

Lasallian Convocation at the United Nations on the Rights of the Child
Opening Remarks
26 April 2010
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A Story

The whole family went out to dinner one evening. Menus were passed to all including Molly, the eight year old daughter. The conversation was an “adult” one, so Molly was ignored.

When the waiter took orders, he came to Molly last. “And what do you want?” he asked. “A hot dog and a soda”, she said.

No,” said her grandmother, “she’ll have the roast chicken, carrots, and mashed potatoes.”

“And milk to drink,” chimed in her father.

“Would you like ketchup or mustard on your hot dog?” asked the waiter as he walked away, taking the parents aback.

“Ketchup,” she called out.

She then turned to her family and added, “You know what? He thinks I’m real!”

(William J. Bausch, The Yellow Brick Road, p. 63)

Why we are Here

We are gathered here because we know children are real! We also know there are too many children in the world who don’t have the chance Molly had to go to a restaurant for dinner. I have been asked why is the Convention on the Rights of the Child a priority for the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and our Lasallian world? Why is it important?

It is important because the foundation of our Lasallian heritage is based on an individual from a rather well-to-do family who contemplated his world in relation to his daily reading of Scripture.

It is important because his contemplation of poor and abandoned youth led him to be part of a network and to create a network, no not a network, a community that became a network that responded to the needs of the vagabonds of his time.

It is important because John Baptist de La Salle’s, purpose in founding the schools was to provide a means of salvation for children both in this world and the next.

It’s important because in the Brother’s Rule we state that we train our students [and ourselves] to adopt a critical stance towards contemporary society...and to become increasingly conscious of the **roots** for the poverty that surrounds them and so become earnestly involved in the promotion of justice and human dignity through the educational service they provide. (The Rule, 13c, 14).

It's important because Brother Alvaro and past superior Generals have always advocated that our Lasallian mission "cannot be reduced to offering welfare assistance but it must go to the roots of poverty to seek out structural solutions and to educate for justice" (2007 Pastoral Letter, p. 41)

It is important because children are the most vulnerable human beings on earth and it is in the face of children that we see God. And across the globe it is often NGO's, citizen groups and religious communities who are the first line of protection for children at risk of violence. (cf. No Room at the Table: Earth's most Vulnerable Children, Donald Dunson)

But it's also important to understand, as you may have already read in Brother John Johnston's 1999 Pastoral Letter that we "situate the defense of children squarely in the context of our faith and of our Lasallian heritage and mission (p.31-33). We commit ourselves to the "liberation" of oppressed children not because we are social activists, but because we are people of faith; the defense of children for us is not just from a social or humanistic perspective and concern, as important as these are, but from our Christian faith.

The Statistical Reality

When we consider the needs of the world's children it is not necessary to leave our shores to understand the plight of many of them:

- Every 11 seconds in our country a high school student drops out of school;
- every 19 seconds a child is arrested;
- every 33 seconds a child is born into poverty;
- every 35 seconds a child is confirmed as abused or neglected;
- every four minutes a child is arrested for a drug offense;
- every 7 minutes a child is arrested for a violent crime;
- every 3 hours a child or teenager is killed by a firearm;
- every 5 hours a child or teen commits suicide; and
- every 14 hours a woman dies from complications of childbirth or pregnancy.
(State of America's Children 2008, Children's Defense Fund)

The needs are overwhelming and hearing such statistics can create a sense of hopelessness in us. Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker and who spent her life right here in New York City working with the poor and the abandoned said, "No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much to do". Fortunately there are many people, like yourselves and those you left back at your ministries who are always ready to step forward and offer a hand.

A Charge

In Brother John's 1999 Pastoral Letter he listed 17 action items that Lasallians and Lasallian ministries can take. Many of them you have been doing for a long time. Let me mention just three:

- We can declare ourselves in writing at district and local levels as committed to the defense of children as an integral dimension of the mission of the District.
- We can create educational programs to educate all our young people to awareness of the consequences of poverty and inadequate social structures.
- Those of us involved in higher education can strive to carry out the recommendations of past General Chapters of the Brothers to foster research into the cause of poverty and social injustice and into ways of eliminating the causes. In our teacher training programs, we can make sure that future teachers know well the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and their implications for teachers and educators. (pp. 47-53)

In recent years we have demonstrated our numerical power for good in the Tsunami, in Haiti, etc. We can do more, particularly from the perspective of this conference's second goal, advocacy.

