

Assembly on Mission
District of San Francisco
Saint Mary's College of California
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DEVELOPING A VISION AND DIRECTION FOR THE
DISTRICT OF SAN FRANCISCO'S LASALLIAN MISSION

by
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Visitor

Brothers and Partners! Welcome to the District of San Francisco's first Assembly on Mission.

The great educational mission of the District of San Francisco grew out of the vision and determination of those first Brothers the Institute sent in 1868 to take over a nearly bankrupt Saint Mary's College, which had been under the direction of diocesan priests since its founding five years earlier in 1863.

And we begin this historic Assembly 134 years later on the campus of Saint Mary's College, now firmly rooted in the Moraga Valley, but not far in spirit from its birth and infancy in San Francisco and its vibrant adolescence in Oakland.

When I look about the room, I see Brothers, laymen, lay women, all age groups, faculty, administrators, staff members, volunteers, people with different life journeys and faith experiences, graced with different gifts and talents, working in different ministries, serving in different geographical regions of the District.

But more importantly, I see and feel strength, confidence, and the courage to confront the challenges we must face together in planning for the future of our Lasallian mission.

It is appropriate that I begin this evening on a theme of gratitude and appreciation. I know that my expressions of appreciation will never equal the fullness of your generosity or the depth of your commitment to the mission.

I know that the heart of the Lasallian mission resides foremost in our teachers and in the unique relationships they have with their students. Perhaps these few words from Matthew's Gospel—barely perceptible today on an aging limestone monument rising above the Brothers cemetery at Mont La Salle—say it best:

*He that shall do and teach
shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

You are the leaders of this District—its Brother Directors, teachers, administrators, board members, counselors, staff members, and coaches. The future of the Lasallian mission in the District has been, and will continue to be, in your hands for years to come.

Finally, I want to extend a warm welcome to our guests from the Brothers' Generalate in Rome and other Regions of the International Institute.

- ❖ to BROTHER WILLIAM MANN, Vicar General, and BROTHER CLAUDE REINHARDT, both of whom serve on the Institute's General Council;
- ❖ to BROTHER THOMAS JOHNSON, Regional Coordinator, Christian Brothers Conference, USA/Toronto Region; and
- ❖ to BROTHER DAVID HAWKE, Chairman, Pacific Asia Region, and Brother Visitor, Australia/New Zealand/Papua-New Guinea.

They will be with us during the Assembly. If you haven't done so already, I urge all of you to introduce yourself to them sometime during the week.

It's so important that we never forget the purpose of this Assembly: it's the mission, the mission, the mission!

And we're not here to define or re-define the mission! The mission is clear! *THE RULE OF THE BROTHERS* proclaims the Institute's purpose, its spirit of faith, and its mission:

- ❖ The purpose of this Institute is to give a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor, according to the ministry which the Church has entrusted to it.
- ❖ The Institute is concerned above all for the educational needs of the poor as they strive to become aware of their dignity and to live and be recognized as human beings and children of God.
- ❖ By virtue of their mission, the Brothers establish schools and cooperate in creating educational communities inspired by the vision of St. John Baptist de La Salle.

While the *DECLARATION* wisely and prudently cautions against adopting extreme positions in determining exactly who the poor are today, it goes on to stipulate firmly that "the apostolate of the poor is an integral part of the finality of the Institute." We know especially, that the poverty of intelligence, the poverty of affection, and the poverty of faith—experiences that afflict the rich and famous, the middle classes, and the poor alike—"are generally rooted in the poverty which is material and economic."

If we proudly proclaim the Lasallian mission in our recruitment brochures, alumni publications, accreditation reports, and mission statements but silently succumb to temptations that over time lure us away from being faithful to the educational service of the poor, then the very "stones will cry out" in condemnation of our hypocrisy. The forms such infidelity takes are numerous—sometimes personal, emotional, intellectual; at other times practical, financial, or organizational. But make no mistake about it: the greatest threat to the future viability of the Lasallian mission is the temptation to compromise our commitment to the service of the poor—to give the poor stones when they ask for bread.

Called to be faithful stewards of the Lasallian mission, we cannot rest on our laurels. We cannot live in the past or hold on to the present. And like the Apostle Peter who proclaimed at the Transfiguration of Jesus high atop the mountain: "It is good that we are here", we know in our hearts that we, too, must move on.

The future beckons us; it summons us. We must not run from it. We must not hide from it. We must boldly embrace it—no matter what challenges, cost, personal sufferings, or institutional crises we might face along the way.

We know the Lord hears the cry of the poor. The Institute, the Church, and people of good will everywhere urge us to respond.

