



MISSION POSSIBLE: A SHARED DREAM

THE ROLE OF YOUNG LASALLIANS IN THE LASALLIAN EDUCATIONAL MISSION

INTRODUCTION

*Lord,
help me to surrender my life
as the morning does to the sun which awakens it,
as the beach does to the sea, when it caresses it,
as the cloud does to the wind that carries it!*
*Lord,
do not sleep in my times of anxiety,
nor rest my steps,
nor alleviate my thirst,
nor soothe my hunger!
Urge me on to life!*

Brother Noé Zevallos

Dear Young Lasallians,

I wanted to begin with a poem from one of the Brothers who deeply impacted my life when I was a young Brother. Brother Zoé Zevallos was a Peruvian by birth and a Latin-American by heart. He was a liberation theologian who impacted many generations of young students and who lived his commitment to the poor with great authenticity and who helped us to discover better the Lasallian charism and to incarnate it in Latin America. When he died unexpectedly, we found a notebook of poems among his possessions, among which was the one we just heard.

To surrender one's life is the secret of finding life and of full human fulfillment. Life is only worth the effort if it is surrendered. To surrender one's life is to make an impossible mission possible and to make our shared dreams a reality. To surrender one's life, to surrender your lives, is to see to it that all have life and it seems to me that this is the most wonderful and

important contribution that a young Lasallian can make to the Lasallian educational mission.

It is certainly not about a *light* commitment, and it is very possible that given the magnitude of the task and the obstacles that society presents to us today, we could very quickly throw in the towel. A young German boy, sixteen years old, said to Günter Grass during one of his famous *Love Parade* concerts (Berlin, 1995): *Since there is no way we can save the world, why not just have a party?* (G. Grass, *My Century*, Alfaguara, Madrid, 1999). This is understood to mean that given a world that is difficult to save, it would be easier to take up the view of some young people who act irresponsibly without even giving the future a chance.

But young Lasallians should not fall into that trap. It is up to you to sow the seeds of your dreams and make them bear fruit so that they become real.

The Contribution of Young Lasallians Today

The first thing that can be said is that the world of young Lasallians cannot be expressed by static images. The fact is that you are not a homogeneous nor a uniform reality but one that is diverse and pluralistic. You are diverse and pluralistic by your ages and by the cultures and geographic areas you represent. Given that condition, in this talk I am going to start from the *horizons* which seem to be those of young people today and that we can define as the confluence of some *experiences* and some *trends* that indicate *preferences, likes, attachments, sympathies, interests, loves, and the expectations* that animate them. With this as a background, which each of you can adapt to your own generational, geographic and cultural reality, we can look at some important contributions that you can make to the Lasallian educational mission.

- The Horizon of the Present

One of the characteristics of young people today is the centrality they give to the present moment. The *instantaneous* and the *now* seem to predominate over the *tomorrow* and the *later*. The great stories have been replaced by the daily stories. One of the reasons for this is, no doubt, the uncertainty which today surrounds the future, which is seen by many young people as a threat, and it raises concern and fear.

This outlook leads one to live practically. If, in contradiction with the slogan of your Symposium, not everything is possible, then *let us consider what we have and enjoy it to the full*, seems to be the practice of many young people. Night has become a symbol of the centrality of the present in that *time is suspended*: within it, one experiences a kind of outlet from the calendar and the clock and in which young people must enjoy everything *simultaneously*: they go from one place to another, hardly staying in one place for long, as if time was so short that they must experience everything all at once (Cf.

Joaquín García Roca, O. C.).

The weakening of the historic messianism of the great projects of the past open to young people more modest paths but more realistic ones and it leads to the discovery of the value of daily life. As the Jesuit José María Tojeira, rector of the Central American University in El Salvador tells us: *Even the crises of the utopias have brought the culture of closer commitment to human suffering, rather than to desperation, cynical disillusionment or even depression which many adults were dragged to by that phenomenon* (Diakonia, July – September 2005). In fact, for many young people what is valuable is to console a person's sorrow today, to kiss a defenseless child today, to bring an Aids sufferer to the hospital today...It seems that the everyday has more relevance than discovering the roots of the sickness or the search for structural solutions.

