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Bridging our passion for the poor and education: mission possible

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Bridging our passion for the poor and education: mission possible *

Brother Robert Schieler, Fsc.**

Greetings. It is a privilege to stand before you this morning. Thank you for your kind invitation. I have looked forward to being with you for I am convinced that as this century progresses the role of our universities, colleges and institutes of higher learning in the Lasallian global mission will only grow in importance and significance.

I welcome the choice of your theme for this *Encuentro*. It is a topic that has been a preoccupation for me since last spring when the Brothers asked that I serve as Superior. I am interested in strengthening an existing bridge in our Lasallian orbit. Among our strongest Lasallian networks today are the Center of the Institute and your International Association of Lasallian Universities. These two global networks are accomplishing wonderful things. There is potential for so much more. The major issue I wish to address with you today is this: at this moment in the life of the Institute can we leave things as they are or find new ways for all of us (those committed to specific projects, those in primary or secondary

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schools, colleges and universities, social care for children and young people in difficulty or at-risk, adult education, catechists and directors of religious education); to live our Lasallian association more genuinely in partnership for the mission? Is it time for overcoming uncertainties, prejudices and fears, and embrace our historical moment in salvation history?

What I am asking is this: Is the time ripe for a closer coordination among our networks that “balances the particular input of our institutions with universal input for the good of our mission and education in general? Together can we reinforce the synergy we share in common: our foundational history constantly consulted and diffused through formation; our decentralized manner of functioning linked by common objectives; and the use of technology” (Capelle, 2006, p. 241) to strengthen and develop further our bonds with one another, with our Districts and with our Regions?

What will we gain by opening up to a more intentional and organic collaboration between the two networks in a more structured and transparent manner of administration? What do we fear losing?

First though, what does our history teach us?

At the end of the 17th century, De La Salle and his teacher-Brothers committed themselves to liberating the children of the poor from the deadly vicious circle in which they found themselves. Their initiative stood in sharp contrast to the established educational systems. Profit, positions of power, and personal interests were often the primary factors involved in deciding who was to receive an education and to what end. The children of penniless day labourers and unprotected craftsmen were given little if any opportunity to enjoy its benefits.

Hermans Lombaerts

What did De La Salle introduce? Among his innovations, I want to highlight some of those practices and policies, familiar to many of us, that have characterized our legacy and the networks we have today.

- A Lasallian school is a school defined by the needs of the students; not by a curriculum template that has no connection to their lives.
- The teachers do not work in isolation but form a community of educators.
- The teachers base their actions on observations, not ideals.
- They do not impose their views in an authoritarian manner.
- When putting their knowledge to practice, they first test it before presenting to their superiors for approval.
- They know the world of youth, its ups and downs, their values and weaknesses, successes and failures, allowing these young people to participate in their own formation and to grow in wisdom.
- Specific data collected from an historic memory from a group which narrates what it is learning.
- Every aspect of the curriculum begins with the social environment where the family lives and works.

Furthermore, these findings and practices were made possible because De La Salle was not content with bookish research, but devoted himself to accompany his brothers, prioritizing their training: teacher formation. The needs of children were the central interest. The responsibility to address these needs falls on the adults in an educational community. This assessment of the roles of the teacher was not shared by all. Christian schools under the direction of De La Salle demanded attention and uncommon commitment and continuous professional development and always a new attentiveness to the context of the life of his disciples.

Judging by the many re-issues of *The Conduct of Schools* these schools had an impressive success in both the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and other congregations dedicated to educational service. Why? "The Brothers themselves continuously and thoroughly tested the methods, teaching techniques, structure and discipline, educational activities, etc... The Brothers were

the ones who, first individually and then together, evaluated the suitability and the effectiveness of their practices before deciding on what should be kept and what should be dropped." (Lauraire, 2008, pp. 6-7) Lasallian scholar Bro. León Lauraire writes, "As a work of school practitioners, the richness of the *Conduite* even today is of special interest only to those who have a similar practical experience of teaching school. To read the work from the standpoint of some educational theory or unrelated pedagogy, or even with some preconceived ideology, is to risk understanding it poorly." (Lauraire, 2008, p. 7) He continues, "We have before us an inductive process. First consideration was given to the real situation: educational needs of students... the conditions, constraints and means of delivering this education; the possibilities for the future and the choice of a specific purpose for the school. Once these were established, appropriate modalities of instruction and education were set up". (Lauraire, 2008, p. 7)