Will we listen? Do we really care? Will we respond personally and institutionally to the educational needs of the poor? Will we have the courage and the will-power to act in their favor?

Will we work collaboratively and in partnership with the business community, non-profits, benefactors, other religious congregations, and people of good will who care passionately and seek positive solutions to the social, economic, and cultural ills of ignorance, poverty, violence, and exclusion?

This week all of us in this room will spend many hours together in prayer, relaxing and eating together, listening to each other within our Committees, and sharing our personal journeys, ideas and values.

Throughout the week we should heed the warning of a wise poet-pilgrim who cautions us with this time-honored wisdom:

"Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men of old,
seek what they sought."

So this evening let us begin a new phase of our journey together—a journey built on trust in which creativity, imagination, intelligence, respect, and candor enliven our dialogue and planning for the Lasallian mission.

We have a marvelous opportunity to develop a common vision and set a positive direction for the Lasallian mission in this District for the first years of the 21st Century, a direction that calls us to personal and institutional transformation.

For the sake of the mission, for the young people we serve, especially the poor who cry out to us to save them, we need such change in order to give hope and dignity and light to them through education!

If we fail to transform ourselves and our institutions, the District of San Francisco's Lasallian mission might well die. The institutions may continue to exist. They may prosper as strong academic centers, enjoy high enrollment levels, and even bask in their reputation for serving the educational needs of students from privileged segments of our society.

But without such transformation, the Lasallian spirit that animates our schools and ennobles our students will die and wither away. The real victims will be the young people abandoned in the death throes of our infidelity.

I believe, that in the process of transforming ourselves and setting a new direction for the Lasallian mission, we can and must expand our ministry to the poor among us and, at the same time:

- ❖ continue our historic commitments to our existing institutions;
- ❖ maintain their academic excellence;
- ❖ increase the proportion of poor students in their educational communities; and
- ❖ educate all of our students, alumni, benefactors and friends about the educational needs of the poor and their right to quality education in a welcoming and caring community.

Through it all we must remain loyal to one another, our institutions, but most importantly, to our students!

The time for gradualism is over. Words without action just won't do it anymore.

All of us in this room have taken many different roads and personal journeys to get where we are in our understanding and experience of the mission.

To inspire us as we begin our journey together, let us remember the heritage of St. John Baptist De La Salle, the early Brothers, and their faithful successors.

Throughout their lives they didn't hold back. They read the "signs of their times." They developed plans. They made decisions; then they acted.

Despite conflicts and setbacks, they expanded. They persevered through every crisis they encountered—crises of vocation, conversion, maturity, creativity, disillusionment, and even death itself.

They looked inward—personally and institutionally—when they had to. And they looked outward when they faithfully listened and responded to the cry of the poor for education.

Let me briefly share with you with a few snapshots from my personal story and several key values and principles I've gleaned from my life as a De La Salle Brother over the past 40 years.

It was at Sacred Heart High School in San Francisco, then a predominantly Irish-Catholic, working-class school community, that I came to know the Brothers and their mission. There, through their ordinary day-to-day teaching, personal example, and love for their students, the Brothers planted the seeds of this extraordinary mission within me.

Shortly after my graduation in 1961, I entered the Brothers with a desire to serve young people through education, but really unaware of the journey that lay ahead.

In my youth no one ever accused me of being a great student. In fact, the Brothers in the novitiate at Mont La Salle and in the scholasticate at Saint Mary's College gradually counseled and steered me away from teaching toward a non-academic career in school maintenance and construction management.

Thankfully, the Brothers didn't pigeon-hole me early in my religious life. Their generosity in accepting my gifts and talents taught me that the real wealth of the District resides in the Brothers and our colleagues—in our commitment to our students, in the vast array of our gifts, our talents, our common sense, our leadership qualities, our courage, our ability to make decisions and to act. Not in our portfolios, buildings, or the reputation of our institutions.

In the mid-1960s while managing the District's school maintenance and construction program, I observed that students in some of our schools were young men primarily from white, Catholic, middle class and wealthier family backgrounds.

Their parents had worked very hard to give them the advantages of a private, Catholic education. Yet, in their cultural and economic isolation, they were quite unprepared to deal with the dramatic social changes emerging in the world in which they were growing up. They had little or no contact with the poor, racial or ethnic minorities, or disadvantaged students.

A growing number of Brothers and colleagues began to see that we had to make our schools more accessible and welcoming to young people trapped in the cycle of

poverty and social isolation. We were beginning to see in the “signs of our time” that we were being called to be more authentic witnesses of the Gospel by living up to our own Lasallian heritage.