In the Gospel sense the young today identify more easily with the birds of the air or the lilies of the field and they make their own the words of Jesus: *Sufficient for a day is its own evil* (Matthew 6: 34); in contrast, many adults identify more easily with the builders of the Tower of Babel who said to one another as they were looking at the future and were animated by a desire for power: *Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth* (Genesis 11: 4). The challenge will always be to turn the law of power into a will to serve and to turn the law of egoism into the ability to love.

On the Lasallian level I can think of two ways in which you can take advantage in this *horizon* of the experiences and the trends of youth today. First of all, as is already being done in some Regions and Districts, promote a one or two year volunteer experience that will allow for, in a relatively short period of time, the embracing of a service experience capable of opening your hearts to the needs of others and which many times will translate into a future, more prolonged commitment, open to digging roots (the past) and seeking solutions (the future).

Secondly, promote even shorter experiences, ones that will allow for touching poverty and human pain with one's hands, for example in mission areas where there are farmers or indigenous people, in summer camps, missionary experiences in the third world, in literacy programs for adults, in helping immigrants learn our language...To speak about justice should lead us to concrete experiences and not keep us in the universe of words and good intentions. As young Lasallians, you are called to incarnate your dreams and to live in close proximity to people's problems. I am always moved by this text from the Founder, which lets us see the responsibility that God has placed in our hands: *You should look upon the children whom you are charged to teach as poor, abandoned orphans...This is the reason God places them as if under your guardianship. He looks on them with*

compassion and takes care of them as being their protector, their support and their father, and it is to you that he entrusts this care. This God of goodness places them in your hands... (Meditation 37.3). Also in your hands, young Lasallians.

- The Horizon of the Body

Another characteristic of today's young people is the centrality of the body and the importance that it has in our society.

This passion for the body translates into care for its form and physical lines, into the centrality of exercise and the growing importance of diets. Sports are practiced not so much for the moral end of obtaining certain values, but especially as a way of getting a good physique. But it is especially *music*, such as it is embraced by young people as a total sensation, in which the centrality of the body is expressed. Young people sing and listen to music as a *corporal adventure* that affects the spirit as well as the senses; as an exercise in communication and identification that is associated with a series of corporal rituals, fashion, and appearance. When in the film, Billy Elliot is asked what he feels when dancing, he immediately responded: *Electricity!* Possibly, this might be the best way to express this phenomenon.

The centrality of the body can bring the positive aspect of a greater sensitivity for the value of the person and his rights. Conscientious objection, participation in pacifist groups or marches, opposition to the death penalty, everything that has to do with the dignity of the body, to any form of slavery or exploitation are characteristic of many young people today.

This centrality also allows one to get back a more integral experience of health and to seek a better quality of life; above all it creates a new culture of love. Taking the body as a starting point, one discovers the person in his totality. As the Mexican thinker, Octavio Paz, expressed it: *Without eros – without a visible form that enters through the senses – there is no love, love that goes beyond the desired body and seeks the soul in the body, and the body in the soul, the whole person.*

Along with these positive aspects, we cannot deny the presence of other phenomena that negatively affect young people today as regards their bodies. The first is commercialization of the body that follows the laws of the market in that it is bought, sold, and consumed. Unfortunately, disregard for the body has increased in the networks of merchandising and publicity which bring a generalized permissiveness and degradation, under the forms of prostitution, pornography, or sexual freedom, which really is nothing more than a new type of slavery.

Looking at this horizon of the body, what can we do at the Lasallian level? The first image that comes to my head and to my imagination is that of boys and girls with their faces and bodies marked by poverty, abuse, pain, lack of affection, war, or child labor. We are told that they constitute the most fragile link of our society and they demand our attention and our solidarity.

The love of a God who wants all to be saved, but who has a special predilection for the littlest, as the Gospel shows us and as Saint John Baptist de La Salle understood it, should make us creative and effective.

