

Mission Assembly Presentation

November 4, 2011

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Introduction

I'd like to share two quotes with you to suggest a spirit as we take up the challenges of the Mission before us:

"All of us might wish at times that we lived in a more tranquil world, but we don't. And if our times are difficult and perplexing, so are they challenging and filled with opportunity."

Robert Kennedy (May '61, Athens, Georgia)

"Do not let anticipation of tomorrow be a burden on the day that is passing. What you lack in the evening, the morrow will bring you, if you know how to hope in God." **John Baptist de La Salle**

As we gather these days in our first Mission Assembly, we have to marvel that we are now in year three of our journey as the District of Eastern North America – aka "DENA".

Our first charge was to ensure the "unity and the communion" of the new District. Working together in good synergy to meet this objective were: the immediate implementation of the District Council of the Brothers, the Mission Council of Partners and Brothers, the formation of many other committees, the great good will and energy among all Lasallians to forge our new District reality, and the bi-location of several members of the District Leadership Team across the geography of DENA.

We gather now in these days to deepen our unity and communion, and to discern together the mission vision and directional priorities of our District for the next four years.

The mission itself is clear, "to give a human and a Christian education to the young, especially the poor" (Rule Art 3). How we do this as we live into the future is the work of our Assembly.

We find ourselves in a setting where Jesus Himself felt at home. He preached on the shore of the Galilee; He called Simon & Andrew, James & John, from along its waterfront; He taught the Apostles how to bless the little they had to work with to feed the 5,000 along its banks **and He withdrew by boat to its solitary places to seek God's will, and God's grace to see that will through.**

It is this last activity that we take up together in these days: to seek God's will for us through our conversation and prayer, and, critically, God's grace to see it through. To quote two signature Brother Alvaro lines, "**What does the Lord require of us today?**" and "**Where are we willing to travel?**"

So, we do not come together for a business meeting, or for an exercise in corporate strategic planning. We gather in Assembly these days for an Apostolic activity. We gather as a charismatic expression of Church, following Jesus in the footsteps of John Baptist de La Salle.

We gather together as a discerning Community, **reading the signs of our times**, reflecting on the reality of who we are at this moment in our history and in our journey together, considering the needs of young people and their families, both here and beyond the geography of DENA, in response to what we are called to do through the Institute, the Church, and the needs of “young people who are poor and far from salvation”.

And, we do all of this, mindful of Br Alvaro’s reference to Archbishop Romero, “with eyes wide open and feet planted firmly on the ground,” aware of our giftedness and also of our limitations, but inspired by John Baptist de La Salle who reminds us to **“Be satisfied with what you can do, since this satisfies God, but do not spare yourself in what you can do with the help of grace. Be convinced that, provided you are willing, you can do more with the help of God’s grace than you imagine.”** And, so, let us discern and act confidently in the service of grace!

The Place of the Mission Assembly in the Build-Out of DENA

Our **Mission Assembly** is the third of three inter-related movements for the deepening and strengthening of the District. We, as Brothers, began the first movement this past April with the first session of the **first District Chapter**, followed by the **Called to Be Brothers Retreat** this summer which focused on deepening the Brothers’ relationship with Jesus, inviting us to live more the contemplative dimension of our lives, and renewing our faith and zeal for the mission.

In March of 2012, we will bring the second session of the District Chapter to a close as it finishes its work and accepts the challenges of this Mission Assembly. We, Partners and Brothers, do all of these things under the overarching banner of **“Together and by Association for Mission – a Journey of Hope”**, the theme chosen by representatives from each of the three respective planning committees for Chapter, Retreat, and Mission Assembly.

The banners before us visualize the dynamic unity of these three movements. They remind us that we Brothers journey with YOU, our Partners, who have wagered much your selves on this new District, and without whom, the Lasallian Mission of the District of Eastern North America would not be possible. Viewed in their unity, these movements speak to us of one Lasallian Community on this journey together in hope!

Prominent in each of these three banners are **the Journey Road** and **the Star of Faith** which recall Saint La Salle’s meditation for the Feast of the Epiphany (Med 96) and the Magi, who guided by the star, came to “recognize Jesus in the poor rags” of the manger.

These companion images speak to us of a Lasallian Community that must always be discerning the new inspirations of the Spirit, and of a Community that is forever on the move, seeking God, and God's mission for us in each new day . . . moving away from what is comfortable, not becoming sedentary or self-content, even at the cost of recasting or leaving an old and beloved ministry.