Throughout these centuries this Lasallian education project was consolidated at the elementary level with its roots in the founding itinerary of Christian and gratuitous schools, schools of popular education. However, when De La Salle died, the 22 schools he left to us didn't represent an amazing success; but, at that moment, he left for us these simple and clear policies.

This is the legacy of popular elementary and Lasallian schools today. Without imposing fundamentalist zeal, the practices and policies created three centuries ago have ensured that the school worked well. Our present Lasallian works correspond to studies of the preferred ways that new generations think, feel and behave, especially among the needy, promoting practices so that the young will want to come to our schools.

From primary education to secondary schools, moving towards higher studies

It wasn't long though before the Brothers understood, especially during the eighteenth century, that the dynamism of the original charism was not limited to primary schools for the poor. Their schools also took the configuration from the characteristics of small towns where they were implanted. It was only a matter

of time for the secondary level to begin to appear on the horizon of works already established for the urgent needs of poor youth and marginalized workers of society. The Brothers prepared the poor and working classes for insertion into the life of society with the practical knowledge to take responsibility in their society, through revising the curriculum as necessary.

**When and why does higher or tertiary education come from?
For what and for whom have we been founded?**

It is commonly understood that the Jesuits, the Society of Jesus, the Order of Preachers or Dominicans, the Benedictines, Augustinians, and Franciscans were the drivers of the Catholic Church's spiritual and intellectual tradition. On many occasions they are perceived as rivals, even enemies, in competition with one another, and not only on the playing fields. Approved by the hierarchy, these works were defined as Catholic. But how to justify a consecrated band of laymen founded and eventually approved for conducting popular works, to serve the working class, without a formal classical education, who would dare to explore higher education. These brothers with fragmented and occasional periods of formation, with a very narrow horizon, were progressively assuming the demands of a very serious intellectual life within this Catholic tradition.

The French philosopher Jacques Maritain, in an address at Manhattan College upon receiving an honorary degree on the occasion of the tercentenary of St. La Salle's birth on April 30, 1951, impeccably located the importance of the charisma of an institution which at that time had a membership of 14,000 Brothers and describes it in these terms:

They are incomparable masters of popular education. They have their own way of making a strong, serious, sometimes severe discipline foster the affection of their pupils and their lasting gratitude. They have an art of making the means proportionate to the ends with a craftsman's accuracy, and by looking always at the essentials. From the very start they have understood that as concerns the working classes —THAT IS, AS CONCERNS THE COMMON MAN, man in his most general and natural condition— EDUCATION MUST EQUIP YOUTH WITH A GENUINE and

efficient PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND THE MEANS OF MAKING A LIVING. And they have understood at the same time that the formation of the soul and of the intellect, the bringing up of man as man, remains the highest and most indispensable aim of education. That integration, for which all are looking today, of the practical and the theoretical, of vocational preparation and the cultivation of the mind —with the implied general enlightenment, ability to think and judge by oneself, and orientation towards wisdom—, that integration is natural for them, and they work it out spontaneously, because they are neither idealists despising matter nor technocrats despising disinterested knowledge; they are Christian educators in the MOST concrete and realist sense of this expression. (Maritain, 1951)

Maritain's reflections are particularly interesting because they are based on the vision he had of the Brothers in France; and he goes on:

[...] we are accustomed to think of the Christian Brothers as dedicated to a kind of teaching which goes very far indeed and covers large fields of knowledge, but keeps voluntarily aloof from secondary education as well as college education and higher learning. And we are accustomed to think of them as clinging to the vernacular, with a definite aversion for Latin and for classical studies. (Maritain, 1951, p. 44)

Maritain describes the two ways the Institute was developing in the nineteenth century in Europe and in the United States and Canada. Two models emerge. Both retain the poor as their preference, and practical education at the elementary level. Both models are characterized by a certain rigidity with respect to Latin and the classics. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this rigidity happened in the United States and what became known in Institute history as "the Latin Question".

