

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

Our formation as a Lasallian may begin at different times and places in our lives, but indeed it is a common experience. Somewhere along the way we were introduced to the “Brothers” – to their work and mission – either as a student or a parent or a staff member or as a potential Brother. That introduction was our first step in our formational journey.

I believe that journey, and our Lasallian formation activities, has five aspects in common:

1. It is **ongoing**. Even as I sat down to write this talk, I found myself needing more formation to more clearly articulate my thoughts, noting that each of us has a different level of experience and formation.
2. It is **prayerfully reflective**. One hallmark of our Lasallian mission is that prayer, and the Gospel, are at the center of all we do. As we are

summoned here, it is in a spirit of prayer that we discern our work, and our District's future. However, we each have our own concept, need, and way for prayer.

3. It is **practical**. De La Salle was clear to his Brothers that students' education should prepare them for this life as well as the next. If our formation activities didn't help us in our daily lives they would be pointless.
4. It is **experiential**. De La Salle says in his Tenth Meditation for the Time of Retreat, third point, that, "zeal will only become perfect if you practice what you are teaching them." We need to have the experience of Lasallian education before we can fully name it and appreciate it.
5. It is always an **invitation**. We choose to respond to the invitation – the call - that is put before us. None of us is forced to "be Lasallian" but we are invited to consider what being a part of the Lasallian family means for us.

These characteristics are also a common thread of the international, regional, district and local formation activities. From CIL in Rome, to LLI, or the new teacher orientation programs of the district, each of us has been able to reflect on our experiences in Lasallian education.

Encouraging Signs

Make note, though, that our formation activities are varied. Not everyone is coming to our schools with the same level of understanding or passion, yet. Also, while some of these are gatherings that may appear to not be explicitly formational, I encourage you to think of each of these as opportunities for intentional formation as well.

Our Vandu Paaruu program, for example, to India and Sri Lanka is a month. While an incredibly rewarding program, some are not able to leave family or work for that long, yet for those who do you hear them say clearly, "it changed my life." Others participate in the Lasallian Leadership Institute for three years

with time spread throughout the school year making it easier for some to participate. But we cannot forget that even among our colleagues there are varied experiences and needs. Some come from industry and have never heard of De La Salle while others have worked for our schools for twenty years, and still say. "What District? De La Salle who?"

The people of this district, their willingness to embrace the mission, but most importantly the formation we receive are the keys to the success of our District and our Institute. We are called to ensure, like De La Salle did, that we are training those who will be training our students. There is no greater affirmation, I believe, to the Brothers and their work, than people craving to be fed by our mission. And as Brother Kevin noted, the multiplication miracle happens around us everyday. The District of San Francisco Context for Action states, "The 43rd General Chapter suggests in Recommendation 4, the formation of Brothers and Partners be a priority in the Institute over the next seven years. This formation, before any possible structure, will make a greater contribution to strengthening Association for the educational service of the poor, as a Lasallian response to the challenges of the 21st Century" (Context for Action, 3.24)

Our formation programs are meeting the needs of many of our staff and students with a breadth that is staggering. Just look at these activities, and think of who participates in them. No formation activity gets "one type" of person anymore. Perhaps before the 1980's it was possible that the only formation activity existed for the Brothers and what a different program that must have looked like than any of today. One only needs to look at this room and see the wealth of different experiences, perspectives, and vocations that make up our schools, our district, and our future.

Lay Catholics in Schools: Witness to Faith a document of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops mentions that, "This means that religious formation must be oriented toward both personal sanctification and apostolic

mission, for these are two inseparable elements in a Christian vocation." (*Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, 1982, #65).

That was what I was missing when I left college. Some of you may know that before I started to serve at Justin-Siena I worked as a Business Manager for a large construction company with over \$20 billion in revenue. Even those fat cats knew the value and necessity for training an employee in the company philosophy, its mission (no we are not the only institution with a mission) and its modus operandi. My first official day on the job I was sent for a drug testing and then put in a room with five of my colleagues with large training manuals that were intended to "indoctrinate me" with the company's philosophy. Literally, my first day, and that of every new employee, is called "New Hire Indoc". In one day I "got it".

Now, juxtapose that experience with the new hire orientation we receive on a local and district level. People still say that they are unpacking after thirty or more years what it means to be Lasallian in the twenty first century.

It makes such a difference that our programs are mission-centered highlighting why they are incredibly successful and because of their success, there continues to be a request for more formation activities. Our already existing programs are thriving and some bursting at the seams. The Lasallian Student Leaders program, for example, just concluded a week with over 175 young Lasallians who are eager to know more fully what it means to be a Lasallian.

What does this tell us, then, about our formation programs? Most striking for me is that our programs, as opposed to others, are invitations to experience the sacred and opportunities to further understand and commit to our mission. Clearly, we are in an enviable position. These programs have emerged from a position of strength. It is not that we try to replace Brothers with lay partners, but

rather to form a common vocabulary, and truly a shared mission. As teachers, we know that we cannot teach what we do not understand.

My own story of formation began when I was a student at Christian Brothers High School and someone took the time, as Brother mentioned, to be “present”. I was blessed to have an older Brother and Sister who walked with me. I met a young Brother who graciously welcomed me into the Lasallian family. I was encouraged, from day one by him, to consider what God was calling me to and how I might best respond. There was also an older Sister in my life that likewise encouraged me, and helped me to develop into the person I am today. As a teenager I never thought that I would be sitting on a panel with Mrs. Powers and Brother Kevin over nine years later sharing my story that they helped create. Yet here I am. I went from a Lasallian Youth, to a Lasallian Collegian, to a Lasallian Partner. Along this journey numerous people have walked with me, for long periods of time, or just for a day. This happened, seemingly, overnight as De La Salle’s words echo, “over a period of time, one commitment lead me into the next one without me having foreseen this in the beginning.” In truth, I never thought that I would ever work at Justin-Siena, yet I have for almost three years.