Tasks: Legislation, Vision, Directional Statements

The task before us is threefold:

1. To pass four pieces of **Legislation**, the most innovative of which are the By-Laws of the Mission Executive Council,
2. To further the process of developing a transformative **Vision** of the future. A vision that we aspire to and that we believe that God is calling us to as a Community, and,
3. To articulate **Directional Statements** that will help us to chart the broad course of action in pursuit of our Vision.

Reading the Signs of Our Times

As we approach these tasks, we need to consider briefly "**the signs of our times,**" the reality factors of our context. While there are many that might be considered, I am focusing on the following:

1. The US Economy

- **In General**
- **With Particular Concern for its effect on Families and Young People**

First, a general perspective . . .

Economically, we are living in a time of great uncertainty and upheaval that is evident in the volatility of our financial markets, characterized by high unemployment and political polarization.

We are, in this moment, more impacted by the political and economic realities beyond our borders than at any time in history. The positive correlation between the **events around the globe** (*European debt crisis, Middle East uprisings, etc.*) and the **volatility of our US markets** illustrates compelling evidence that the two are very much connected.

What in the past had been a seemingly measured and somewhat predictable steady growth trend has been replaced by a roller coaster ride of market gyrations on almost a daily basis, reflecting a sense of ambiguity and a lack of direction that stifles even the most optimistic investor.

Since the near financial meltdown of 2008, US households have seen almost \$13 trillion in wealth evaporate. More than 6 million jobs have been lost, and the unemployment rate appears headed for its highest level since 1940. (Krugman, NYT Magazine 9/6/09, p.41)

Secondly . . .

Applying these factors to the real world in which many of our young people and their families live, the concrete effects on the US economy can be seen in the following statistics on **unemployment**, the **slip from middle class status**, and **household foreclosures**:

1. The **Department of Labor** notes that we are in the worst **jobs crisis** since the Great Depression. While the official unemployment rate is 9.1 percent, if you add the people who can only find part-time work or who have stopped looking altogether, the rate is over 16 percent, or roughly 1 in 6 people in the labor force.
2. A **Pew Study** released this past month, ***Downward Mobility for the Middle Class: Waking Up from the American Dream***, notes that nearly 1 in 3 Americans who grew up Middle Class has slipped down the income ladder as an adult. The Great American Dream of a house, a college education for your kids, and savings for a comfortable retirement is now out of reach for a steadily growing number of families.
3. Regarding US **households**: A recent report by the **Federal Deposit Insurance Company (FDIC)** notes that 1 out of every 200 households will be foreclosed upon; every 3 months 250,000 new families will enter into foreclosure; and, 1 child in every classroom in America is at risk of losing his/her home.

A **Bloomberg** news story notes that over 3 million homes have been repossessed since 2006 and this number could balloon to about 6 million by 2013 when the market will finally absorb these distressed properties.

A recent government report on the 2010 Census entitled, **Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance in the US: 2010**, notes that more than a fifth of the youth under the age of 18 lived in poverty last year. Poverty rates for children rose from 20.7% in 2009 to 22% last year, making kids more likely than any other age group to be poor. The picture is even bleaker for children under the age of 6, **25% of whom live in poverty**.

2. Two Significant Demographic Trends in US Catholic Affiliation

- **Significant Number of Catholics Leaving Catholicism**
- **Growth of the US Hispanic Catholic Population**

First those leaving . . .

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life's 2008 report, *US Religious Landscape Study*, based on a survey of 35,000 adult Americans, noted that **1 out of 3** adult Americans who were raised Catholic have left the Church. Let me repeat that . . .

In a follow-up study in 2009, *Faith in Flux*, the Pew Research Center reported, "Almost half of all the Catholics who are unaffiliated left Catholicism before reaching age 18, as did one-third who are now Protestant. Among both groups, an additional 3 in 10 left the Catholic Church as young adults between the ages of 18 and 23." **A staggering number of those who left the Church did so as teenagers and before the age of 24!**

- Of those unaffiliated: 71% report that they just drifted away
- Of those now Protestant: 71%, the same percentage, note that their spiritual needs were not being met

This **Pew Study** notes that "Catholicism has lost more people to other religions or to no religion than any other religious group." These numbers matter, Folks, because they are not just alarming statistics, they are our brothers and sisters, our nieces and nephews, our children and grandchildren, our friends, colleagues and students, and even our spouses and parents.