The crisis over the Latin Question shook the North American model. Strongly marked by immigration and the urgent needs of a growing youth population, the bishops were very attentive to the education of Catholic immigrants. Poverty, the lack of employment and increased marginalization of a population that were victims to the economy: some Brothers realized the historical situation and had the audacity to make changes in the curriculum, and to move beyond elemen-

tary education, founding high schools and establishing night schools and Sunday schools, for example. They were also attentive to the relationship between workers and their leaders, on the one hand, and administrators and owners of factories, on the other. All needed new styles of dialogue and negotiation skills and abilities. What should be the orientation of the schools in this new environment? Other congregations also entered this debate with their own agendas, sometimes to clarify and sometimes to complicate. All of this caused the Superiors in France unavoidable fears of losing the sense of the purpose of our founding charism. However, with the support of many laity, and thanks to the interventions of some bishops, gradually there was clarity of the need for change. Again, Maritain, quoting Cardinal Gasparri, Papal Secretary of State, describes it in these terms:

In consideration of the far-reaching changes which modern times have made in educational programs and statutes, and also in view of the larger participation of all classes of society in all kinds of studies, His Holiness, Pope Pius XI judges that the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, ought, henceforth, to extend their teaching to classical studies as it was already done with success to the higher education sciences, even in behalf of the well-to-do classes. (Maritain, 1951, p. 45)

The Latin Question caused great suffering and forestalled original creativity. Unfair punishments, the exile of Visitors and college presidents, etc. have been studied, but this is not the place to go into greater depth into the topic. It is enough to remember that it is nothing but the experience of an Institute debating fidelity to the expectations of its founder and fidelity to the present moment. But, in fact, there are not two fidelities. Fidelity to the past sometimes requires openness to changes the Founder could not have foreseen.

This distinction is significant not so much for the fact that the Founder cannot see it all, but in history new situations emerge with new needs calling for new responses. These situations need discernment in the Church for the glory of God, for the good of the Church, and for the good of the society of the Brothers. But while new and unprecedented situations emerged, the main purpose of the community, preference for the education of the poor, remained intact.

The Latin Question surfaced two concepts that were seen as incompatible in the seventeenth century: the poor and the classics. As an institute, across the centuries, we have not shied away from making these two concepts less incompatible.

Who do we choose as our preference (or audience) for our educational mission?

Following the Second Vatican Council, the Brothers' General Chapter of renewal (1966-1967) and the publication of the "Declaration of the Brothers in the world today," the Institute responds without hesitation that the poor are our preferential option for our educational service.

With clarity and eloquence, when we talk about the poor today in the world of a globalized economy dominated by a consumerist culture of "commodity," we are more conscious of the "new poor" forced to go to the periphery, the consequences for their children, often fatal. Torn from the center of inter-action of insertion in society, these young people encounter many obstacles to their development, both intellectually and spiritually.

I think there is no meeting when discussing our Lasallian mission today where we do not talk about this issue, especially when it comes to those who we would like to serve. In doing so, we worry it may cause academic difficulties to our legacy, putting us in the obligation to create remedial programs to accompany these students, that are very costly and place great stress on the university. Moreover, we allege, with our limited resources we cannot subsidize such programs exclusively from those students who can pay the tuition. These, too, must be helped and from year to year we experience a decrease in the numbers of those who are able to pay.

It is truly a dilemma: how to address the poor out of their context. As if by luring them on campus they must abdicate their family life, where they live, their culture and their history. How to connect the campus and the neighborhood? How to connect what they study and learn with their reality? I suspect that this

matter is not resolved by quantitative equations. The matter should be considered qualitatively. That requires us to reflect on our preferential option.

