

De La Salle Christian Brothers
District of San Francisco
DISTRICT ASSEMBLY ON MISSION
Saint Mary's College of California
July 30 - August 4, 2006



KEYNOTE ADDRESS
by
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July 31, 2006

Theme: ***Mission:
Whom We Serve
and
How We Serve***

Several years ago, while I was still fairly new at Cathedral High School, I had in class a sophomore who was really a pain in the butt. Unlike most of the boys who were eager, cooperative and appreciative of the education they received, this student was often angry, sarcastic, complaining, and a real nuisance. He was a pretty big, real scrappy kid... type that would always be in the middle of something if there was trouble. He was also never absent! To this day I remember him very well. His name is Oscar Menendez.

Oscar was famous for easily getting mad and mouthing off - he had a comment for everything - and would regularly gripe about how expensive everything was, particularly our tuition. Although Oscar received financial aid to help offset his tuition, he was never satisfied. He was a kid in need of a lot of attention, who came from a family with tremendous need and who had few resources.

One day after class I just had enough of his complaining , and I told him, "Oscar why don't you just go out get a job." I told him, "When I was your age, I earned money by raking our neighbor's leaves, mowing their lawns, and cleaning their gutters. Why don't you go and do the same and earn some money for yourself?"

His response: "Well, Brother John you come from a wealthy family." I retorted, "You don't even know my family." Oscar responded, "I may not know your family, but I know you're wealthy."

"You see, in my neighborhood there are no trees, people have no lawns. All we have is asphalt! What do you want me to mow, graffiti"?

Wow. Not knowing really what to say, I told Oscar I would drive him home after school and we would look for a job together at a local McDonald's or fast food place. While he completed three applications that afternoon, and I talked to several managers, no job was obtained that day. I did, however, get a good understanding of his rough and poor neighborhood near Hollywood, and while I saw many fences and graffiti, it was true that I didn't see any lawns.

While Oscar continued to be a pain in the butt, and was always circling where trouble could be found, I always maintained a real fondness for him because I clearly recognized he was a boy that Saint La Salle and the Brothers could have encountered and taught more than 300 years ago on the streets of Reims, Rouen, or Paris. What was true back regarding the poor and unruly seemed very close to me and to a broader extent to many of our other schools around the District.

As I look at the District and our educational mission today, I do see encouraging signs that connect our past to our present.

First: I believe the leadership of the Brothers across our Region have established one of the most progressive apostolic religious orders in North America. I would particularly like to compliment our past and current Brother Visitors of this District and our District Leadership Team -- particularly our Office of Education -- for their professional and inspirational vision and help in assisting us with our mission. Instead of retreating or cutting back, the Brothers have chosen to recognize the importance and value -- in both word and deed -- of promoting dedicated lay men and women as Partners throughout our educational works and institutional leadership.

Collaborative bodies which regularly meet to promote our Lasallian identity, and professional and spiritual development, are imbued with wonderful lay men and women throughout the District. Such groups as the Secondary School Administrators Association, District Mission Council, Association of Board Chairs, and Lasallian Leadership Institute, among others give us as a District a vibrant sense of our mission and helps sustain our identity as leaders as -we engage in the challenging work of education.

A second sign of encouragement has been the substantial work and twofold commitment dedicated by the District Leadership Team and individuals -- particularly from our Partners following their participation in the Lasallian Leadership Institute -- to open new schools and to encourage existing schools -- particularly the high schools and Saint Mary's College -- to enroll more low income students who would otherwise not consider our Catholic Lasallian. institutions. Very few religious orders are even considering opening new schools today, and it is a privilege and a source of pride for me that our District has been at the forefront of looking at options and existing schools which have a greater potential of educating the poor.

While opening new schools may be exciting, it is equally encouraging that we have not downplayed the importance of our existing and traditional secondary schools and Saint Mary's College. As a principal of a school that has existed for more than 80 years, and one where direct service of the poor is the effective priority and hallmark of the school, I am encouraged that the secondary schools throughout our District and Saint Mary's College that do not serve a majority student population that is economically marginalized, are still being challenged to take seriously the last General Chapter's call to make "service of the poor" a greater priority and commitment.