Similar to my experience, many of my peers have made choices that changed their life and their lifestyle. Celina Gomes said recently that, “the single greatest choice in my life was choosing Sacred Heart Cathedral”, and I know that she is not the only person who feels that way. Look at your own schools and see the new teachers at tender ages that are making the commitment to work in Lasallian schools and are already coming to the table with some Lasallian formation. Often as a Lasallian Youth, a Collegian or a student, training and forming our students to be Lasallian has been occurring and we are reaping the rewards. In one room of faculty we are seeing that there will be teachers engaged in ministry for twenty years with teachers who are fresh to this profession, and each of them has some formation experience that they bless us with.

Also, it is my understanding that Principals and Presidents are always looking for qualified staff members. More and more, we see that they are hiring people who are mission centered. I overheard one President say, "It is much easier to train someone to be a good math teacher, than in one day get the Lasallian mission." I am heartened to know that mission centeredness is a priority in our district hiring and I hope that continues.

Nonetheless, much patience and awareness of the Spirit at work is required in our schools and our formation activities. We do not expect everyone to be on board from day one. We must, as many of us do, take the time to sit and listen to someone struggling to comprehend what "service to the poor" means at most of our schools. The last General Chapter, however, encouraged that all of our formation activities has a reference to the service of the poor. That challenge emboldens us to speak honestly with one another to more fully understand what that means. Who is the poor that we serve?

That honesty is only present, though, because of the relationships we build through of our formation. There are people who guide and teach us along this path of formation that make the difference in how we approach and embrace our mission. Much of that happens informally, too. Formation and guidance happens on an almost daily basis. Stories are told, values are shared, and experiences felt that unite us in our mission. If we did not have someone on a local level to speak with about the challenge that our mission often presents, we would probably not survive. Yet we thrive because people are there to walk this journey with us; sounds a lot like the Brothers, huh?

As the three of us talked, we noticed that as we each answer our baptismal call, in whatever way God encourages us to; we are strengthened by the people who are there with us, and are fortified by the training we receive. Because our District is a leader in inviting us to training and in fostering the desire to be Lasallian I believe our reach goes even beyond our own schools. Justin-Siena

recently hired a person who heard about our mission and left his job because he wanted to be a part of what we are. He said in his interview that he has never seen a religious order that shares their mission so proudly with lay people. Wow. We are clearly doing something right, but what a challenge it is to sustain that.

Formation Questions... Next steps – District Action

As a district, and as individual schools, if we want to remain as vital and strong as we are today we must strengthen and continue our formation activities for they are at the root of our success. While our Office of Education is a fantastic resource, they, too, can become taxed and pulled in too many directions. We need to be mindful that it is not “their” job to train us, but our job to train and form one another. We must think proactively, and not wait for District directives when thinking what is best for our community and our mission as it regards formation.

Additionally, with our LEC schools moving to the Policy Governance model, but even for those who are not, Lasallian formation must be a top priority for our Boards. If these individuals are charged with ensuring the efficacy of our mission throughout the school, they must know what to look for. While DLSI does a wonderful retreat for Board education, that is not enough. It is no longer a “Board issue” what students are wearing, or what subjects they are being taught, but how many of our faculties, students or parents are aware of that. Better still, what about the need of ensuring that our Board members are fully trained, and fully aware of what it means to be a Lasallian serving at a Lasallian school?

Likewise, we often say that our parents are partners in education with us. When was the last time that we did Lasallian formation for them? If we are truly partners than every member of our community should have a formation program or at least something deliberate and intentionally formative for mission. Going back to Celina’s comment, what would it look like if every student felt and experienced the transformative experiences that she and I did? How do we reach the students

who are not the normal cast of characters to go to Lasallian youth, do service, or have a proclivity for the mission?

A danger, though, with the phenomenal programs that exist seems to be happening without much notice. The Lasallian Leadership Institute and other programs that are training many of our staff to be “Leaders”, leaves them with where to go? While I am not suggesting that every member of LLI should be or wants to be a President, or Principal, we might lose their talent and formation if we don’t ask the question. As Cecilia mentioned, we are blessed with people who are spreading their gifts and talents throughout the District, but we must ensure that we encourage them to do so and that we find new ways to use the formation experiences of our staff. It is a blessing, but how do we show that it is?

It has also been noted that the word “relationship” is a common theme throughout our groups. Many of our schools, although not all, are in at least driving distance of one another. Rather than solely looking at the issue of how we can better serve our students, why not look at the idea of how to better serve our staff inter-school as well?

Further, I am reminded by Christ’s message to tend to His sheep. If we want this Lasallian mission to expand and strengthen we must remember to be rooted in the Gospel and to form every member in our community in what it means to be a Catholic, Lasallian. We must not forget that our schools are Catholic and while we are just getting a hold of what Lasallian means, there is much work to be done in the realm of Catholic formation and identity.

As we embark on the future, De La Salle says poignantly, Domine, opus tuum (The work is yours). Indeed, this mission is the work of God, because it would not have survived and grown had it not been because God’s hand.

David Holquin

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