

**THE LASALLIAN EDUCATOR
FACING TODAY'S CHALLENGES
(1/3)**

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INTRODUCTION

One of the principal characteristics of the Latin-American is that he is rooted in REALITY. On the literary level one speaks of the "Magic Realism" of the Latin American novel, a mixture of reality and fantasy. In the area of theology and pedagogy the two most important manifestations are the Theology of Liberation and education for the masses in which Paulo Freire plays such an important role. What we are talking about is something more than just a simple question of methodology; it is rather an entire working structure, a structure for discussion. All theories, all experiential knowledge and all programs must be based on reality and then must return to the same reality in order to transform it. This was the plan in Medellín and in Puebla: analyze the reality in the light of Christianity and recommend action plans. Therefore it is important to say a word about the reality of our world and that of Latin America before beginning a discussion of the role of the Lasallian Educator.

But it is also true that De La Salle always had a twofold contemplation in mind. On the one hand was the salvific plan of God discovered in his Word and on the other hand there was the historical contemplation of the abandonment of children of the artisans and the poor. Both contemplations had the same goal: to put the means of salvation within reach of the young people who were far from it. So, then, there were three movements: See the reality, reflect on it with the Word of God, commit oneself to an action with transforming power. This same outline is what today we need to incarnate in our own Brazilian, Latin-American and world realities.

De La Salle involved himself in the world of the poor. He experienced a time of both kenosis and insertion. We all know his journey. We all know that this contact with the world of the poor was for him a transforming experience that would cause him to change his criteria, interests and religious conceptions.

De La Salle discovered fraternity, community, the team approach as the God-enlightened place of the presence of the Lord and as the normal means for making this visible to

mankind. In Latin-America the value of brotherhood is fundamental. Participation and solidarity are continuing criteria for action. Faith, nourished by the Word of God is born and develops within the heart of community. We could list here the experience of the ecclesial base communities which are so well-developed in Brazil.

Being rooted in reality presupposes a close scrutiny which is full of love. One of the Jesuits assassinated in El Salvador, Father Juan Ramón Moreno, wrote:

"An unexamined world unaccepted by that scrutiny in its reality and specific needs arouses nothing. But a scrutiny different than the loving scrutiny of God, which this would stir up, is something else again, but it is not that incarnate movement that identifies with the world and takes on, rooting itself in history, the world's sufferings and contradictions in order to bring it to the fullness of life".

The times in which we live today are particularly significant to the point that we say that we are on the verge of the Third Millennium and this marks a change of epoch.

The world situation is marked by a considerable number of tendencies and events. Among others are conflicts of an ethnic, racial or religious character, world economic growth and the expansion of markets with their great contrasts, information technology, great problems dealing with poverty.

At the Church level, there are advances in ecumenism and religious dialogue, the laity are becoming more and more committed, different continents by means of Synods are involved in discussions about their own identities and the Jubilee for the year 2000 has opened the door to new hopes.

In the Institute there is a growing attention to the shared Lasallian mission and to missionary activity while we prepare to celebrate three very significant dates: The 50th anniversary of the proclamation of the Founder as Patron of Teachers, the centenary of the canonization of Saint John Baptist de La Salle on 24 May 2000, and the 350th anniversary of the Founder's birth on 30 April 2001.

1. TODAY'S CHALLENGES

As we face the changes that we experience today there is much talk about new paradigms. There have been changes both at the idea level as well as at the level of action. We cannot close ourselves in on the past and then live with our backs facing the realities of today. Enrique Iglesias, President of the Inter-American Development Bank said that the next century will be *"a fascinating and cruel century"*. In fact, the world of science, the technical world, the world of communication, of consumerism is fascinating. The bad part is that this fascination is for only a few. But it would be cruel for those who are excluded because we going from a situation of oppression to one of exclusion for those who are less competitive. The poverty and marginalization of its world will be on the increase according to what is now being shown, unfortunately, by the indices of international organizations.

