of interdependence and collaborative execution of commitments.¹³ As Lasallians we have a shared vision rooted in the charism of our Founder. Our communities foster quality relationships. “Together and by association,” we have a spirit of interdependence and collaboration; twinning programs are an example of this spirit. The necessary structures that will strengthen collaboration and coordination require further development. The steps the Institute is taking include: the restructuring of Districts and Regions; the creation of mission councils and assemblies; and, most recently, the appointments of a General Councilor to the IALU Board and of an IALU member to the International Council of Association for the Lasallian Mission. What remains to strengthen are the links between the networks at the District, Regional and Institute levels.

¹³ The author is indebted to the unidentifiable source of this quotation.

Emerging Structures to Support Networking

As these networks emerged, in the final decades of the 20th century, new structures with the potential for supporting them were also appearing. The Visitors' Conferences, providing leadership and vision for their Regions and Districts are one example. Following the 1986 Chapter the position of Regional Coordinator was created, later to be replaced by General Councilors for the Regions. As a result, communications between the Center of the Institute and the Regions are more regular. Subsequent Chapters mandated the creation of mission councils and assemblies at the International, Regional and District levels. Most recently, the 45th General Chapter created the International Council for Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission. These new structures are designed to increase Lasallian networking.

The emergence of District, Regional and Institute formation programs complement these structures. All of us appreciate how many of our Partners are embracing the Lasallian charism. But not only our Partners: the International Council of Young Lasallians, the various Lasallian Volunteer Movements and the local Lasallian youth and collegians gatherings also speak to the vitality of our charism and to its continuing need.

I believe we have now reached an important moment when we must mature the structures and build consensus around those Institute priorities that invite collaboration. Maturing the structures means committing the human

resources that are necessary for action. Rather than simply sharing dreams without the practical means to carry them forward, we must now become more intentionally practical.

The Benefits of Networking

Never before have we experienced a generation that can instantly communicate and network with one another. There are positive and negative impacts of this phenomenon. Suffice it to say that certain groups of people and parts of the world of this current generation have learned how to harness the internet and social media in a very positive way. We see educators using digital tools to ensure greater learning in and out of the classrooms. We see crowd sourcing promoting greater responsibility toward certain good causes. We see individuals advocating on behalf of the poor and the oppressed through social media, and eventually changing mindsets and governmental and policy reforms.

There is strength in numbers. There are benefits from a strong international network. I suggest that two benefits relevant to us are creativity and advocacy.

Creativity is a result of effective networking. Referencing Kao Law, one author wrote “creativity increases exponentially with the divergence and diversity of those connected to a network. The continued networking of the world will move us from the information age to the age of creativity. The beauty of this is that human creativity is a resource available everywhere in the world.... Creativity is

born of the human spirit, and we all have access to it.”¹⁴

Effective advocacy can also be a result of networking. However, advocacy is not something that comfortably engages many of us. “The word ‘advocate’ causes some of us to feel a bit uneasy.”¹⁵ Yet, as we know, our *Rule* and past General Chapters insist that “our mission cannot be reduced to offering welfare assistance but it must go to the roots of poverty to seek out structural solutions to educate for justice”.¹⁶ There is comfort in numbers. A strong Lasallian network can better link our commitments to the educational service of the poor and the promotion of justice.

The benefits of networking also include social and professional support, sharing resources, the flow of desired information across groups and associations, the sharing of mutual expectations and greater visibility for the larger Lasallian mission. Mutual enrichment, better performance/desired results, efficient use of resources and the like should be some of the outcomes of dialogue between Lasallian networks and movements. Networking, of course, is not only intended for our own benefit or personal enrichment, but also to enable us to realize our Lasallian vocation of collaborative learning with those “outside the camp”.

¹⁴ Thornburg, David D. *Technologies of Liberation: Education in the New Century*, in *Conversations in Excellence*, Ed. Cimino, Carol, et. al., NCEA, 2000, pp. 56-57.

¹⁵ Johnston, FSC, John, “Jesus was Indignant... Are we?” *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2011.

¹⁶ Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC, Álvaro, *The Report of the Superior General to the 44th General Chapter*, Rome, 2007, p. 35.

PART B.