Another disturbing trend, not researched yet but beginning to get attention in the independent Catholic press, is the number of devout adult Catholics who are leaving the Church. These are educated women and men who have raised their families in the Church, given years of active and faithful service to their local Church, but who have grown discouraged in their hope of seeing the teachings of Vatican II realized; who have little hope for real institutional reform; and who doubt the wisdom in elements of the Church's teaching on matters of sexual morality or gender roles.

These Catholics are not drifting away from the Church but intentionally leaving, typically for other Christian Churches, as a matter of conscience.

Second Demographic Trend: Growth of the US Hispanic Catholic Population....

Despite the large numbers of Catholics who leave the Church, the Catholic percentage of the US population continues to hover around 25%. This is the result of the growing numbers of Hispanic Catholics immigrating to the US, and the higher birthrates among immigrant Hispanic families.

According to the **2008 Pew Survey on Religion**, 30% of the US Catholic population is now Hispanic. While they only account for 15% of Catholics over fifty years of age they account for 60% of Catholics under thirty-five years of age.

Of note, 78% of Hispanics raised in the Church remain in the Church (vs 63% of the rest of us).

In a 2008 article, the **Pew Hispanic Center** reported that Hispanic students now make up 1 in 5 public school students in the US and that “strong growth” in Hispanic enrollment is expected to continue for decades.

A New York Times article in January 2009 noted that, while the percentage of Catholic children attending Catholic schools nationwide is 15%, only 3% of Hispanic Catholic children have access to Catholic schools.

As US Catholicism continues to grow with the influx of Hispanic immigrants to the US, they are also less likely to have completed a high school education and more likely to find themselves in low income jobs. In this sense, as the US Church becomes more immigrant, it will also become poor and less likely to have access to Catholic schools.

3. The Faith of American Youth Today

- **In general**
- **Findings regarding Catholic youth**

Kendra Creasy Dean, a Researcher for the **Lily Endowment** sponsored **National Study of Youth & Religion (NSYR)**, and author of the 2010 book, ***Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church***, states the following in the very first sentence of her book: “Let me save you some trouble, here is the gist of what you are about to read: American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith – but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school”. And, oh, “One more thing: we’re responsible.”

The National Study of Youth & Religion, a three phase longitudinal survey of 3,400, 13-17 year olds begun in 2001 and funded through 2010, reports that, generally, young people are “incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives. Religion is in the background of their lives, unfocused and implicit, important but not a priority, valued but not invested in, and praised but not describable.”

Ultimately, the observations of Dean’s book and the findings of the **National Study of Youth & Religion** seem more of a commentary on how faith communities have failed to engage young people than on the lack of religious feeling and commitment on the part of young people.

The **National Study** summarizes US youth’s religious convictions as “**Moralistic Therapeutic Deism**” particularly evident among mainline Protestant *and Catholic youth*.

The Creed of **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism** is: (according to NSY&R)

- A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other
- The central goal in life is to be happy and feel good about oneself
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem, and
- Good people go to heaven when they die

Please note the absence of any expression of a personal relationship with God and any sense of real membership in a faith community!

The good news is that most US teens feel generally positive toward religion and embrace some religious identity. The bad news is that most religious congregations in the US are failing in religiously engaging and educating their young people. This is a reality borne out in the previously referenced Pew Study noting the great number of young Catholics 18-23 who leave the Church.

The longitudinal data for the Catholic Report of the study is clear that there is a steady decline in most measures of "religiosity" across the nine years from Catholic "Phase 1" teenagers to "Phase 3" emerging adults.

Two variables stand out regarding the impact of faith formation in measuring "Phase 3" emerging adults: 1) the positive impact of any faith formation versus none; and, 2) faith formation by committed parents in the teenage years.

The study concludes that "the greater the availability of religiously grounded relationships, activities, programs, and opportunities for teenagers, the more likely teens are to be religiously engaged and invested. In other words, congregations that prioritize youth ministry and support for their parents, invest in trained and skilled youth ministry leaders, and make serious efforts to engage and teach adolescents, seem much more likely to draw young people into their religious lives and to foster religious and spiritual maturity in their youngest members." (Smith p. 262)

4. The State of Catholic Schools Today

I need not go into detail about this "Sign of the Times." You need only "google" the NCEA website for information on Catholic School Trend Data to get the statistical picture, and you know well from your first hand experiences, the challenges of sustaining Catholic schools today.

The USCCB in its 2005 Pastoral, **Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium**, moved quickly in articulating the goal of keeping

Catholic Schools **“available, accessible, and affordable”** but meeting that challenge remains a more formidable process.

A number of our own middle and secondary schools are threatened by the ongoing challenges of increasing costs, declining enrollments, increasing need for financial aid, and shrinking endowments.

