

De La Salle Christian Brothers
District of San Francisco
DISTRICT ASSEMBLY ON MISSION
Saint Mary's College of California
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KEYNOTE PANEL ADDRESS
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Theme:
Vocation

The core purpose of the vocation ministry efforts of the San Francisco District is to awaken, nurture, and accompany God's call in each other.

How do we awaken, nurture, and accompany God's call in each other? I am reminded of the theme that the Lasallian Collegians chose for the Student Leadership Camp a few years ago: "To be the Holy Presence". One profound way that we can awaken, nurture, and accompany God's call in each other is to be purposeful about "re-membering" that we are living in -- that we are BEING -- the Holy Presence of God. The words of St. John Baptist de La Salle continue to guide us in this endeavor "to be the Holy Presence": He says to us today, as he told the early Brothers: "Throughout the tasks which fill your day, **make an effort** to remain united with God: welcome Him and serve Him in other people."

Our task is clear but not always easy: we need to "make an effort" to remain in union with God and look upon the events of our lives with the eyes of faith.

We believe the same is most true as we look at the area of Vocations in our Church and in our District at this time in history. In order to awaken, nurture, and accompany vocations in ourselves, each other, and especially our students, we must continually "make an effort".

This morning, we will highlight some of the results of the many efforts that have been made and continue to be made in the area of Vocation Promotion in our District and to discuss some encouraging signs of the ongoing efforts to awaken, nurture, and accompany God's call in each other for the future.

Many efforts

As we begin to talk about this area of Vocations, let's take a moment to remind ourselves of one of the core values of the Vocation Program for the District of San Francisco.

The first core value which supports the purpose and guides us in "making an effort" to promote Vocations is: (that)

1. There is a call (mission) in everyone from God.

In our District, we know that when we talk about vocations, we are not ONLY talking about "religious vocations". Before Vatican II, vocation was commonly used only for people who entered a seminary or a religious congregation. Thankfully, the present-day understanding of vocation is much broader. Everyone is called by God to something and therefore has a vocation. Vocations include:

- Consecrated Religious (Brother/Sister),
- Ordained (Priests/Deacons) and
- Committed Lay Persons (Single/Married).

"Whatever our state in life, our particular vocation, each one of us is called to bear witness to the Gospel by the way we live and minister." The task of each of us, Brother or Lay Partner, Single or Married, is to discern God's will, accept it, and live it out. That is responding to the universal call to be holy.

In the document called The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, we read:

"The entire people of God has the responsibility for awakening, discerning and developing vocations in the Church. The Brothers share in this work with the rest of the Christian community, especially the parents, priests, religious and lay teachers. They invite in a special way the most committed members of the educational community to join with them in the pastoral ministry of vocations". (Rule, art. 83)

As the three of us on this panel met to discuss the issue of Vocations in our District, we were encouraged to realize that we, as a District, have indeed been making an effort to awaken, nurture, and accompany Vocations throughout our District in very specific ways.

Specific efforts:

Here are some of the ways that we have been “sharing the work” of promoting Vocations in our District:

- In order to ensure that a culture of vocation awareness is being built up, each of our schools in the District has a Vocation Coordinator as well as a Brothers Community Vocation Coordinator.
- Vocation Ministry has been incorporated into all programs of the Office of Education.
- Resources and promotional materials are regularly distributed to every school and a special website called **www.brothersvocation.org** has been created as a resource for teachers and students alike.
- Traditionally, Brothers have exclusively been assigned as Director of Vocation Ministry on the District level. Now however, for the first time, our District has appointed both a Brother and a Lay Partner (Brother George Van Grieken and Ms. Marilyn Paquette) to promote and foster Vocations in our District. I don't know of any other District in the world that has a lay person who is a woman working in the area of Vocation Ministry. I think this makes a significant statement about how we acknowledge all vocations and embrace all members of our Lasallian community.
- More and more of our faculty and staff see their work as a calling, as their personal vocation in life. Faculty in-services, retreats, and new faculty orientations have focused on vocation.
- Student retreats and leadership programs typically include the notion of vocation as the source of one's commitment to Lasallian mission.
- We all know that success in the area of Vocation Ministry is not measured merely in the number of young men who enter “The Brothers”. Our sense of Vocation Ministry has expanded to include all of our students, male and female, from our youngest students at The De Marillac Academy in San Francisco to the young men and women at St. Mary's College in Moraga.
- Our schools have been successfully fostering a culture of vocation. The word vocation is replacing career or job, and has become part of the vernacular in many of our schools.
- Students are being inspired and taking to heart the Lasallian adage: “Enter to learn; leave to serve.” The experiences that our students have while in our care are significant enough that they want to stay connected with us and they are returning to serve in the Lasallian mission.

Most significantly, in the past few years, the Directors of Vocation Ministry in our District have collaborated with Brothers, Partners, and their religious and educational communities to more intensely promote greater understanding and appreciation of the Brothers' vocation.