I. The Year of...

Coming close on the heels of the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis has dedicated 2016 as the special jubilee Year of Mercy. He also woke up the world in 2015 with his encyclical *Laudato Si'*. We might look upon these proclamations as invitations from the Pope for three encounters: a personal encounter with the meaning of our consecration for today, a relational encounter of mercy with people on the margins of our societies and an encounter with our environment, God's creation.

a. Year of Consecrated Life: Encountering Our Religious Life Today

By dedicating the Year of Consecrated Life Pope Francis invites us to:

a *pilgrimage* in reverse, a pathway of knowledge to discover ourselves on the streets of Palestine or near the boat of the humble fisherman of Galilee. He invites us to contemplate the beginnings of a journey or rather, of an event initiated by Christ, when the nets were left on the lake shore, the tax collector's desk by the side of the road, the ambitions of the zealot among discarded plans.¹⁷

Our journeys began when we accepted the call of our vocation as Brothers of the Christian Schools. Through God's successive calls, we deepened our commitment to follow Jesus. For many of us our perseverance has been

¹⁷. CICLSAL, Rejoice!, 2014, p. 22.

lived out in a period of great change for our Church, our Institute and our world. The blessings of an interior life with the Lord and a community life with our Brothers sustain us in the midst of all that is transpiring around us.

Nearly 40 years ago, the General Council published a document on our Consecrated Life (*Circular 406*). Among other things, it addressed the result of the December 8, 1974 Institute-wide survey on the meaning of our identity and our vowed life. The reflection, at that time, on our understanding of the meaning of our consecration remains rich. *Circular 406* invited:

each Brother to discern for himself the action of God at the core of his existence, and to rediscover his life in the light of faith. Knowledge of our weaknesses, of our remissness, of our compromising should not prevent us from taking stock of all that is positive and potentially valuable in ourselves. Life and death live side by side in us. It is possible, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to give that life in us a chance to grow and to guide this emergence of the self.¹⁸

How true this continues to be. Our life is an ongoing journey of exodus and discovery. It is an “exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery, and indeed the discovery of God”¹⁹. The *Declaration* offered a path for this discovery of the meaning of our consecration:

¹⁸. General Council, *Circular 406, Our Consecrated Life*, p. 86.

¹⁹. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*, 2006, No. 6.

Every Brother must make his own the decision of Saint John Baptist de La Salle to go to the poor “with the heart of a poor man.” As he does so, a Brother will discover a deeper understanding of the meaning of his consecration to God. For the service of the poor cannot be separated from the poverty which is a Christian attitude of mind, the humble acceptance of the gift of Christ, the response of love for Christ and for all men²⁰.

b. The Jubilee Year of Mercy: Encountering People on the Margins of Society

In announcing the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis said: "Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism."²¹

An encounter with mercy happens every time the Gospel meets humanity through the corporal works of mercy: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, and bury the dead. For Lasallians, the works of mercy also include providing a human and Christian education,

²⁰. Brothers of the Christian Schools, *The Declaration*, 1967, 34.2.

²¹. Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, *Bull of Indiction*, April 11, 2015, No. 15.

especially for persons living beyond the borders of contemporary society.

c. The Environment: Encountering God's Creation

At the entrance to the botanical gardens in Montreal, Canada, stands a statue of Brother Marie-Victorin, a native of Québec, known as the “Father of the Montreal Botanical Garden”. In the history of our Institute there are other such Brothers who made significant contributions in the area of the natural sciences, including those impacting the environment. A recent initiative is Encuentro XI celebrated last March in Bogotá, Colombia. During this Encuentro, the presidents of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU) identified several areas to be addressed by the Association. One of these is “Joint Global Diplomacy and Lobbying” and included in these key issues are poverty reduction, food security and the environment. IALU has already initiated collaborative research on these important topics.

As an international Institute dedicated to human and Christian education we should be especially attentive to caring for our common home. While environmental issues and community service projects are addressed and promoted in individual schools, *Laudato si'* is a good impetus for us to consider crafting an Institute-wide environmental policy.

In *MEL Bulletin* No. 46, Brother José Martín Montoya Durà offers Lasallian schools an environmental plan for sustainable development. He notes that:

Generally speaking, one could say that environmental education has made progress from being merely a stance connected with the natural sciences, to becoming involved with the ethics of human development. At the present time, this aspect of pedagogy needs to be made a part of education, to concentrate on the economic and social processes of sustainable development, given that the existing model for development we have, does not solve great social problems such as poverty, inequality, injustice, war, etc.²²

The Year of Mercy and the encyclical *Laudato si'* are intimately linked in the Pope's vision. There is an "intimate relationship" he says, "between the poor and the fragility of the planet..."²³ How we as Districts and Institute respond to the Pope's vision and invitation demands a response from all of us: each ministry, each District, and the Center of the Institute.

