



WORDS OF WELCOME FOR THE INTERNATIONAL ASSEMBLY 2006

By Bro. Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, Superior General

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Dear Lasallians:

I welcome you all to the Mother House, our common house, our family house which today, with your presence, is living a new stage in its centuries-old history by opening its doors to Lasallians from all over the world who live the same charism in a complementary manner, starting out from their own specific vocations, and who represent so many diverse races and cultures. It is a moment of intense joy and profound hope. It is a really historic occasion, in which you, and all those you represent, should feel true protagonists; although the main protagonist is the Holy Spirit who, from commitment to commitment, has been leading us – almost without our noticing it – to reinvent our mission and to secure its future, in responding to the needs of the young and especially the poor, by means of the human and Christian education ministry which the Lord has confided to us.

The diversity represented by this Assembly is a clear sign that what matters is not *to arrive quickly and alone but all together and at (the appointed) time*, in the words of the Spanish poet León Felipe. This time of God is always a *kairos*, a time of grace and salvation. It is not about an adventure undertaken alone. Ours bears fruit in fraternal communion and in our efforts in common. In our case this is *'together and by association'*.

What encourages us is, that with a view to the future, we are building a new reality, in which all of us who make the Lasallian charism our own are expanding our association for the educational service of the poor and the evangelization of the young. We are seeing a true rebirth or re-foundation, a providential time in the history of the Lasallian charism.

In the 'Memoir on the Habit' written in 1689, in which the Founder describes the newly-formed community of Brothers, there already appears the first

experience of association with lay persons. Therefore, going back in Lasallian history we can see in the initiative of the 'seminary' for village teachers, a hint of the shared mission which we are living today. It concerned a training school for village teachers, or in other words, it was dealing with a concrete educational structure, with an internal organization and an educational plan. We know that, for various reasons - it was for its time innovative – it failed. In the 'Memoir on the Habit' this is how the Founder described this experience: *"Provision is also made for training schoolmasters for rural districts in a house, separate from the Community, that we call a normal school (training college). Those who are trained there remain only for a few years, until they are well prepared in religious spirit as well as for their work..... They are taught to become proficient in singing, reading and writing; Their room, board and laundry are all free. In due course, they are placed in a hamlet or a village as a parish assistant... (M.H. 4,6)*

As we can see, inspired by God, John Baptist de La Salle was not afraid to open up different paths which could be ways of salvation for the young. This has been the basic motivation which has animated our mission, with its ups and downs, in the course of these last three centuries of human history. I am convinced that association and its structures ought to be in the service of this salvation mission which gives meaning to our lives and is our way of giving glory to that God *who wishes that they have life and have it abundantly* (John 10,10).

As Lasallians, the first and most important thing is to be attentive and let ourselves be affected by this reality just as our Founder was with the reality which touched him. This ought to be the sap which nourishes the tree born of that little mustard seed. Therefore we are called upon not to lock ourselves up in our little world, but to feel ourselves part of a body which opens our hearts to the dimensions of the world. The Rule of the Brothers, without any beating about the bush, presents us with this objective which transcends all types of borders, whether they be of time or space: *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. The Institute establishes, renews and diversifies its works according to what the Kingdom of God requires (R.11)*. We should not content ourselves simply with preserving what we have. The most important thing is to respond to the needs of the young of today.

Certainly the international dimension which characterizes us is a call to live some of our basic attitudes with a view to 'otherness'; this means knowing how to accept, respect and value differences. This also presupposes a change of attitude which ought to make us move from imposing to listening, from laying down the law to sharing, from thinking that we know it all, to the humble and demanding task of a permanent apprenticeship which will always be incomplete.

This further presupposes taking on board, not only in theory but also in practice, the fact that in all cultures and across all manifestations of religion, God shows

Himself. *'In all cultures and religions we find **the seed of the Word of God and the power of the Spirit of God.** This implies a respectful rapprochement to the diverse cultures and religions'* (Circ.435, p.39). This is not easy, because we are used to thinking that we possess the truth and that our work is simply to transmit that which we already have, without any new searching or openness to the truth of the other.