One response to this dilemma that has intrigued me was the talk of the Jesuit President of the University of Central America, Father Ignacio Ellacuría, murdered one night, along with members of his community by repressive forces in the country of El Salvador.

A Christian university must take into account the gospel preference for the poor. This does not mean that only the poor will study at the university; nor does it mean that the university should abdicate its mission of academic excellence — excellence which is needed in order to solve complex issues of our time. What it does mean, according to Ellacuría, is that the university should be present intellectually where it is needed:

- To provide science for those without science;
- To provide skills for those without skills;
- To be a voice for those without voices;
- To give intellectual support for those who do not possess the academic qualifications to make their rights legitimately heard.

Consider for a moment these statements from a Rector who intentionally re-imagined what a college that chooses the poor can be.

The first point that he identifies is “the place” where universities find themselves. The campus is the place where needs and hopes are at a crossroads and different interpretations of what it should be about can come into conflict. But the central focus of the learning process and all intellectual activity intersect where the poor live and have their being; where they mature and develop professionally and spiritually.

Second, he speaks of “presence.” It is not about increasing the number of the poor at a university. On the contrary, a prestigious and powerful university reaches out without individualistic ambitions. There is no question of creating

a gap or lowering academic standards but of lifting up. Embracing these virtues are included in order to transform real problems.

This way of understanding a Catholic college is a challenge to elite universities; those that disconnect the content of the various disciplines from reality. The conversation between the content of the various disciplines or different professional fields with the needs of those abandoned creates a distinct learning process.

This does not require tremendously expensive research budgets. With modest means we can strengthen this part of academic life, helping young people to connect with real problems. That study is fundamental. Teachers become more passionate and creative. Students are more motivated for they can find that what they learn is relevant and applicable to reality. So that all the disciplines come as equals in the conversation and subsequent implementation. But Ella-curía goes even further, identifying four verbs that energize the purpose of a university. The verbs are:

- “Provide” science for those without science.
- “Give skills” to investigate, to collect what they learn, and to apply that learning.
- “To be a voice” for those who do not have a voice. Do not remove their place but we give the power to speak for themselves. We are not substitutes, i.e. we do not speak in place or for them.
- Finally, give “intellectual support.”

Let me emphasize the fact that, in this text, Ella-curía does not speak of this way of learning with the poor and for the common good as an act of charity. Empowering them is related to the concept of justice as articulated in our Catholic social teachings.

This requires a concern for excellence in the study of the context of the poor from the perspectives of different academic disciplines. The inter-disciplinary approach opens new possibilities favoring interventions and actions together.

Finally, finding ways and means to make higher education more accessible to the poor would gain in depth if the embodied purpose of the university is a place where the poor and their teachers become present to each other and respectively stimulate the quality of every student at the university. Fortunately, within our own Lasallian Family, we have examples of this kind of presence as well as models of the kind Ellacuría spoke of here. While I am not personally familiar with existing initiatives you have, right here in Bogotá is Utopia, and in the Philippines, the origins of the College of Saint Benilde in Manila brought tertiary education to those who otherwise may not have had the opportunity.

I end up where I started. I have not the slightest doubt about the transformative potential and power which our two international networks have. Historically, each springs and sprouts from the same charism given to De La Salle and his first Brothers; the eyes of faith and passion for the mission that moved our Founder are still present in our story today and in our two Lasallian networks. Allow me a brief re-capitulation of your own story.

The stages of a journey

The *Institute Bulletin* no. 252, published in 2010, was entirely devoted to the topic of Lasallian Centers of Higher Education. In it, Joan Landeros gives us a wonderful overview of the progress and promise of IALU. She reminds us of the first meeting at La Salle University, Mexico, in 1978 and developments until the next meeting in 1987, referencing the dramatic change in climate between these two times. In the 1978 meeting only Brothers were present; there is an absence of laity. Also, at that time, "...no permanent form of continuity was structured and all possibility of an association and any statutes that would rule it were rejected."

A direct consequence of this rejection was the delay of these *Encuentros*. We waited until 1987 to have the second *Encuentro*. On this occasion not only was there a lay presence but also a dialogue with a panel of students. The climate had changed dramatically; the nascent association did not retreat in on itself.