Every graduate of a Catholic school should emerge with a deep commitment to promoting the quality of life, to justice as a seamless garment, and to protecting the integrity of creation.... They ought to come out committed to oppose all sinful social structures, and to help reform them or create new ones.²⁴

²² Montoya Durá, FSC, José Martín, *Environmental education for sustainable development*, *MEL Bulletin* No. 46, October, 2012, p. 39.

²³ Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, No. 16.

²⁴ Groome, Thomas, *Will There Be Faith?*, 251, as quoted in: Miller, FSC, Ernest, *Let Us Bear Witness to the Reign of God: Reimagining Lasallian Education and Evangelization*, a doctoral dissertation, The Catholic Theological Union, May 2015, p. 176.

PART C

I. A Gospel Adventure: Meeting God “Outside the Camp”

The greatest cause of your joy in this life is to proclaim the Gospel free of charge... (Med. 207.2)

A Gospel Adventure is the Institute’s theme for 2015 – 2016. The theme emerges from our “first and principal Rule”. In the Gospel we “constantly seek sustenance in the Word of God, which we study, meditate on and share with one another.”²⁵ We feel a freshness in the Pope’s call to return to the Gospel. During the annual Day of Recollection at the Motherhouse last winter we insisted that this call should not be understood as simply something nice; it is not superficial. As Saint John Baptist de La Salle reminds us, “the difference between worldings’ joy and the joy of God’s servants is that the former is only superficial, whereas the latter is very deep”. He goes on to say:

The joy of the just, according to our Lord, will be unshakable and not easily subject to changes, because it is founded on what sustains the life of grace in them, namely, the love of God and union with him by prayer and the reception of the sacraments. In this way God maintains and nourishes their joy; it is solidly based because it is based on God himself.²⁶

The joy of the Gospel is a surprise. Jesus’ life and the lives of the other great biblical personalities are full of

²⁵ Brothers of the Christian Schools, *The Rule*, Rome, 2015, Art. 8.

²⁶ Loes, FSC, Augustine and Huether, FSC, Francis, (eds.) *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, Christian Brothers Conference, Landover, Maryland, 1994, No. 34.2, p. 93.

unexpected surprises. God confounds us! Recall Sarah who first laughed at the suggestion of the three strangers that she would bear a child in her old age. Ultimately her joy knew no bounds: “God has given me cause to laugh, and all who hear of it will laugh with me” (Gn. 21:6). In one sense, the joy of the Gospel is a call to return to the idealism and radical aspect of our first calling, when as young men, we said yes to the gift of our vocation as a Brother. We were called then and are we called now to follow the God of Jesus Christ, to recognize our identity in our relationship with the Triune God and to accept it and live it out joyfully. For it is the joy of the faithfulness of God, God’s unconditional love for humanity.

The joy of our mission is lived within the context of the whole Church. Pope Francis has resurrected the spirit of Vatican II. The Church as the People of God is called and sent. Our mission is to model, point to, and act on the Church's vision as the People of God: we are to be for everyone; all are to be welcomed, no one is to be excluded. Among the tasks of our educational ministries is the preparation of our young people for a Church that must be welcoming and inclusive.

It is also important to find our joy with the people with whom we are presently living and working. They are the people God has graced us with; this is the time we have been given. If we can't make a difference where we are now, we can't and won't make a difference elsewhere.

Finally, the joy of the Gospel urges us to find the best way to respond creatively to today’s needs. If we do not meet

God “outside the camp” and respond creatively to the urgings of the Spirit, transformation will not happen.