While it is not for me or any one individual to say what we should advocate for, let me suggest two in addition to whatever you may decide as a group. The plight of immigrants is also a priority of the Institute today. Last month at the Midwest District's animators gathering we learned that for every letter that a congressman or woman receives in support of real immigration reform, he or she receives 1500 letters against any reform. Do we really want to see a time in our country when like the law just passed in Arizona any policeman can come up to you or me and ask for my identity card to prove I'm a citizen? What if in the next year our congressmen and women received 1,000,000 postcards like those produced by the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Conference from Lasallians asking for real immigration reform that keeps immigrant families together while at the same time adopts smart and humane enforcement policies.

A second suggestion: at the conclusion of the Brothers' 43rd General Chapter in 2000 the Regions of the Institute created the Brother John Johnston Fund for the Protection and Welfare of Children to honor his 24 years of International leadership. Subsequently, Brother John requested the fund be re-named the Lasallian International Children's Fund (LICF). The fund is used to support:

- Programs directly serving needy children and youth.
- Advocacy projects on behalf of children
- Training leaders in the promotion of the rights of children.

Next year Brother Alvaro will make his pastoral visit to the United States and Canada. Can Lasallians in our Region launch a campaign to raise additional monies for this fund to give to Brother Alvaro when he visits? Can we not also use that occasion to set some other goals at this conference to achieve by the time of his visit?

Conclusion

We all know of Mother Teresa of Calcutta and the wonderful work she started for the untold numbers of the poor and abandoned in India. Mother Teresa once said:

I never look at the masses [of humanity] as my responsibility; I look at the individual. I can only love one person at a time – just one, one, one. So you begin. I began – I picked up one person. Maybe if I didn't pick up that one person, I wouldn't have picked up forty-two thousand... The same thing goes for you, the same thing in your family, the same thing in your church, your community. Just begin – one, one, one.

(Lasalle University and its Catholic Lasallian Mission (2009), p. 61)

This is ultimately what we are about. Given our vast network, each of us just helping one child, we are helping tens of thousands. Our collective Lasallian world has the power to do so much. I am confident you will identify some creative initiatives during your days here.

On behalf of Brother Alvaro, the Brother Visitors of our Region I sincerely thank the planning committee for organizing this wonderful event and for your participation in it.

The Children's Defense Fund seeks to invest in Every Child to secure the future for all of us. They have identified six immediate priorities for all children. Not surprisingly, five of them concern and/or can be addressed by the availability of quality education. I do not have the time to go into the details but you can access the information on their website (www.childrensdefense.org)

In article 11 of the 1987 edition of the Brothers' Rule we read:

John Baptist de La Salle was **deeply moved** by the way in which 'the children of the artisans and the poor' were abandoned and left to themselves. As a practical response to his prayerful consideration of this fact in relations to God's plan of salvation, he came to discern, in faith, what God wanted the mission of the Institute to be....

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 to be recognized as human beings and children of God.

It is late,
But it is our time.
It is late,
But it is all the time we have on hand
To create our future
It is late,
But we are at this late hour
It is late
But the dawn will come if we urge it on.

Frodo feels the pressure and experiences frustration because so much is demanded of him, and he says to Gandalf: "I wish it need not have happened in my time". To which Gandalf replies: "So do I; and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us".

(Adapted from J. R. R. Tolkien)

In this Easter season the Church uses the Gospel of John and throughout this week of readings Jesus constantly refers to God his Father who loves and sent him to us for our salvation. As you read in Brother John Johnston's 1999 Pastoral Letter too many children in our world today "hardly remember their fathers, if they remember them at all; others do not even know who their fathers are; some have suffered the scars of neglect, abandonment, physical and sexual abuse" (p. 9). This too is why it is important. La Salle told his first brothers, "You should look upon the children whom you are charged to teach as poor, abandoned orphans. In fact, though the majority of them do have a father here on earth, they are still as if they had none and are abandoned to themselves for the salvation of their souls. This is the reason God places them as if under your guidance (37.3).