While there was still no elected leadership to serve the association or by-laws established, subsequent meetings, especially in the sixth *Encuentro* in the Philippines and the seventh in Barcelona, saw the need for more communication and greater collaboration among institutions. A new idea was being born.

Apparently *Encuentro* VIII in Canoas, Brazil, was the time when the network recognized the “mature role of Lasallian higher education in the Institute’s educational mission” (p. 10). This gathering also heard the insistent call of Brother Álvaro, then Superior General, which echoed aspirations of the 1993 42nd General Chapter, the first International Mission Assembly in 2006, and the 44th General Chapter of 2007. Indeed, Brother Álvaro’s paper offered an important challenge for our universities, colleges and institutes of higher learning to play in the associative movement of the whole of Lasallian works of the Institute. He encouraged you to play your own role in addressing the urgencies and challenges of today, again, identified by our last four General Chapters: hunger, migration, the disintegration of the family, and the new poverties. Are they not, he asked, “the call of the spirit asking us for a prophetic response at this moment in our history”? How encouraging it is to him and all of us when we read your 2013–2018 agenda calling for research in the areas of nutrition and health, the environment, innovations in education, and learning aimed at serving the poor.

Two networks —ancient and new—, one mission: a unique partnership

In the same spirit of my predecessor, I also assure you that my presence at this meeting wants to say, without doubt, the importance to me as Superior General and for our Institute is the diverse network that we call IALU, composed of universities, technical or agricultural institutes, and institutes of higher learning that may or may not be affiliated with another university or college. I value who you are and what you do. My participation also wants to be an act of hope in your potentialities. Regarding the creation of a strong partnership between us, they can be also a source of support and resources for all Lasallian works.

Our networks have global dimensions and both Brothers and lay contribute to the mission. Even more, both networks, as we have expressed here, recognize

and value our founding charism of De La Salle and his first Brothers in 17th-century France. And both assume in partnership one mission entrusted to them by the Church.

Often, however, we are so passionate about a given place, a particular work which we love, we lose a sense of the whole. This happens in both of our networks. It probably has a positive aspect: we have great zeal for what we are doing in our ministries. But there is the risk of eliminating the possibility for a greater mission impact. Can we not capitalize better on the international character of the Institute?

At this time, the two networks have sufficient autonomy to function well without interference and each has asserted its identity, ways of working, and the most appropriate structure. I do not see manifested doubts and tensions. The validity of our higher education or tertiary network is unquestioned, especially when we realize we are effectively the voice of the poor. There should be no fears of one network absorbing the other. But I ask, is it perhaps time to review the possibilities and take a step further as proposed by Brother Álvaro Rodríguez, now a rector of a university in his own right? I ask this also in the context of the rapidly changing demographics of the Institute, particularly the aging and diminishing number of Brothers. Just last week, in fact, at a conference of school heads of the RELAN region, a keynote speaker referenced the impact of this increasing generational distance in our Lasallian institutions from a culture shaped by the Brothers.

What is our present situation?

On the one hand are those Lasallian institutions conducted by Brothers and/or competent Partners that identify with the charism of La Salle and offer a variety of educational programs and projects. Among these institutions there is still a visible community of Brothers, while in others their presence is not as numerous as before. The continuity of the mission at this time is guaranteed by the presence of committed Brothers and lay; or, in some cases, entirely by the laity.

On the other hand, there is an increasing number of higher educational works also inspired by the founding charism, but more autonomous and governed by the mediation of structures corresponding to this level of education. In these works, since their inception, the presence of lay greatly exceeds the presence of Brothers.

Of course, not everyone working in these institutions consider themselves Lasallians, or aspire to be or to participate in the Lasallian charism. But many do identify with this charism and with its updated spiritual and pedagogical heritage. These are the beginnings of a "Lasallian movement" by which Brothers and Partners are in search of a structure for association for the mission "throughout the networks of the Institute."