The fall of great ideologies, the crises of the national state and of political parties, are causing society to reevaluate civil, cultural and religious societies. But often this religious awakening is very subjective and is treated as a "menu" from which one can select this or that which is more appealing, thus pulling one away from that which is doctrinal and obligatory.

Observing our own Latin-American reality we can affirm that the last two decades have brought a deterioration of life due to, above all, structural and market adjustment policies. The current tendency is for continental unification and the integration of markets. One example of the would be the Cono Sur countries. This movement seems to be irreversible but as a consequence it brings with it a type of greater development but with a large number of people who are excluded from the benefits.

According to information from the World Bank, one in three Latin-Americans is poor and a total of 85 million persons, or 18% of the population suffer from an extreme type of poverty. It is estimated that during each minute there are two more poor persons in our Region and according to projections for the year 2005 there will be 176 million new poor persons in Latin America. We are faced with a world of excluded persons. We are not talking about an economic problem. For us Christians this is an ethical problem which poses a fundamental challenge: how to see to it that people are not left out in the cold, how to see to it that participation can be achieved by all. The Lasallian educator cannot be indifferent to this dramatic reality.

Another ethical problem we are faced with is the loss of the value of life -from abortion to the elimination of those who may be in the way: the disposable ones. We have all read with horror about the elimination of street children in Rio, in Bogota and in Guatemala or about the massacres of indigenous people in order to gain land. When life loses value, it is easy to establish a culture of violence in so many forms: the violation of human rights, infant mortality, torture, kidnaping, drug trafficking, drug addiction, environmental contamination, administrative corruption.

It is here where we should place the role of **EDUCATION**, an education which is at the service of our own identity, one which is open to dialogue, to respect and to inquiry, because our reality is multi-ethnic and multi-cultural and those who up until now have had no say should be kept in mind in a special way. In Latin America education has been defined as "*pedagogy of the oppressed*" and the "*practice of liberty*", but also it can be shown that many times it has been of service to the system itself and has not been producing social changes and it has been detached from the interests of the people.

And it is precisely here where **CHRISTIAN EDUCATION** has an extremely important role to play. Our bishops at Puebla invited us to develop a type of education which was capable of humanizing, of personalizing, one which was integral to the Latin-American social process. This would be an education which played a critical role that would enable the creation of a new society, one that was participatory and fraternal, that would change the person who was being educated into a subject, not only for his own development but also to be at the service of the development of his community. If Medellin spoke to us about a "*liberalizing education*" then Puebla asks us also for a type of "*evangelizing education*" because "*The best service to one's brother is a type of evangelization that allows him to be ready to fulfill himself as a child of God, it liberates him from injustices and it sees to his advancement in an integrated manner*" (P. 1145). The Santo Domingo conference spells out this goal: "*When we speak of Christian education, we speak of one in which the teacher educates persons towards a program for mankind in which Jesus Christ lives*" and therefore "*The Christian teacher should be considered as a Church individual who evangelizes, catechizes and educates in a Christian manner. His identity is defined within the Church community. His role should be recognized within the Church*" (S.D. 265).

The reality is that Latin-America is a continent which is more sacramentalized than evangelized. Today we find ourselves facing the challenge of the **NEW EVANGELIZATION**. The Pope in Haiti talked about this challenge with the following words: "Build a new Latin-America, strengthened in its Christian vocation, one which is free, fraternal, just, peaceful, faithful to Christ and to the Latin-American person". In general, the great majority have a faith which is weak and not well-trained. Here we discover the important role of Christian education. We are talking about renewing the faith as a school of thought and as a way of life so that it might serve as the basis for this new personal existence. This is a faith which is capable of responding to the ultimate questions of existence, but it is a faith which is incarnated in history and which translates into demands for social and structural transformation. This is a faith which is not only a "profession" but also a lifestyle which is marked by Gospel criteria.

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