

**“FE Y ALEGRÍA”
(FAITH AND JOY)
THE EXTRAORDINARY
MOVEMENT OF POPULAR
INTEGRAL EDUCATION
IN LATIN AMERICA (1)**

*“Where the pavements ends
Where the water doesn't reach
Where the city loses its proper name
That is where Fe y Alegria begins...”*

Latin America is the continent of superlatives almost by definition. Unfortunately many of its “mosts” are on the negative side. As the continent draws close to the 500th anniversary of its European discovery and evangelization, an overview suggests “What might have been”. The beauty of the land, its abundant resources, its hundreds of millions of inhabitants, might all have come together to form something as close to an ideal society as the real world would permit. But the weight of the real, and sinful, world has produced a present day reality in which the great majority of Latin Americans is very poor. Man's avarice and selfishness have resulted in an insurmountable gulf between the rich and the poor. Not even the Church can be entirely exempt from blame. In spite of numerous and heroic defenders of the downtrodden, as a general rule, the Church was seen as defender of the established order of things from colonial and republican times. This was true in the field of education. Church schools, the “colegios”, were most often at the service of the monied classes. The poor rarely had the same advantages and, as the continent passed the halfway mark in this century, the sheer masses of the unschooled and illiterate seemed to pose an invincible challenge. The governments themselves, the ministries of education, could come together at international conferences such as the one sponsored by UNESCO in Costa Rica in June of 1983 and blithely pledge themselves to eradicate illiteracy by 1999 and ensure from eight to ten years of formal education for all children; but a deepening economic crisis, heavy external debts and grave social ills make even that target date unattainable.

What can the Church do? Even more quixotically, what can one man do? This article is precisely about one man who dared to take up the challenge of the unschooled millions — and greatly succeeded in his own lifetime. Even more importantly, his spiritual legacy lives on, his work constantly expanding. The man is Father José María Vélaz S.J., the founder of Fe y Alegria, “Faith and Joy”, the Movement of Popular Integral Education in ten Latin America countries.

The time is 1955. The place, a slum neighborhood of Caracas, Venezuela, one of the infamous barrios that ring the glittering towers of the city center, clinging precariously to the hillsides. Father José María Vélaz, a Jesuit priest born in Chile but educated in Spain where he also entered the Society of Jesus, is visiting again with some of his university students. They have been coming for a good while now, helping out with catechism classes and some of the corporal works of mercy, but it is like writing in the sand at the edge of the sea, so easily is a day's effort forgotten by the time of the following visit. The grinding poverty makes a mockery of any little improvement they felt they had made. The young students begin to think that it is all hopeless but Father Vélaz has been thinking, praying, looking for a solution. He now feels that he can put his finger on the root cause of the injustices and inequalities that they see. It is ignorance. “It is absolutely necessary for us to start a school”, he says. “Otherwise, we are just wasting our time”.

The pronouncement is overheard by a cement mason. Abraham Reyes is an extraordinary man; already the father of eight, he would eventually have thirteen of his own children plus some twenty adopted children that for a time at least would form part of his family. He has expanded his house on the side of a hill so that each of the two levels can be entered directly from the street. At the moment his family is only using one of the floors. “I can offer my house”, he says. And so, a sign is hung over the door announcing that a school accepts boy students. Thus, Fe y Alegria is born.

For the Brother of the Christian Schools, for the Lasallian Family, that chance meeting, that analysis, that generous response, have an echo that rolls back almost three centuries to the city of Rheims in France. A young Canon of the Cathedral Chapter, John Baptist de La Salle, met that enthusiastic sower of charity schools, M. Adrian Nyel, on the doorstep of the Sisters of the Divine Child. Providence would weave a web of persons, places and events and John Baptist would follow faithfully what he came to see as God's will. The result, thirty-seven years later, was the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. At the time of his death, de La Salle could count more than a score of schools, nearly 250 Brothers and some 10,000 children in the schools, all in the Kingdom of France but for one small beginning in Rome.

Father José María Vélaz died in 1985. What he and Abraham Reyes began thirty-two ago has had an extraordinary development, far more impressive in the terms of mere numbers than the beginnings of John Baptist de La Salle's Brothers and the Christian Schools. To introduce a few of the statistics: at the end of 1986 there were 371 educational centers in ten Latin American countries, 303,249 students, 10,799 educators (administrators, teachers and auxiliaries); the centers include pre-schools, primary and secondary schools, plants for technical and special education, radio schools and “non-formal” or adult education courses. An astonishing statistic is that of the 113 religious congregations, with 791 religious — almost exclusively Sisters — that collaborate with the Jesuit Fathers in the management of most centers.