The fragility of some of our educational Ministries, and associated Brothers’ Communities, primarily in service to young people from working class and economically struggling families, has already resulted in our closing or withdrawing from 5 schools (1 elementary, 1 San Miguel, and 3 high schools) in the last two years:

1. The La Salle Elementary School at St. Gabriel’s Parish, East Elmhurst (closed)
2. San Miguel School, Camden (closed)
3. Cardinal Gibbons High School, Baltimore (closed by Archdiocese)
4. Bishop Walsh School, Cumberland (withdrawn)
5. Saint Frances Academy, Baltimore (withdrawn)

As we look to **“renew our existing works and to create new ones for the educational needs of the poor”**, the call of the 44th General Chapter (Doc 4, 2.3.1), it is imperative that we do so based on sound financial models that are sustainable. In the words of a Director of District Finances who will remain nameless, “no money; no mission.” If as the Bishops say, “Catholic schools are the responsibility of the entire Catholic community,” then we need to innovate new and creative ways of engaging this “entire” community for the long haul.

Three co-relevant areas of need for Catholic School viability, articulated by Notre Dame University’s Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE), are the need:

1. to recruit and form effective Catholic School leaders,
2. to recruit and form a new generation of effective Catholic School teachers; and,
3. to form partnerships with Catholic colleges and universities (University Consortium for Catholic Education) (ND Task Force on Catholic Education, 2006, Report pp. 5-9)

5. The Diminishing Number of Brothers and “First Lasallians” and the Gift of Charism

On Wednesday, September 9, 2009, day One of DENA, there were 382 FSC’s. Today there are 355 of us (average age 70). In these 26 months we are 27 fewer. In 4 years we will be 60 fewer. It is a time of rapid diminishment for us.

While there are still 184 Brothers in full-time and 25 Brothers in part-time ministry, our largest cohorts of working Brothers, men between 60 and 75, are steadily moving away from full and part-time ministry. We are a diminishing presence in ministry.

Simultaneously, many of the great Lasallians, men and women, who have been pioneers and Partners in the Lasallian conversation and mission, are also aging and beginning to move away from ministry.

Brother Miguel Campos in his conversations with us has exhorted us to have a greater sense of urgency and generativity in embracing Shared Mission and in inviting our colleagues to discover within the Lasallian mission, a deeper sense of their own vocational call.

If we hope to see the Lasallian mission prosper and thrive, it is essential that we do all that we are able, individually and communally, to share the gift that we have received. This, in itself, should be viewed by each of us as an integral aspect of our ministry.

The good news is that there are many who have participated in Lasallian formation and today, not only contribute to the furtherance of the mission, but also feel drawn to and identify with something deeper than simply mission collaboration.

In recent years, the conversation has begun to move from shared mission to “shared charism,” as well. The 43rd General Chapter (2000) speaks of this in reference to those “Partners who . . . collaborate in the Lasallian Mission, and who feel a call to deepen the charism, spirituality, and Lasallian communion in which they participate.” The 44th General Chapter (2007) notes that the Brothers live their religious consecration along with other people who share the same Lasallian charism, becoming “for them and with them, the heart, memory, and guarantor of the Lasallian charism.”

Circular 461 on Association (2010) highlights the Church’s recognition of “people who are not members of a religious institute taking part in the charismatic ideals of a religious institute . . . committing themselves to a specific way of living God’s call through an institute’s charism . . . especially in mission, community life, and spirituality” (461, 3.5-3.7).

For me, a most critical insight is one made by Brother Antonio Botana, a noted theologian, sociologist, and Lasallian scholar, in his recent article, **from “Sharing the Mission” to “Living the Charism in a Family”**, published in the inaugural issue of the *Digital Review of Lasallian Research*. Working from the Church premise that “the charism which we share for the service of the mission is the gift of the Holy Spirit,” he states that “authentic shared mission must include sharing the gift of the charism . . . which can only be granted by the Spirit, (the divine Person) . . . and is lived in communion.”

He goes further to state that “If Lasallian educational works have been able to maintain a spirit for a long time, it is because they were integrated into a network of relationships where this spirit was shared.” I don’t think this is a revelation to those of you who have already lived the charism as part of your vocational spirituality, but Botana does a masterful job of putting into words what is and what is becoming our personal and communal experience.