In my judgment, the established schools that serve primarily middle to upper income families - due to the reality of being tuition driven institutions - have a genuine place in our District alongside the schools and works which more directly educate the economic poor. While all schools, regardless of their location or particular environment, should strive to attract and enroll economically margin alized students, we face the reality that a tuition based school will never be able to enroll a large number of poor students and be able to maintain its financial viability. Nonetheless, it

is essential that the leadership of schools which do serve predominantly students from upper income and affluent families, establish programs and provide opportunities which sensitize their students to the needs and reality of the poor. By and large, I think we are going in this direction and it is something we can be proud of.

A third sign of encouragement -- perhaps the most important for our long term viability -- are the formation programs and activities provided by the District to our faculty and staff, students, and trustees. As a teacher, administrator and board of trustee member I have appreciated the invitation and opportunity to participate in meaningful orientation sessions, workshops, board training sessions, and the Lasallian Leadership Institute to rekindle and broaden my initial formation and education in the Brothers. By far the most valuable part of our formation programs is the time for personal interaction with District, Regional and International Brothers and Partners. Awareness of our collective mission that is gained by bringing people away from their local school site and having them interact and listen to Partners and Brothers who share common goals and interests from other school settings has a tremendous and lasting value to sustain us in our mission, particularly when the going gets tough (as we know it will!). In short, we know we are not alone. We have association. Although our District and Regional formation programs for teachers and trustees is not as extensive as the formation program for the Brothers, what we provide is most valuable and the primary means of educating colleagues regarding our Lasallian spirituality and heritage.

It is in fully embracing and being knowledgeable of our Catholic, Lasallian spirituality that I think we may find the greatest challenge as we move into the future with fewer Brothers in District. As a leader of a school, I am well aware that if I am not well grounded in my faith, and cannot articulate and make decisions based upon my faith, then I am no different from well-intentioned, hardworking colleagues in a public or private school. As Lasallians committed to the educational advancement of youth, in addition to being professional in the work place, we must also be spiritual people in the work place.

While I am much more familiar with Lasallian and Western spirituality than Eastern spirituality, I find it fascinating that the Chinese character for God is also rooted in the symbol or character for human beings. The primary symbol for representing

God in the Chinese language is the straight, strong and dominant vertical center character *[here demonstrate by holding up the center symbol]*. In the Chinese language the word "man" or human being" come from the same character of God, but with an attached smaller stroke. *[here demonstrate with the smaller horizontal stroke.]* Ironically, it is the Chinese who convey that to be fully human we must be in touch with God, and for God to be fully in touch with us, he chose to be human.

While most credential, professional, and educational management courses will not teach and expound on the need for spirituality, we as Lasallian educators have the additional task of making Christ present to the children confided to our care. In this sense, instilling our schools with a strong spirituality -- while perhaps not always the focus of our daily actions -- is one of the most pressing challenges we have today because the Brothers and our culture are not reinforcing this point as vividly as in the past.

The question is: Are we walking the walk with our Catholic faith and actively promoting and evangelizing our Catholic faith in our schools? Do you really see yourself, and the other math teachers, science teachers, and English teachers on your campus as ambassadors and ministers of Christ, or do you prefer to see your role solely as a competent and caring teacher, staff member, or administrator? My sense is, most of us feel more comfortable being the teacher of math, history, and the seminar class than being the prophet of the Gospel and ministers of our faith. If this is true, we have a challenge to make our teachers and schools more authentically Catholic.

Another challenge or trend we face today, and will continue to face, is the reduction of middle-class students in our schools. It has been said by many presidents and principals over the last several years, that the traditional middle class is being squeezed out of our schools. In many ways the majority of our schools and Saint Mary's College, are primarily an option for wealthier families and for a relatively smaller number of poor families (5%) who the schools nearly fully subsidize as part of their gratuitous outreach to the poor which is so central to the spirituality and pedagogy of St. LaSalle and the early Brothers. It is a crisis -- not only in our Lasallian schools but in nearly all Catholic, private schools throughout our country -- that primarily only wealthier students are enjoying the benefits of

Catholic education.

Although the situation is currently not as bleak in the Los Angeles Archdiocese as it is in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Oakland, I know of pastors in L.A. who rejoice to see their struggling inner-city Catholic elementary school close, only to have it reopen as a public charter elementary school. The reason: The charter elementary school brings in substantial rental income to the parish and the pastor is relieved of one less responsibility which he sees as a "headache."