The Institute of the Brothers bears the unmistakable mark of the personality and inspiration of its Founder,

John Baptist de La Salle. That fact is the condition sine qua non of the growth and vigor of the Institute. In an undertaking of the scope of the Fe y Alegria Movement, the imprint of its founder has assured the strength, the unity of vision and growth of the whole system. What sort of man was José María Velaz? He is described by a fellow Jesuit, Father Fernando Gutiérrez Duque, National Director of Fe y Alegria in Guatemala, as a "good priest and religious", "an efficient poet, all that he dreamed of for Fe y Alegria, he brought about". It seems that he had an uncanny intuition for striking the responsive chord in possible collaborators and gaining their support. Here the superficial parallel with the life and work of St. John Baptist de La Salle does not carry through. Father Vélaz's itinerary is not marked by great crises and failures. There was some criticism and isolation. He was often charged with the "fetish of numbers". Nevertheless, from the small beginnings we've already seen, the work quickly burgeoned; he succeeded in attracting the support not only of private enterprise and international agencies but also managed substantial subsidies of governments that had done little for private education and have even acted in a decidedly anticlerical spirit. Towards the end of his life he was recognized as an educational pioneer in much of Latin America and had begun to be awarded honorary doctorates.

With his own Society of Jesus Father Vélaz passed through three distinct moments with regard to Fe y Alegria. The first was isolation. Here was a professor of humanities in the university who suddenly was dabbling in schools for slum dwellers. "He must be crazy but let him get it out of his system". The next moment was one of interest, but still from a distance. "Well, something is certainly happening. Let's see how it develops". It might be pointed out here that Vatican II had taken place and its interpretation for Latin America as the preferential option for the poor and for youth had been pronounced by the Bishops at their Medellín and Puebla Conferences. The traditional Jesuit apostolate of schools for the future elite was being examined critically. The notion of schools for the very poor and disadvantaged seemed to make good sense. The final moment, which Father Gutiérrez Duque smilingly dubbed "the most dangerous of all", was the full recognition on the part of the Jesuits of Latin America of the worth of the Fe y Alegria Movement. The "danger" was that the work would be taken over by the Society. Actually, Fe y Alegria is independently incorporated in each country in which it is present. It is all bound together in a loose federation of national directors and by the spiritual legacy of Father José María Vélaz who participated in the drafting of the "Ideario" or basic philosophy of Fe y Alegria. The commitment of the Jesuit Fathers is in personnel: nine of the ten national directors are Jesuits and, of these, five have been provincials. Financially, the Society has never made direct contributions.

How then has Fe y Alegria evolved in the thirty-two years of its existence? The Movement identifies itself as popular, integral education born of, and dynamized by, a living out of the Christian Faith which, faced with situations of injustices, commits itself to the cause of the poor and neglected in the building up of a more just and fraternal society.

The term *popular* seems to be applied rather loosely to most modern educational movements. For Fe y Alegria it has specific meaning: It is experiential rather than academic; it is geared to work, to production, to usefulness; it is, besides, gratuitous as are the public schools but with the stress on that quality education that private schools can offer; it is inculturated in the marginated, unattended, areas; finally, it offers diplomas, recognizing the fact that, for the poor person, the title is important for his or her self realization and for purposes of employment.

Integral applies to the entire person, at every level: faith, intellect and human values. It might be mentioned here that there is no discrimination based on ethnic, economic or religious considerations. Especially in these latter, Fe y Alegria provides an ecumenical meeting place for the many religions. It is a well-known fact that, in recent decades, evangelical and fundamentalist sects have made tremendous inroads in the poor barrios and villages of Latin America, precisely the target areas of the Fe y Alegria Movement. As a result, up to 50% or more of the student population is identified as non-Catholic. The parents and children are aware of the Catholic origins and administration of Fe y Alegria but they also know that the non-Catholic sects receive due respect even in the religion classes and class prayers.

In an interview, Father Gutiérrez Duque stated that for some years he has studied the conferences of Father Vélaz and had, besides, numerous personal contacts with the founder of Fe y Alegria. He has reached the conclusion that the essential character of the movement can be distilled in two concepts, alliteratively termed "*Marginality and Multitude*".

The first of these has to do with the absolute fidelity Fe y Alegria has had to its objective of quality education in the abandoned places, the zones of greatest demand and within the reach of the population that has the fewest resources.

The second, "multitude", is probably Father Vélaz's sharpest intuition and his response to the "challenge of the millions". He firmly believed that Fe y Alegria should continually stretch its capacity because, for him, it is volume that increases the possibilities of quality. Against all the voices that expressed doubts or counseled prudence, Father Vélaz achieved official recognition for his schools and substantial government subsidies for his teachers' salaries. This help varies from country to country and also has some disadvantages but, in general terms, it has meant a per-student cost that is one-third of what is required by state schools. The wisdom of Father Vélaz's intuition is demonstrated today by the impressive panoply of human and material resources cited earlier in statistics.

Death came to José María Vélaz July 19, 1985, in the jungles of Venezuela. El Masparro was his last Fe y Alegria school and, to the very end, his mind teemed with projects and ways to serve more and more poor children. The spirit of this practical poet is captured in his testament.

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