The young apostle John discovered the person of Jesus based on his body: *What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life...* (1 John 1: 1). As young Lasallians, let us help ourselves to discover God beneath the sacrament of the human body. *Young volunteers are those who are the first – and without excluding volunteers of other ages – to be best in tune with the characteristics of kids who are doing poorly. In this case it is important to link the connection of language, taste and esthetics to a certain extent, with the certainty that the real and unique encounter with those who suffer affects me, touches me, and does not leave me indifferent* (Luis A. Aranguren: "The new forms of poverty, young people and education," *Misión Joven* number 273, 1999).

- The Horizon of Fragmentation

The term "**zapping**" is a powerful symbol of the horizon of fragmentation and it can help us to better understand this youth phenomenon. As Joaquín García Roca says: *Zapping is something more than the simple act of watching different television programs simultaneously. It is symbolic of a fragmented reality that is made up of different strokes and that is continually chosen among many options.* We can say something similar today about surfing the Internet, which allows one to embrace a continuous montage of perspectives, a festival of images, a collage of experiences.

The triumph of the image over reality and surfaces over profundity certainly bring some positive elements, at the same time as some latent problems. Among the first (the positive elements) we can cite *intercultural* ones: Today borders are crossed and barriers are destroyed for young people, although we adults may raise others such as in Israel or on the border of Mexico. This reality favors dialogue, it helps to eliminate prejudice and it offers a polyphonic richness rather than a monophonic one. The person opens himself up to differences and he is more tolerant and young people today embrace a true culture of mixed races in almost all areas.

Another important value for young people is the personal recognition of one another, being considered as a full person with the right to speak and to

respond and the ability to decide autonomously; being listened to and appreciated. Today, young people speak of the right to be different. At the same time, in the supermarket of life, one chooses what one likes or agrees with, come what may... *There is what there is*, and the important thing is to enjoy the moment without being concerned about looking for meaning or the causes of the effects. Young people have helped us to be aware of the complexity of things, of the multiplicity of causes and of the many interactions that exist in human phenomena. *To be convinced that on a dung heap a garden can sprout or that a son of a prostitute can be a saint, or that an unsuccessful student can give lessons about humanity to the rest of the class, is a definitive lesson of the current culture of complexity* (Joaquín García Roca).

Perhaps the greatest danger of this horizon might be its *moral relativity* that can foster tolerance certainly, but that can easily also lead to indifference or apathy, leaving aside virtues such as determination, perseverance, self-denial...What is certain is that this lack of strong principles, certainties or virtues can be a breeding ground for all types of fundamentalism, because as the old saying goes: nature dreads emptiness.

How can we read this horizon of fragmentation in Lasallian terms? I think that first of all as an international Institute you can help us with your tolerant and open spirit to appreciate and respect diversity; to let each one express himself and be recognized; to not impose one culture over other ones; to build bridges that allow us to accept personal, cultural, religious, social, political differences..In a word, to create a world that is more human, more fraternal, more in solidarity.

Embracing experiences in contexts other than your own could be an excellent beginning. This is what Luis Ignacio Salgado, a young Mexican volunteer tells us, just after he just finished his volunteer year in Haiti: *I want to take advantage of this occasion to be thankful for the trust and the support that was offered me during this year when I was helping to support the Brothers' works in Haiti. The time went by quickly and it seems incredible that I am already preparing for my return. Borges said that the return is more difficult than expatriation. I certainly hope that that is not the case. It was a year of pleasant experiences, but also one of trials. A year for which I am enormously grateful to God and to the Brothers in the District. If Saint Francis of Assisi used to leave the monastery to evangelize the people by his example, I on the contrary left my home to be evangelized. The people of Haiti taught me by their poverty or lack of things and especially by their happiness and simplicity, what it means to be a child of God...*(La Salle, South Mexico, June 2006).