The bad news is that I do not have a solution to end this financial quandary. While I was very impressed and received a good education on the issue of school choice as presented at our nearly week-long District sponsored "Colloquium on School Choice" last June, I see no hope for greater school choice for private schools in California primarily due to the influence of the powerful and well-funded teachers union and state legislators controlling Sacramento who seek to block any attempt which will reduce funding for their members or their political campaigns.

The reality is, I think Saint LaSalle would not be pleased we are charging tuition that the majority of people whom he tried to reach in his day would not be able to afford. What should we do then?

Our Vision should be driven by need. But whose need is your school really responding to? Are we responding to the needs of current families, who have the financial option of enrolling in another school in order to secure our job and that of our Partners, or are we setting our vision to assist those who are currently not assisted by our school but whom St. LaSalle would want us to include? Would your school accept and purposely seeks to enroll students like my former student, Oscar Menendez, who did not bring extraordinary academic or athletic talent or financial resources to the school? Are our schools seeking safety, prestige and financial stability -- like almost all other private, Catholic schools today -- or is the school leadership and trustees trying to address the unmet needs of youth in your local community?

In speaking about finances, I think another challenge the District has to work on in the very near future is the issue of restructuring in the region. Primarily due to the diminishment of the number of Brothers in our region there is a need to consolidate the number of Brothers into fewer Districts so better leadership can be provided to the

Brothers. As a result, we may -- and I do mean may since I am not an authority on this matter -- but I can fully anticipate there will be financial costs to our District that are currently being directed to our educational mission through De La Salle Institute and the Benilde Charitable Trust that may be taken to assist and support new responsibilities associated with restructuring in our region. If additional funds are required as part of the outcome of restructuring District responsibilities, this could mean a reduction in funds to programs all our schools enjoy or a reduction in subsidy to some schools which receive such assistance to educate the poor.

While the financial implications and challenge of restructuring is not something I think we can really deal with at this Assembly, I bring it up because I can foresee its being an issue that the Brother Visitors, and the District Leadership will have to tackle during the next four years.

Lastly, as we envision the future of our Catholic, Lasallian educational mission in our District, what can we do at this Assembly to make our vision a greater reality in our communities?

My sense is the best thing we can probably do is to become engaged in our Theme Group, and see if common issues come to the surface. Listening and talking with one another will probably surface the most pressing issues that we as a District should address in the months and four years ahead.

I think there are enough pragmatists in this room that we won't get carried away and suggest some totally unrealistic direction, but I also think we need to be "risk takers" and allow for new ideas to surface so we become more authentic "ambassadors and ministers of Christ" that St. La Salle call us to be. To have faith in the Providence of God is an essential part of our Lasallian charism and to trust that God will not disappoint those who place their trust in him, can be the most surprising and affirming aspect of our ministry.

This past May I was delighted to receive an e-mail from Oscar Menendez, my former student that I mentioned earlier, and I would like to read part of his letter as an example of the good that we do -- perhaps which often is not seen until years later --for the students confided to our care.

Dear Brother John,

It is with great happiness that I am able to send out my college graduation

invitation. Cathedral High School will always have a special place in my heart. Teachers like yourself, Mr. Leong, Mr. Bertolone, Mr. Godoy, Mr. Galaz, Mr. Murphy, and personnel like Mr. Farfan, Brother James, and Mrs. Griego all played a very big part in helping me get to this point. I know I wasn't always the best student or best behaved but those teachers never turned their back on me. Without you fighting for me I probably never would have finished Cathedral High School. You made sure I was always OK and did what I was supposed to do. You were always there to calm me down when I was mad and actually took the time to listen to my problems. It is for this reason that besides my family and myself, my college diploma belongs to Cathedral High School as much as it does to me. Without Cathedral I would never have been able to send out an e-mail like this one. So thank you Cathedral High School and its staff. It is because of you that I will celebrate such a great day with my family. I guess now I will expect to receive letters from Cathedral asking for money now that I will graduate. Once I get some money, I would love to donate to Cathedral. Thank you and may God bless the Cathedral family for helping a poor kid from Salvadoran parents accomplish such a great dream.

Thank you, Oscar Menendez

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