Brother Antonio states the challenge of our current reality well in simple concrete terms in two clear sentences: **“Shared mission that does not create a ‘charismatic family’ is a frustrated mission. That ‘second generation’ of teachers that enters a school and does not find the family to ensure the spirit, or the charismatic blood of the school, is a generation that will assist in closing the school, at least in terms of a school that bears a charism.”**

Actively building the Lasallian Community, the charismatic family, in each of our ministries, for the mission is important, certainly, but it is as important for the Community “to possess, to preserve, and to increase” the charism which is both the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit itself. It is time to move the message, well established around mission, to mission *and* charism, in which all have a part, but which only a community can possess and convey.

So, What are We Called to Do in Light of the Gospel and the Lasallian Mission?

Neither the Gospel nor Hebrew Scripture, neither the purpose of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, nor anything in our Lasallian Heritage, neither the documents of our recent International Mission Assembly nor of our General Chapter give us a pass on service to the poor because times are tough or because it is difficult to work with young people who are from economically challenging circumstances.

Document Four on the Educational Service of the Poor from the 44th Chapter states our situation as follows:

We, Brothers and Lasallians, are challenged to be truly convinced that the educational service of the poor is a constitutive part of our Lasallian identity, vocation, and mission. The commitment to the transformation of our educational works as instruments of education for the poor, the defense of the rights of children and education for social justice still greatly concerns us.

We dream that the renewal of our existing educational works be done, not only with the criteria of success and social prestige, but with the ideal of fidelity to our vocation and our identity as Ambassadors of Jesus Christ announcing the Gospel to the poor. (Doc 4, 2.1)

Overarching Challenges

In consideration of the International Mission Assembly of 2006, the General Chapter of 2007, and the current “signs of our times”, the overarching challenges from my perspective are:

1. How will we ensure the sustainability of our current works while at the same time keeping them accessible to young people who are from challenged economic circumstances?
2. How will we respond to new needs of the poor, in particular, the growing Hispanic Catholic population that will have such an important role to play in the future of the US Church?
3. Given the fact that so many young people drift away from the Church if they have not been engaged in communities that are responsive to their faith needs, how can we, as a charismatic expression of the Church, be evangelically relevant for these young people in a growing culture of “whateverism”?
4. How can we be more effective in awakening and accompanying young people in their vocational discernment for service in the Church as Teachers, Youth Ministers, Lay Ministers in Parishes, Brothers, Sisters, Deacons, and Priests?
5. How can we, more intentionally and explicitly “possess, preserve, and increase” the vitality of the charismatic Community of Lasallians in our ministries in order to ensure the mission?
6. How can we increase effective formation for Lasallian Mission Leadership to ensure the apostolic and charismatic leadership of our ministries?

Hope Grounded in Faith

We have, across the District, many examples of innovation in reaching out to young people in need. The hope that we journey with has the power to make us go beyond our challenges and fears, to do creative, and perhaps, as yet, unimaginable things. It is a hope that will drive us forward in new ways for the future.

At this past LASSCA Workshop in March, I was struck by the words of one of the keynote presenters, Ray McNulty, President of the International Center for Leadership in Education, who stated so well: “The future is not someplace we are going, but a place we are creating. The paths to the future are not found but made.” This is the future that our journey of hope, together and by association for mission, aspires to and lives.

Sister Doris Gottemoeller, RSM, a former President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in a recent article (*Hope in an Anxious Age*) notes that despite the diminishment of Religious in recent years “God’s grace is no less available to us now than it was to our predecessors. Like them, we have to listen to the voices of the poor and act with compassion. Like them, we have to marshal our resources and act with courage. Like them, we have to renew our purpose and act with confidence.”

Key to the future, according to Sister Doris, is “a deeply held faith in God and in God’s plan for us . . . that is broader and deeper than any of us imagine; and, an unwavering sense of hope grounded in faith and deepened in prayer.”

This is our moment in time, “difficult and perplexing” yes, but a moment no less full of potential and grace than any other moment in our history. Strengthened by the grace of this moment, it is our duty and our privilege, in the words of the Rule of 1718 on **The Spirit of the Institute** “to possess . . . to preserve . . . and to increase” this Spirit, our shared charism, across and among all of our apostolic communities.

We have been entrusted with a great legacy from all of the Brothers and Partners who have preceded us. Let us pass this gift on to our young Brothers and Partners with great faith, zeal, and trust in God’s Providence and in God’s creative imagination to prepare and prosper the next chapter in our story.

Let us have no doubt that the words of St. John Baptist de La Salle are still true: “The need for this Institute is very great.” To paraphrase the Rule of the Brothers, “The young, the poor, the world, and the Church still need the ministry of the Lasallian Community.”

Live Jesus in our hearts!