In the last decades our two networks have experienced significant developments. In the face of rapidly changing demographics, the Institute has restructured itself from 11 Regions and approximately 60 Districts to the present 5 Regions, 32 Districts and 2 Delegations. The purpose of this restructuring has been to assure, as much as it is possible, the vitality and viability of the mission and the leadership for it. Measuring the success of our efforts and any unforeseen consequences resulting from the restructuring could be a future research topic in itself.

IALU, as we have just seen, has evolved from an idea to an association with statutes, faculty and student exchanges, a formation program in Rome, and collaborative research initiatives. Here too you took to heart my predecessor's words:

IALU should cease to be a merely benevolent association that watches over its tertiary institutions and shares fraternally. It should create a body, based on what we already have, that will allow it to affirm, support, and effectively transform the educational mission at the tertiary level through our loyalty to the Lasallian legacy...I am not inviting you to create a colossal giant body that will control and paralyze our activities and require enormous resources but rather one that will facilitate and aid in a modest but effective collaboration.

Certainly, in recent years, your formation program in Rome has become even more appreciated as an effective collaboration and a strengthening of bonds among your faculty and staff who have participated in these experiences. Saint Mary's University in Winona three years ago inaugurated their Lasallian Research Symposium. Its most recent gathering last September had representation from all five Regions of the Institute, and the participation of Brother Diego Muñoz, Institute Director of Lasallian Resources and Research. Most recently, the 45th General Chapter took the step of mandating that the Superior "appoint a General Councilor to accompany Lasallian Higher Education and recommend his appointment to the Administrative Council of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU)."

I personally endorse this call to collaboration and as a practical proof of this conviction I have appointed Brother Gustavo Ramírez to the General Council to liaise with IALU in matters relating to the educational mission. As I referenced above, in the rapidly changing demographics of our institute today, can our two networks coordinate better our vision, our hopes and dreams for those entrusted to our care, especially the poor? Will it not enhance our "transformative power" going forward? What do we have to lose? What do we gain?

Some possible next steps?

Over the last twenty years, at each of the past four General Chapters, propositions were made and approved relative to contributions that our universities, colleges and institutes of higher learning could offer to the Lasallian mission. Often I have had an unsettling feeling about this. Not because I do not agree with the propositions, I'm sure I voted in favor of all of them. I attribute my feeling to the fact that, while some of the delegates were directly involved in higher education, the Institute and its ministries in higher education lacked the forum for real dialogue and exchange of views. My feelings were: this is what the Institute wishes, what do our universities wish? That is why I am so grateful to your organization and what it is today. Recent years have seen developments and increased two-way communications and conversations. But we still have a way to go.

At this moment, I do not wish to talk specifics. If I did, I would not be honoring what I just said. But I will recall a few propositions from the last General Chapter simply to bring them to your attention and as possible points for future discussion. I will do so under five headings: organization, research, Lasallian vocations, expanding our presence in tertiary education, and collaboration with other organizations.

Organization

In addition to appointing a General Councilor with a higher education portfolio, another proposition of our last Chapter was to create the International Council for the Lasallian Educational Mission. A first step was to bring together an *ad hoc* committee to establish the statutes for this new Institute council. That task was completed two weeks ago in Rome. The council will have nine members, 1/3 Brothers and 2/3 Partners. One person from each of the Institute's five Regions will be member. Membership is also allotted a person from the IALU's Executive International Board. One more step of the Institute's desire for closer coordination with you for the global Lasallian mission.

Research

Regarding the vitality of the mission, the Chapter again recognized that universities can bring their research expertise as you are already doing in some cases. Connected, both networks can conduct research on such topics as economy, the culture of commodity, new poor, and the new poverties, and how all these are affecting the youth and adults in our institutions.

Despite the good work of Brother Diego Muñoz and the Resources and Research Services at the Center of the Institute, this is an important area needing continued strengthening. Going forward it is unlikely that the Center of the Institute will have a cadre of Lasallian research scholars among the Brothers as we had in the past. I would think there are young, non-tenured faculty members among your institutions who are looking for a niche in the world of research. Research with a Lasallian nuance can be conducted from the disciplines of

education, history, theology, sociology and spirituality. You received a letter in late January announcing the 6th SEIL session to be held in Rome next October; SIEL is a program for training Lasallian researchers. We are most interested in researchers from your institutions participating in this session.