In the early 1970s the Brother Visitor assigned me to teach accounting and direct the student activities program at Saint Mary’s College High School in Berkeley. Soon I found myself in charge of managing the food service operation, the business office, and the maintenance program, but more importantly, making decisions about which families would get financial aid for their sons, most of whom were African-American and Spanish-speaking parents from poor and working-class families.

Before long I was asked to assume a series of other leadership positions at school and District levels—vice-principal, Community Director, principal of the boarding school at Mont La Salle, District Treasurer, president of the Christian Brothers winery, and finally today, in my eighth year as Visitor.

Along the way, I have also been blessed to serve on various District, Regional and Institute committees and the boards of trustees of Saint Mary’s College, Moraga, College of Santa Fe in New Mexico, and Saint Mary’s University in Winona, Minnesota.

In the last twenty years I have grown in my understanding of the inter-dependence that exists among the schools and the Lasallian educators of the District and between the District itself and other sectors of the international Institute.

I recall my story only to express my gratitude to the Brothers for their faith and confidence in me, to my students of long ago for allowing me to teach them and to enter into their lives as a friend, and to my lay colleagues in the schools, at the winery, and at the District for helping me understand the crucial role lay men and women and other religious will play in the future growth of the Lasallian mission.

From the time we—the De La Salle Brothers—came to California in 1868 until 100 years later, we held the great majority of the teaching and administrative positions at the College, in the elementary and high schools, within District administration, and in other apostolic works of the District.

Especially for the first 80 years or so, we Brothers often treated lay professors and teachers, many of whom were graduates of the College or the high schools in the District, as short-term, temporary employees.

In the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th, the College always had a few lay instructors and professors on its faculty. But the College really lowered the barrier to the laity in the late 1940s when an increasing number of lay professors, mostly men, were hired for full-time, long-term teaching positions and lay people from business and the professions were first appointed to its Board of Trustees.

I believe that many of our most committed teachers, staff, and now board members, first came only to stay a little while, but then after experiencing the power and wonder of the Lasallian mission, ended up being true believers, totally committed to their students and institutions.

By the mid-1960s we realized that our basic assumptions about the number of Brothers and lay people serving in the mission were simply wrong. Slowly, we came to see that the rapid turnover of our lay employees was not healthy.

No lay person rose to the level of vice-president at the College or vice-principal at the high schools until the mid-1960s. It was not until 1990 that a lay person first assumed the office of president at one of the high schools.

The boards of trustees of the secondary school corporations, comprised mostly of lay people, were not incorporated until the mid-1990s.

No lay person ever served as a member of the Brothers Visitor's administrative team until 1995. It has only been in the last fifteen years that lay people have served on the Board of Directors of De La Salle Institute or the Benilde Religious International Trust.

Fifty years ago nearly all of the administrators, teachers, and staff of the institutions in the District were Brothers. During the 2001-02 school year, the numbers were fundamentally reversed. Ninety-four percent of the full-time faculty and administration of all of the institutions in the District, including Saint Mary's College, were held by lay men and women and other religious. Six percent were held by Brothers.

In the past seven years, we have taken risks to expand the mission. We have made significant progress through the creation of new institutions, new outreach programs, more scholarship assistance, and expanded formation programs. But we have experienced some setbacks along the way.

I want to share with you the pertinent facts surrounding the closure of St. Joseph School in Sunnyside, Washington.

At the outset, I want you to know that I take full responsibility for the closure of the school.

In the summer of 1998, after reaching an agreement with the Diocese of Yakima, the District assumed governance and financial responsibility for the school.

In the 2001-02 school year, 127 students were enrolled at a per student cost of \$6,285 against a per student income of \$417, with the gap being made up by the District.

With great sadness, after two emotion-filled meetings this spring, the District Council accepted my recommendation to withdraw financial support from the school, thus causing its closure in June, 2002.

It became clear to me after several years that the board of trustees and the school's leadership would not be able to attract outside funding sources to reduce the runaway gap between expenditures and the nominal tuition income the students' families were able to pay. The parish and the Diocese of Yakima lacked any real financial ability to help out. No other donors—individuals, corporations, or foundations—stepped up.

In four years, the District spent nearly \$3.0 million on St. Joseph, a school with students and families that clearly met our mission criteria.

Yet, absent viable financial partners, the District could not continue to fund St. Joseph, especially in light of the critical need to balance the District's perpetuity requirements against the needs of other programs affecting a large number of students and schools, most notably the 5% scholarship program for students in all schools living below the federal poverty level and the unique needs of Cathedral High School.