2. Transformation: A Renewing Action

“Are we determined to break new ground that the novelty of God presents us or to dig in to old structures that have lost the ability to respond?”²⁷

What brings about transformation/change, renewal, adapted renewal or re-foundation? This question suggests others. Are we doing enough in our own personal lives, in our ministries and our Districts? Are we really called to maintain all of our institutions? How do we move if we are bound by our institutions? How do we move an Institute that is so large? How do I personally move myself? How ready are we to “die” so as to allow new life to come into being? “Like it or not, breakdown and disintegration appear to be the means God uses to prepare congregations and their members for deep and thorough transformation.”²⁸

Transformation is not doing better what you already are doing, but doing something entirely different. Transformation happens in mission. Transformation is risk-taking and very challenging. “To be transformed, first we must meet people who are different, not our family, friends and neighbors who are like us. Let us meet across differences – intellectual, cultural, national, racial, religious and other differences.”²⁹ In other words, let us cross

²⁷. Francis, *Homily, Pentecost*, 2013.

²⁸. Sammon, FMS, Sean, *Religious Life Reimagined* in America, September 14, 2015, p. 3.

²⁹. Vanier, Jean, “In the heart of the poor”, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, No. 22, 29 May 2015, p. 13.

boundaries, go beyond borders and stand on the peripheries. Let us recall the inspiring vision of the *Declaration* that still motivates us. The vision of the *Declaration* “engages the Brothers to undertake a renewing action for which it assigns objectives, suggests some strategies...and insists that the Brothers are the agents of this transforming action.”³⁰

Yes, we understand the tension between staying in our comfort zone and moving to where we will be uncomfortable. Yes, we know initially it can be difficult and at times quite unsettling. But as men of faith we know too that giving our lives away will bring greater joy. If we know what needs to be done are we willing to take great risks to do so? How much do we love one another?

I do not know of any individual or congregation that can sustain the work of conversion or transformation without the profound *lure* of love. Why else would anyone go through such an ordeal? And never are we so lured as when we, and the relationships that matter to us, are broken. No longer able to stand on our own two feet, we hear more clearly the great love of God. Our yearning grows stronger in response to the invitation: “I am going to lure her and lead her out into the wilderness and speak to her heart” (Ho. 2:16). It is by the luring love of God, your love of community and your yearning to make things whole again that you will gain the

³⁰ Sauvage, FSC, Michel and Campos, FSC, Miguel, *The Fragile Hope of a Witness: The Itinerary of Brother Michel Sauvage, Lasallian Studies*, No. 18, Rome, 2014, p. 414.

strength to step further into the spiral of refounding and journey back home again.³¹

During the above mentioned day of community reflection, one Brother noted that when he read the *Joy of the Gospel* he felt he was reading a Lasallian document. As an Institute we are moving in the right direction. Some of our initiatives are prophetic; two examples are our presence in the South Sudan and the Fratelli Project. Another example of moving in the right direction is the formation of our Partners and being associated with them in the in mission. The call to be Brothers without borders and the creation of new communities on the peripheries are other examples. We are doing many amazing things; however, because we do not always effectively network, much of the good we do remains unknown to most of the Lasallian Family and the larger educational world. We need to better link and strengthen our international networks. More importantly, we must develop stronger networks so as to more effectively advocate for those who have no voice.

As educators, regardless of where we find ourselves, whether at the center or at the peripheries, Pope Francis is asking us to announce Christ to vulnerable, wounded and suffering people. We can do this both in our traditional ministries and by continuing to expand our presence in alternative educational centers suggested since the time of the *Declaration*.

³¹ Dunn, Ph.D., Ted, *Refounding Religious Life: A Choice for Transformational Change*, in *Human Development*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Fall 2009, pp. 5-13.

From the beginning, the Lasallian school has represented itself in response to new educational needs of young people while maintaining its fundamental character – its true identity – of humanizing, liberating and evangelizing.³²

Conclusion: Finding God “Outside the Camp”

*To let ourselves be led by God through changing times requires, on our part, great imagination*³³

A recent book advocates reading the Bible with imagination. According to the author, fundamentalists who read the Bible literally and atheists who dismiss it as mythology miss the mark. People of faith understand the value of poetry, metaphors and images to reveal truths that light the way for each new generation of believers. The author calls such individuals, “People of the Book”; they recognize their own experience in the stories of the Hebrew people and the first generations of Christians. The author cites the civil rights movement in America, apartheid in South Africa and Alexander Solzhenitsyn's experience in the Gulags of Soviet Russia as examples of enslaved people taking the story of the Exodus and making it their own. They stood in a different place and viewed the horizon from a new perspective. They dared to imagine that their world could be different. What was needed then and is

³² Miller, FSC, Ernest. *Let Us Bear Witness to the Reign of God: Reimagining Lasallian Education and Evangelization*, doctoral dissertation, The Catholic Theological Union, May, 2015, p. 161.