An important reason for promoting higher education in a stronger relationship with the Institute's network is the possibility of each discipline imagining concrete research projects, involving their students developing new knowledge and possible applications for the common good. Teachers in both networks would learn from each other and they would be encouraged to continue their academic and professional formation. The place where we engage in research and publications could be better focused if all the universities or a Consortium of Universities were working on the same issues: immigration from South America to the United States or from Africa to Europe, immigrant workers in the Middle East, or youth at risk, street children, displaced by wars.

Each academic discipline or a selected group of disciplines could find areas for investigation in the peripheries and the fringes of societies that Pope Francis speaks about from the angle of health, nutrition, and the environment, as you have already begun doing so. Working with our own institutions models could be designed, applied, and observed. Everyone in the two networks, students, professors and teachers, and the local neighborhoods could benefit from this collaboration.

Lasallian vocations

Research, at least in the Western world, tells us young emerging adults are delaying life choices until their late twenties and even early thirties. Can Lasallian universities and institutes of higher education in collaboration with district, regional and Institute vocation ministers develop more effective strategies to promote Lasallian vocations at the tertiary level both to the Brothers life and for interested Lasallian educators? To commemorate the 300th anniversary of the death of Saint La Salle, the Chapter designated 2019 as the Year of Lasallian Vocations. Currently averaging just 80 novices a year, I do not believe we should wait until 2019 to address the vocation challenge we face today.

Expanding our tertiary presence

A number of our African Brothers have or are obtaining doctorates. I met with all the Visitors of our African Districts last November encouraging them to begin a long-range planning process to establish a Lasallian University on the African Continent. Here IALU can be a great assistance to us in realizing this dream. Also the new installed Cardinal of Addis Ababa came to see me last week requesting the Brothers assume the management of the Catholic University of Ethiopia. I don't know if we can or should respond to this request but it is something to consider.

Collaboration with other organizations

Responding boldly and creatively to urgent needs of the vulnerable on the borders of our societies is another proposition and challenge from the Chapter. I am happy to report that just three days ago the Institute entered into a joint agreement with the Marist Brothers to establish a presence and educational center for the Syrian refugees flooding into Lebanon. We are calling it *The Fratelli Project*. It is slated to begin in the next couple of months. While it is responding to a present crisis the intent of our two congregations is to replicate this initiative in future areas of need.

Finally, can we imagine harnessing our two networks with two additional networks in our family: Lasallian volunteers and UMAEL, the association of former students? What an incredible resource for good we can become. In the high-velocity times we live in with technology instantly communicating information to virtually everyone on the planet, no single network may have the capacity to effectively respond to today's needs in a timely fashion. Most organizations though have a few people or places or projects that contain the innovative seeds of the future in some partial form. Together we can locate and support those that might be cropping up in our networks.

Again, these are some general directions the General Chapter and others are urging on us. I look forward to hearing your ideas as we, I hope, take together the next steps into our shared future.

Closing

In his very first meditation for the time of retreat De La Salle tells us: “Not only does God will that everyone come to the knowledge of truth, but He wants everyone to be saved.” Here we have been given our purpose and mission as members of the Lasallian family. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis writes:

The Church, in her commitment to evangelization, appreciates and encourages the charism of theologians and their scholarly efforts to advance dialogue with the world of culture and sciences...Universities are outstanding environments for articulating and developing this evangelizing commitment in an interdisciplinary and integrating way. Catholic schools, which always strive to join their work of education with the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, are a most valuable resource for the evangelization of culture, even in those countries and cities where hostile situations challenge us to greater creativity in our search for suitable methods. (Pope Francis, 2013, p. 92)

Is this not reason enough for closer coordination of our two networks? Universities and our secondary and primary schools, together, announcing the good news of salvation for all, in this world and in God's kingdom to come.

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