We assumed the mission risks and the financial risks in the hope that others interested in the plight of the poor in this marginal agricultural community would assist us. When such help wasn't forthcoming, I knew it was time to leave.

I want to touch briefly on some practical implications of our journey together this week and its continuance in the days, months, and years ahead.

Continue to study and get ready. Each of us in this room and all of our colleagues at home must be prepared to act when providential moments of grace and opportunity to serve the educational needs of young people come our way.

Do your homework. Seek truth in all learning. Listen and speak respectfully to your students and colleagues, but never be afraid to say what's on your mind. Be open to new ideas and values, but test them against your principles. Let a generous hospitality and a spirit of friendship and loyalty characterize our relationships.

We will move ahead more quickly and with more confidence if we first focus our dialogue on the wisdom of our core Lasallian values. No one goes on a journey without the benefit of a good roadmap. For your Lasallian journey, refer often to *THE RULE*, the 300-year heritage of Lasallian education, and most importantly, to your own contemporary experience of loving and educating your students.

I especially urge you to study the District of San Francisco's roadmap—*REACHING OUT, TOUCHING HEARTS, CONTEXT FOR ACTION/ACTION PLAN*. Endorsed by the Tenth

District Chapter in 1998, this roadmap to the future represents the collective wisdom of the Lasallian educators of the District in the late 1990s.

In their presentations tomorrow, District Leadership Team members will share with you the major themes associated with their areas of responsibility and raise questions and key challenges we might consider as we deliberate about the future of the Lasallian mission.

We have a great deal of work to do this week. From my vantage point, let me briefly summarize our tasks:

- ❖ We must reflect and pray together about our identity as Lasallian educators and our respective roles in the Lasallian mission;
- ❖ In the general assembly, committee, and informal groups, we must listen to our colleagues' experience of the Lasallian mission; and
- ❖ We must develop a common vision and set a positive direction for the Lasallian mission for the next four years.

Tonight, in this room, we Brothers extend our hearts and hands outward to you, our colleagues. We welcome you as full partners in the Lasallian mission.

Let us continue to build a climate of trust, hospitality, and sensitivity among ourselves; to develop an open, inclusive framework for a new understanding of association for mission.

At the same time, we ask you to deepen your understanding and respect for our religious consecration, our spiritual charism and our commitment to the education of young people, especially young people from poor families.

Since the founding of this District in 1868, we Brothers have taken great pride in our schools, our management skills, and our relationships with our colleagues, students and their parents.

Although we are fewer in number and aging, we are hopeful that young men will find their life's work in community with us.

It has not been an easy journey for us in recent years. Some of us have grieved about losing control of our schools. But for the most part, we have gracefully accepted our colleagues as full partners in mission. Our trust in Providence tells us "to look upon everything with the eyes of faith."

Over the past decade we have worked hard in our Chapters and our Communities to set a congregational direction, articulate a vision, and implement the necessary

changes to protect the integrity of our religious consecration and the authenticity of the Lasallian mission.

In our internal dialogues and through our mission experience with our colleagues, we have developed a clearer sense of our personal and corporate identity, our spiritual heritage in the Gospel mission of the Church, and the kind of leadership we must exert to advance the Lasallian mission in the future.

To you, our colleagues, we ask you to intensify your commitment to the mission, the legacy of De La Salle and the early Brothers and the work of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools over the past 320 years.

Nurture it! Honor it! Take responsibility for it! Enlarge it! Know that your work and leadership will touch the lives of generations of students to come.

As you take on more positions of responsibility and leadership, I appeal to you to be shrewd risk-assessors, bold risk-takers, bridge-builders, team-oriented, honest with and compassionate to students and colleagues, and courageous in standing up for justice and fairness in your educational community. Strive always for excellence in your professional work.

Take responsibility; never blame others for your mistakes. Do everything in your power to honor the Lasallian heritage of excellent schools. And together, may we discharge our duties faithfully.

I ask you again to think of our deliberations this week primarily as a journey within our minds and hearts to find the courage to believe that something extraordinary is possible as a result of our coming together to plan for the future of the Lasallian mission.

There is an old proverb that says, “When we dream alone, it is only a dream. When we dream together, it is no longer a dream but the beginning of reality.”

So let us dream and pray; listen and dialogue in order to develop a positive vision and direction for the future of the Lasallian mission in the District of San Francisco—a vision and direction that we can present with confidence to the upcoming District Chapter meeting in October for its consideration, review and final approval.

Then at every level—personal, institutional, and District—we must act.