At the same time and not denying what has been said already, we do not renounce what is specifically Christian, capable of purifying and enriching every culture. The person and the message of Jesus about being a child of God, about fraternity, unconditional love, forgiveness without limits: these are the greatest riches we can give to an individual in his/her relationship with God, with others and with the world. Today, like Peter, we can say to the man and woman of no matter which culture, crushed under so many senseless things, *'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.'* (Acts 3,6).

It is in this same sense that we should interpret the insistence which gratuity holds in Lasallian spirituality and pedagogy. Gratuity does not simply have a financial connotation. It also refers to a spiritual attitude, because our ministry constitutes a free gift from the goodness of God, which in its turn ought to be translated into a gratuitous and disinterested handing on, which makes visible to children and young people the unconditional love of a God who is always near, which we remember when we frequently recall His presence.

In any case, we should not forget either that the Founder was always concerned that the *school goes well*, as he put it in some of his letters (Letters 75,8; 58,20). Gratuity does not mean rejecting efficiency. On the contrary, the Founder manifested a determination for historical efficiency which led him to revolutionary and audacious changes such as the simultaneous method in primary schools, the use of the mother tongue instead of Latin, a practical education which prepared for life, and finally his wish to respond to the needs of his time with a healthy pedagogical realism.

The world of the poor teaches us what Christian love must be, that it certainly looks for peace, but unmasks false pacifism, resignation and inactivity; that it certainly must be gratuitous but it must look for historical efficiency. These words of Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, on receiving a doctorate *honoris causa* from the University of Louvain on February 2nd 1980, 50 days before he was assassinated, seem to me to respond very well to what Lasallian schools have always wanted to be. Founded for the poor and open to all young people, Lasallian schools, wishing to respond to the needs of the young, have found in poor and evangelical environments a stimulus and a challenge for their creativity and imagination.

The primitive Church can throw light on what we are trying to do today with shared mission and with association. In the light of the Bible, the primitive Christian community considered itself, above all, as People of God, with a predominantly charismatic structure. The gifts received were to be put at the service of others and of the evangelizing mission and made fraternal communion central to what was being lived by the diverse charisms united by the Holy Spirit.

The hierarchic distinctions appeared later; at the beginning it was a matter of charismatic diversity which found in Jesus its foundation. St. Paul says to each was given a gift which was to be put at the service of others. *'The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ' (Ephesians 4, 11-14).*

If to day the Lasallian educational and evangelizing mission calls upon Brothers and lay persons and all those who wish to share our charism, it is in regard to service. It is a question of a communion of services so that the young, starting with the poor and marginalized, may arrive at their human and Christian fullness, whether in the form of dialogue where the young of other religions are concerned or of explicit announcement in the case of believers. Anyone who clings to his ministry simply as a job, may be tempted to hoard up his service for himself or herself, without preparing new 'servants'. But in this case his service is no longer a service: it is simply a privilege for oneself.

Conclusion

Father Yves Congar, in his famous book: 'Signposts for a lay theology', written at the beginning of the 50s, began his Introduction with an anecdote told by Cardinal Gasquet in 1914: " *A catechumen asked a Catholic priest what was the position of the laity in his Church. The priest replied: 'The position of the laity in our Church is double. They get down on their knees in front of the altar, which is the first position .They sit in front of the pulpit, which is the second position.'*" Cardinal Gasquet added: *he forgot a third – they put their hands in their purses.*" (quoted by Camilo Maccise 'A new face for the consecrated life' Frontera Hegian, 45). Dear Lasallians, I hope none of you see yourselves pictured in that description. At the beginning of this international Assembly may we all feel ourselves as brothers and sisters united in the same spirit, embarked on the same boat and in a communion of service for the benefit of the young, especially those who have most need of us.

In an unpublished work of Camus, '*The First Man*', published by his daughter in 1994, there is a telling phrase: *There are human beings who justify the existence of the world, who by their very presence help us to live.* The challenge today is for us and the question we might ask is: "How do we act so that all of us who feel ourselves associated for the educational and evangelizing Lasallian mission

can be a presence which justifies for the young this very complicated world in which they live?" The answer, it seems to me, can be no other than a call to conversion and to uniting our strength in a communion of service.

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