To this end, a comprehensive District Pastoral Plan for Vocation Ministry has been created. This marks one of the important achievements in the area of

Vocations for our District. The major goals for the Pastoral Plan are meant to be very big and nearly unattainable in order to keep us moving forward. Let me briefly share those 4 major goals with you now:

1. All Brothers, teachers, staff, students and parents will be able to articulate their own vocation and be able to awaken, nurture and accompany others in their vocation.
2. All teachers, staff and students will have a basic understanding and direct experience of the Brothers and the Brothers' life in order to communicate the viability of the Brothers' life and see it as a possibility for some of them.
3. The Brothers will promote their vocation to groups and individuals outside of our works.
4. Vocational support will be available for persons beyond their time in the Lasallian Ministry.

These goals will be ongoing in their fulfillment and will set the direction in Vocation Ministry programming for our District during the next 4 years.

Turbulence and Transition: Religious Vocations and the Multiplication Miracle of the Charism

Let's talk specifically for a little while about vocations to "The Brothers". In America, we can see that Religious Orders are getting older and smaller. In some other countries, religious orders are getting younger and bigger. The fact of the matter is, in our own District, we can see that the Brothers are getting older and that fewer men are joining us at this time in our history.

It seems clear to say that regarding vocations to the Brothers throughout our Region, we are in a time of turbulence and transition.

Every time of transition is a process. What is required is that we honor the often slow process of the transitional time. During this time of transition, we are called, as Brothers and Partners, to probe the meaning and significance of our individual vocations. We know that these times of turbulence and transition are nothing new in our Lasallian tradition. One has only to recall the moment of the Heroic Vow when our Founder renewed his commitment to the Institute along with only two other Brothers.

Like the Founder said, "we learn to see the hand of God in the events of our lives." During this time of declining religious vocations in our country, we are challenged to see with the eyes of faith. Robert Brumet, in his book entitled "Finding Yourself in Transition", says:

“Each transition allows us the opportunity for a ‘bigger God’ than we once believed in. We can realize that God is not only guiding us through the transition but is the very force that is bringing about the transition and the resulting transformation.”

Do we see this transitional period with the eyes of faith? Is our faith “big enough” to allow that it is God who is guiding us towards a transformation in the area of Religious Vocation?

A few weeks ago, I was in Chicago attending a retreat for the Brothers in the region of the United States and Canada. One of the retreat facilitators, Br. James Zullo, invited the Brother participants to consider the story from Matthew’s Gospel about the multiplication of the loaves and fishes in light of our present reality of fewer Brother Vocations.

Let us look closely at that miracle story for a moment. As you know, Jesus’ disciples were anxious because they had only two fish and five loaves of bread to feed the many people who had gathered to hear Jesus preach. Jesus’ response was to recognize the value of what they did have -- two fish and five loaves -- and to give thanks for it. “Jesus took the fish and loaves and looking up to heaven, gave thanks.”

What is it that we have, to give thanks for, as Brothers?

Although we are fewer in number (two fish and five loaves), perhaps we are being asked to recognize what we have, to give thanks for it and to share it with those who have gathered to be fed.

Our charism, the Lasallian mission, and the sharing of this charism, is that miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. What is essential for us to recognize is that this miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes has already happened in our District of San Francisco. We have only to open our eyes to see that the Lasallian charism has been recognized and blessed and has multiplied! We have only to look around this room to see this living miracle in each other!

Do you realize that we Lasallians have about 100 schools in the United States and that since 1993 we have opened 21 new works? Yes, just in the past thirteen years, we have started twenty-one new schools in the U.S./Toronto Region. And four of those twenty-one new works are in our very own District of San Francisco. What better evidence of the miracle at work in us!

I think that this Gospel miracle story can speak a hopeful message to each of us whenever we begin to feel anxious about this transitional time concerning religious vocations in our world and in our District today. The words of Joan

Chittister come to mind: “The crisis of vocations in the Church is not a matter of numbers; it’s a matter of interpretation.” We’ve never had so many vocations in our District, let alone the Institute and the Church!

However we must remember to continue to recognize, bless, and share the message of this miracle story. We must remember to “make an effort”.

In Conclusion

“To make an effort” today means to open our hearts and our minds in order to see with the eyes of faith what God is guiding us towards during this time of turbulence and transition. Again, is our faith **big enough** to allow that **it is God** who is guiding us towards a transformation?

Parker Palmer, in his book “The Courage to Teach”, says that “Vocation is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

In our San Francisco District, I see this idea being the embodiment of our shared mission whenever we, as Lasallian Partners and Brothers, awaken, nurture, and accompany God’s call in each other.

When we “make the effort” to respond to God’s call and develop a deep sense of our vocation we can perform miracles like Jesus did. And, in so doing, we are not only fed like the crowd that gathered around Jesus, but we become His true disciples who are invited to witness and to share the multiplication miracle and “to be the Holy Presence of God” in our world today.

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