³³ Rolheiser, OMI, Ronald, *Against an Infinite Horizon: The Finger of God in our Everyday Lives*, Crossroad, New York, 1995, p. 201.

needed today are evangelizers who help to place us in God's presence "outside the camp" and listen for his voice.

The commission to evangelize requires us to be poets, or interpreters of everyday experiences. We help others see life as touched by God. We do that by looking at life in the light of faith. Evangelizing involves looking more deeply into the ordinary to see the extraordinary and then naming the divine graciousness sustaining us.³⁴

Why are we being asked to be more attentive to the poor, the excluded, and the marginalized on the peripheries, the deserts and the borders of society? It is not so much because we will evangelize them, but rather we will open ourselves to being evangelized by them. As we have so often heard and know in the depths of our hearts, "It is those on the margins of society who understand the Gospel message and not those in the dominant community".³⁵

This pastoral letter outlines themes that resonate with the challenges of our time that demand a Gospel response. Our Lasallian educational service to and with the poor is a Gospel response. What is still needed is advocacy for those voices not being heard. Past General Chapters and Superior Generals have identified as a particular priority of our charism the defense of the rights of children. We need to be more intentional in this regard. Where does the defense of children's rights fit into the schools' curricula and Districts' plans? How do we not only support the objectives of the

³⁴. Gula, PSS, Richard M., *Give us this day*, April, 2015, p. 323.

³⁵. Barr, Kevin, J. *Fire on the Earth Spectrum*, 1995, p. 30.

International Catholic Child Bureau (BICE) but also take steps to realize them? Like De La Salle, “we have to move beyond mere indignation to act, to discharge the prophetic potentiality to unmask ‘acts of injustice’ and ‘manifestations of misery’.”³⁶

Where do we stand? The Fratelli Project is an invitation to stand in a different place. Its purpose is to respond to the increasing crises among displaced people in cross border situations in different parts of the world. The Fratelli Project is an Institute response. I know individual Districts, ministries and communities are also responding. We are all called to respond to these crises in the best possible way we can. I encourage you to share with us the steps your ministries and communities are taking.

Might we not consider the revision of our *Rule* as leading us to stand in a new place? The Institute in 2015 exists in a world and Church different than that of the 1987 *Rule*. The 1987 *Rule*, for example, viewed our consecrated life within the perspective of Vatican II's understanding of religious life. The specificity of our life as Brothers viewed from the centrality of the vow of association is the starting point for the chapter on Consecrated Life in our revised *Rule*. The vow of association “opens up our horizon and moves us beyond ourselves.”³⁷ What are we seeing on that horizon? What is moving us? Who is calling us?

³⁶. Johnston, FSC, John, “Jesus Was Indignant... Are We?” Presentation at the Huether Conference, Washington, DC, November 15, 2001, p. 6.

³⁷. Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC, Álvaro, “Associated with the God of the Poor: Our consecrated life in the light of the 4th vow”, *Pastoral Letter*, Rome, 2003, p. 12.

A sub-title in the 1987 *Rule*, “Shared Mission” has evolved to the “Lasallian Mission” where both Brothers and Partners share responsibility. Islam, the environment and the global financial crisis were only within the peripheral vision of most of us in 1987; not so today. And while aging and diminishing numbers were already a reality in 1987, in 2015 they can either block our vision for the future or invite us to stand in a different place to view the needs of the world and Church from a wider perspective.

Finally, Jesus, in the parable of the widow’s mite, invites and challenges us to see things differently. While the poor widow’s gift consists of two insignificant coins, her commitment is total. Her gift is in stark contrast with the larger contributions offered by rich people. She has been living “outside the camp” and has met God “face to face.” “What we see and hear depends on where we stand. So perhaps the first response to Jesus’ challenge is for us to stand in a different place, at the frontiers where Pope Francis call us to venture. The view there may be unfamiliar and a little uncomfortable, but the widows and their friends await, ready to teach us something new from where they stand.”³⁸



Brother Robert Schieler
Superior General

³⁸. O’Brien, SJ, Kevin, in *Give Us This Day*, June, 2015, p. 75.