

Shared Mission and the Local Church for a Lasallian Future

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John Baptist De La Salle is very clear on the importance of the Brothers' ministry, and by extension all Lasallians, for the life of the Church. He makes clear that the service they offer to their students in Gospel ministry bringing the presence of Christ in succession to the apostolic ministry outlined in the Scripture he cites. In his own day he worked with priests and bishops who were supportive of his vision for the Brothers, and kept a healthy tension and even distance when it was necessary for him to enable the mission of the Church as the Brothers lived it.

In our time it is important, in the context of shared mission, to look at the unique Lasallian calling, and carefully discern how in each place and throughout the Institute, we can appropriately develop shared mission with the local, diocesan and national church, including with clergy, bishops and laity beyond our primary apostolate, the school. While the bishops have a juridical role in overseeing the teaching of the Gospel, the Lasallians as professional educators with commitments to catechesis and service of the poor, carry the pedagogical skill, cultural experience and charisms that will enable the leadership of local churches to be effective.

As *Vita Consecrata* notes, it is important for religious to be loyal to their vocation and charisms and not to be co-opted by other segments of church life, during a period of declining numbers. However, it is also important, in the context of shared mission, to see that the whole mission of the Church is integrated, with each giving their appropriate gifts and enabling the whole body of Christ. Both *The Lasallian Mission of Human & Christian Education: A Shared Mission (SM)* and the *Declaration* outline, for us, the new ecclesial context, and some of the values that will contribute to a shared mission with the local church. Certainly, in addition to service of the poor, catechetics and educational competence, the Lasallian community brings particular expertise and gifts in lay ministry development and formation, which are gifts for the whole Church. (SM 1.41)

The Institute and our Lasallian families have many who are already involved in local church leadership, and who provide rich resources for reflection and planning in our communities and institutions. There are Brothers and others who serve diocesan pastoral councils, episcopal conference advisory boards, superintendents of schools, directors of religious education, social justice coordinators and a host of other positions in dioceses, parishes and episcopal conferences. This is an integral dimension of shared mission, and will need to be articulated and integrated explicitly in the work of the next General Chapter, as well as in the life of districts and regions across the Institute. Possibly more important than providing staff for dioceses, being willing to advise, through boards and commissions, makes possible the networking and mutual support implied in shared mission.

At this time in the history of the Institute and the Church especial note needs to be taken of the gifts the Lasallian charism provides for the wider Church. The importance of "quality education and an explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ" (Rule 13) are signaled by the publication by the Holy See of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *The General Directory for Catechesis* and *The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of those Engaged in Pastoral Work*. In many parts of the world Lasallians are called upon, not only to implement these initiatives in their schools, but also to share their catechetical, pedagogical and theological expertise to promote improved Christian education in the wider community, without abandoning their secure institutional bases.

In some contexts, bishops conferences have encouraged integrating these initiatives into the cultural experience of their local contexts. In other contexts, the *Catechism* has begun to be used as a test of the orthodoxy of catechists and materials used in religious education. In the variety of contexts in which Lasallians find themselves,

they have an important contribution to make at this phase of Catholic history. This contribution is an important dimension of shared mission. (SM 1.56; 1.28, 9) Indeed, the colloquia designed to work on an Institute policy can make important contributions to understanding where the sectors of the Institute are in their shared mission with the local churches, and suggest further developments. As we evaluate the impact on the Institute of the “100” invited to new ministries of service of the poor, might we not want to consider if the next chapter could call forth “100” Lasallians to take up new *initiatives of evangelization* to serve the Church in the 21st century?

The Institute has only gradually come into the field of higher education. As Catholic university presidents assembled in 1989 in the early development of the *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* process of the Holy See, it came as a surprise that the Brothers were so prominent in the world wide university mission of the Church, second only to the Jesuits some say. The process of discussion in the Church about its higher education mission has been very fruitful in certain parts of the world, where the universities provide a singular witness to the Gospel and presence of the Church in research, the intellectual ferment of the culture, and formation in adult faith.

For example, in the United States, this process has initiated a five year dialogue between bishops and university leadership that has developed a broad and deep consensus about shared mission and insuring the Catholic identity in higher education. Although the Holy See may not see itself ready to accept the bishops’ work and witness in their own country, the quality of the shared relationship can only serve to enhance the quality of Catholic higher education and the ministry of the bishops.

At present, Brother Andrew Gonzalez from De La Salle, Manila, heads the International Federation of Catholic Universities, signaling the importance with which the Catholic university community affirms the Brothers’ leadership. As the world becomes more complex, the contribution of Lasallian universities to the social vision of the Church, its nurturing of Gospel leadership, and its research on behalf of service of the poor and promotion of the faith, will become increasingly important for the local churches. (SM 1.55; 1.511)

Direct service of the poor is essential to the Lasallian charism from our foundation through the current renewal, reemphasized by both Chapter and the Superior’s pastoral letter. The unique experience of the Lasallian communities, Brothers, colleagues, volunteers and parents, is a rich resource in providing the wider church community with the experience, witness and prophetic challenge that can make social solidarity a mark of the whole Christian community. For those working with the poor and marginalized, it is sometimes a challenge to contribute to the consciousness raising of local church leadership, or even of fellow Lasallians in other contexts. However, this solidarity and willingness to exert leadership for the wider community are important gifts, sometimes as important as the direct work with the weakest and most needy of God’s children.

We live in a new ecclesial context, where pluralism is a fact of church life and a reality of our schools in many parts of the world. Where we teach fellow Christians who are not Catholic or religious people not of the Christian faith, we have a unique vantage point to advise the wider Church on their vision, needs and the effective means whereby ecumenical progress and interfaith sensitivity can be promoted. Educators share an intimacy with the community, and for us with the poor and those being formed in their faith, that is often absent from the daily lives and formation of church leaders. For that reason, those Lasallians who are called and gifted in these matters carry an important role in advising bishops, diocesan and parish leaders in the challenges and content of our common shared mission.

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