- The Horizon of the Religious

There are many today who speak of a search for the transcendent among young people in spite of the environment of secularization that exists in a great part of the world. It is about a dawn that gives more importance to feelings, to the search for meaning, to satisfying primary needs than to the institutional. On the one side, religious practice has diminished among young people as has been expressed in surveys done in many countries, but on the other side, the question of religion is taking different paths. There are three paths that seem to be opening up. That of cosmic elements linked to ecology, that of the personal, mystical experience of an encounter with God, and that of belonging to a small community or reference group.

But it is especially the search for meaning and responses to fundamental questions about human beings that feed the religious restlessness of young people. There is a kind of dissatisfaction about what the consumer society offers and the need for something else. *Religious experience has displaced institutional components, and in their place there is a strong presence of strictly personal elements: the sense of guilt, the experience of a transcendent presence, the preeminence of a superior being, the mystery of death as a threshold of life, the experience of mystical communication* (Joaquín García Roca).

Thank you, young Lasallians, for offering us adults in the Lasallian Family the opportunity to discover the importance of experience. An experience that promotes human fulfillment in the horizon of the present and the exercise of freedom. Thanks for inviting us to look at the abyss which we live many times in our theories and in practice. You invite us to have in our spiritual lives a narrative, concrete, and approachable language; you invite us to incarnated prayer, like that of Jesus, which is above all a personal, silent, and deep openness to God as Father and at the same time it is the discovery of his saving will and commitment to life for our brothers and sisters.

Here is how José Gomez, a young 21-year old Spaniard said it: *I pray when I love*; or as the young German girl, Monika Gaar said it: *You are like a winter woolen glove. You are a beautiful book: on each page there is a surprise. You are like an enormous handkerchief into which my tears flow. You are like a telephone friend who is never busy.* The experience of a God who is close and who takes shape in the weakest: *My most beautiful prayer is to see my brother, each morning, each afternoon, at all times. My brother about whom others whisper: "He has Down Syndrome."* (Cristina Del Sol, Italy) (Prayer, San Paolo- Fabrica).

We adults ought not to forget esthetics and the spirit of living together that you offer us and you yourselves should be open to ethics and to the transforming commitment of the world of adults. The important thing is to make a comprehensive synthesis. The experience of another young Mexican volunteer might serve as a stimulating example: *To be a Lasallian volunteer*

is an adventure that changes your life 100%. When you are concluding your volunteer period you can look at your shoes and you can see that they are very much worn-out because God has walked in you and his great power is living in you. You will carry with you many memories, from the smiles of the children with whom you played ball to the man you taught to use a garden instrument. If you learned well, that garden instrument will help you to sketch out your life, because you are not a volunteer for just one year, or for three months, or for a few weeks, but you are a volunteer forever, God's volunteer. When you have 20 days left to complete your experience you will be filled with very strong feelings of joy and sadness since your entire being does not want to leave the place where you really began to live (Manuel Alejandro Corona, volunteer in Ayahualuco, Mexico. La Salle, South Mexico, June 2006).

CONCLUSION

When Pope Benedict XVI held his first interview, a few days after his election, he was asked what specific message he wanted to bring to the young people he was going to meet in Cologne, and his immediate response was: *I want to show them how nice it is to be a Christian, since there is the widespread idea that Christians must observe an immense number of commandments, prohibitions, principles, etc., and that therefore, Christianity is, according to this idea, something that tires out and oppresses life, and that life is freer without all these burdens. I would like, on the other hand, to stress that to be supported by a great love and by revelation is not a burden, but they are like wings, and that it is beautiful to be a Christian. This experience gives us depth, but above all it gives us community when we know that, as Christians, we are never alone: first of all we find God, who is always with us; and then we, among ourselves, always form one great community, a community that is on a journey, that has a future project: all of this demands that we live a life that is worth living.*

This is fundamentally what I hope you young people will contribute to the Lasallian educational mission. That, by embracing the experience of a God who is always close, you might be a community on a journey with a future project starting from the horizons of the present, the body, fragmentation, the religious. That you might make possible the mission, sharing your dreams and that the Lord will not quench your thirst, nor satisfy your hunger but that he will urge you towards life, so that others, so that everyone might have life, and have it in abundance.

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