



BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS
- Superior General -

ENTER TO LEARN, LEAVE TO SERVE
– Solidarity Through Education –

First of all, I want to offer you my fraternal greetings and to welcome you most cordially to the Fourth Congress of the World Union of Lasallian Former Students. And through you, I would like to greet the millions of former students who are not present here today in Panama but who feel that they are represented by you and united to you in this important event. I am especially grateful to your President, José Ramón Batiste Peñaranda, to the Executive Board and to the Panamanian committee who, with such dedication, have prepared this meeting during which we will try to take another step in the line of service and solidarity in the educational field. Special greetings as well to the Panamanian authorities who are with us as we begin our meeting.

As you will recall, the slogan chosen for the last Congress in Mexico was also an invitation to service: *Lasallian Former Students Called to Serve*. Four years later, it would not be a bad idea to assess the response which former students gave to the call at that time and which I remind you of now. The call **to serve children by defending their rights; to serve young people by helping them to find meaning in their lives; to serve the poor and excluded by promoting their active participation in the benefits of globalization; to serve the world by creating bonds of fraternity; to serve peace and to be builders of peace in a divided world; to serve the unity of the human family through ecumenism and interreligious dialogue**. It seems to me that these calls continue to be a challenge for all members of the Lasallian Family and in a special way for our former students. I believe that this is also what the slogan is all about for the present Congress: *Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve*.

The first time that I heard this slogan, which I believe was popularized by the District of San Francisco in the schools there, was in Sydney, Australia at the Seventh Meeting for Young Lasallians in the Asia-Pacific region in the year 2000. I can report that the young people there were strongly motivated and, at the end of the meeting, the question most often heard was: What can we do for others when we return to our various countries? At this meeting there were young people from different faiths and cultures but they were all united in the same Lasallian ideal of service. Some years later, during my pastoral visit to India in 2003, I saw this slogan engraved on the door of one of our schools that takes care of poor children as do all our schools in this immense country.

Certainly, when you enter a Lasallian school you do enter it in order to learn. That seems obvious. However, the question that comes up is: to learn WHAT? The slogan for your Congress gives us the answer: *in order to serve*. As Father Pedro Arrupe, former Superior General of the Jesuits, expressed it so well many years ago, the goal of Catholic educational institutions can be none other. *Today, our principal educational objective – he said – is to form men and women for others...people who cannot conceive of loving God without loving the least of the brethren; men and woman who are totally convinced that love of God that does not manifest itself in justice for others is a farce. This type of education goes directly against the educational trend that is prevalent practically throughout the world* (Pedro Arrupe, SJ).

Today, in many countries, education in general is undergoing a profound crisis and everywhere to some degree there are unsettling phenomena of juvenile violence within many

schools. Educational concern that boils down only to instruction in computer skills and English, important as they may be, they are not enough. As Lasallian schools, we cannot fall into the trap of managing education exclusively with criteria of the market place. Our criteria should be based above all in the Gospel and in its values such as love, commitment, forgiveness, fraternity, and service.

We can summarize the service of a Lasallian school in some lines of its educational process, which I hope you will recognize in the Lasallian schools, high schools, and universities where you pursued your studies. Today there is much talk in many places about the character proper to a Lasallian school, that which distinguishes it from others, that for which you certainly feel satisfied in being former students of one of our schools.

- The Lasallian educational process is centered around the person of each student in such a way that one is treated as an individual, unique and unrepeatable and attention is paid to the person of each young person in a holistic manner.
- The Lasallian educational process comes from a unique reality so that it can respond to the characteristics, needs, aspirations and cultural values of each population which it serves. But this is not about only taking on one reality, it is also about contributing the instruments needed to transform it and open it up to inter-cultural dialogue.
- The Lasallian educational process deeply values the quality of relationships and it promotes working together in different communities: educational communities, faith communities...Fraternity is one of its distinctive traits. Each Lasallian should feel that he or she is a brother or sister, with a heart that is open and without borders.
- The Lasallian educational process should be one that is participatory and democratic. Since the beginning, the Founder in the Conduct of Schools promoted a type of education that favored horizontal communication more and shied away from coercion and paternalism.
- The Lasallian educational process grows in creativity, giving less emphasis to repetition and keeping in mind that fact that what is most important is the that students learn to give original, personal responses.
- The Lasallian education process is characterized by being academically challenging as expressed by one of our most important congregational documents. *It is important that Brothers' schools at every level be characterized by quality education, a truly professional spirit and genuine service to students and to society(Declaration 45.2).*
- The Lasallian educational process educates for life and for work that is socially productive. From the beginning, pragmatism was one of its traits since it attempts to respond to the concrete needs of the young. Today it is fundamental to help in the integration of intellectual and manual work, theory and practice, education and life, in order to give each person the tools that will allow them to be agents for personal, community, and social development.
- The Lasallian educational process educates in ecological commitment and defense of the environment, aware that the earth is the unique place where mankind can be fulfilled, where one can love others, and where one meets God; aware also of the common responsibility for leaving behind a habitable world for those who will come later.
- The Lasallian educational process makes a clear option for the educational service of the poor, trying to make our schools accessible to them and that in our schools they feel at home. I think here that scholarships offered by several of our unions of former students make this possible for a significant number of needy youth.
- The Lasallian educational process fosters growth in faith though explicit catechesis, Christian life groups, and in the case of students of other religions, through interreligious and ecumenical dialogue. In both cases, Lasallian education tries to see to it that students live an operational faith in the practice of love, that will prepare

them to be creators of relationships that are more just among peoples, who commit themselves to action in favor of justice and peace, who are interested by the globalization of solidarity.

The principles that I just listed are not theoretical ones. In many places, we have concrete examples of how they are lived out. I would like to highlight for you some invitations and some examples.

! In October 2006 we had in Rome the first International Assembly on the Education Mission and Association. Brothers and lay persons participated. One of the commitments that came from this Assembly was as follows: *This Assembly wishes to remind all Lasallians that the vitality of our Mission depends on how we respond today, associated together, to the needs of the poor. We value the efforts that we Lasallians make to liberate the poor from the different forms of poverty and we ask that the service of the poor and the promotion of justice be considered as the heart and the cause of the strengthening of the Lasallian Mission throughout the world.* I am sure that our Former Students will not be insensitive to this call.

! On September 8, 2000, 189 nations adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration, which was signed by 147 heads of state and government, stating that *their collective responsibility of respecting and defending the principles of human dignity, equality and equity on the world level, and their due respect for all inhabitants of the planet, especially the most vulnerable and for the world's children in particular, to whom the future belongs.* (www.un.org/millenniumgoals) For this purpose, 8 objectives to be achieved by the year 2015 were established. Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and former High Commissioner for Human Rights for the United Nations, invited us at our 44th General Chapter, held just a few months ago, to collaborate in achieving these eight objectives. I would like to recall them here:

1. To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
2. To achieve universal primary education.
3. To promote gender equality and empower women.
4. To reduce child mortality.
5. To improve maternal health.
6. To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.
7. To ensure environmental sustainability.
8. To develop a global partnership for development.

! Panama offers us a very valid concrete response to the principles and invitations which I just highlighted. After the 43rd General Chapter in 2000 and in the context of association for the Lasallian educational mission, Brothers and Former Students have devoted themselves to searching for the adequate tool to serve poor children and young people in Panama. As a result of this effort, the NGO "PROA-PANAMA" (Promoting Agents in Panama) was created which, in turn, led to an agreement with the Ministry of Education which saw the creation of the San Miguel School in Los Lagos, Colón, and then the San Miguel Tocumen School Center, in the capital. You will have the opportunity to visit these schools and to get first-hand information. I would just like to add that the Institute looks upon these initiatives very positively just as it does other similar ones for the service of the needy that are underway in other Districts. Today I ask myself and I ask you if this might not be a specific area where the synergy between Former Students and Brothers can be realized.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with a short poem from Guatemalan writer Miguel Ángel Asturias, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, who encourages us to give life and to serve others, which is the secret of a fulfilled life. If this is what you learned in the Lasallian schools you attended, then I believe that we can be very satisfied, because what has been learned has been translated, is being translated, and will be translated into service.

*To give is to love
To give prodigiously
Through each drop of water
To give back a torrent.
We were made that way,
Made to throw
Seeds into the flowerbed
And stars into the sea,
And oh! One never tires,
Lord, of what you provide.
And upon returning, he tells you:
My heart is like
An empty backpack.*

Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría
Superior General