

Huether Conference
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Crisis, Sanctuary and the Rights of the Child Within Our Lasallian Tradition

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Introduction

I am very happy to be back here in Cincinnati and to be back once again at the Huether Conference. It's a very special time to be here with my community in Rome, Brother Alvaro and the other members of our community in Rome, the General Council. We have enjoyed being with you these days for this excellent gathering getting an idea of the scope of the Lasallian Mission in the United States and Toronto Region.

Almost all of us have travelled here from somewhere else and many of us have travelled by plane. So we may be able to identify with the man who came up to the ticketing counter at the airport with three bags and said, "I have three bags here. I want one to go to Cincinnati, one to go to London and the third to Sidney." The woman at the desk replied, "I'm sorry, sir, but we cannot do that." At that, the man answered, "Why not? You did it the last time?"

Now the reason we are able to laugh at this joke is that we have either experienced something like this, we have heard of experiences like this or it is something we fear when we go to put our bags in at the airport. Our Lasallian stories in the same way come from experience, hearing of experience and may have a bit of fear in them as we face the problems of today.

My words this morning will not be a summary or a response to what has been said here these days but a reflection on the themes of crisis, sanctuary and the rights of the child within our Lasallian tradition, and something about our responses internationally, locally and personally as Lasallians deeply concerned with the young entrusted to our care.

Crisis and Sanctuary

When has there not been a crisis? When has there not been a crisis with young people? There has never been an easy, problem-free period among generations in society, in school or in families. We can go back to ancient Romans who pondered what to do with the younger generation. We can look at the state and behavior of the children of the artisans and the poor in De La Salle's time, the time of the great Sun-King, Louis XIV, and find a crisis. We can look at the 1950's that some of us here might remember, the age of Ricky and Lucy Ricardo and Leave it to Beaver and think of a time of innocence but it was also the time of the Blackboard Jungle and the racial gang fights put to music in West Side Story. There was a youth crisis in those days. There is a youth crisis today.

There comes a time in a family, in schools and in society when young people seem to be truly the "other" that we adults cannot understand. It goes back to Romeo and Juliet and can be seen in the gang warfare in our big cities, the use of drugs, addiction to the internet and the problems of families, none of it new, but all of it challenging and more real than my allusions to literature and entertainment.

We face also crises that affect young people, drugs, sexual irresponsibility, violence, breakdown of the family, poor education, postmodern relativism, trafficking in human persons, child labor and on and on. We might become discouraged and frightened by all of this, especially you who are parents, for some of you responsible for young people. One of the crises we have in our society is that of fear. We fear losing our jobs; we fear because our retirement funds have disappeared, we fear crime, the H1N1 flu, and terrorists. The issues are real but if we become paralyzed by what we see and hear and live without any sense of faith thinking that we can gain control of our environment, we are fooling ourselves and the children entrusted to us.

The crises we face as a society and as a planet is what it implies, personal, local, national and global. The prevailing twenty-four hour a day news cycle has done a good job of letting us have an awareness of global, national and local crises. Conversely, it also disseminates a good deal of fear, fear that can freeze us to a point that we are the ones seeking sanctuary instead of providing sanctuary. Therefore, our first response to crisis of any proportion is not to let fear cause us to react instead of act. As Brother Alvaro quoted Albert Einstein saying "*Crisis is the best blessing that can happen to people and nations, because crisis brings progress.*" It is in providing sanctuary that the blessing and the progress can happen.

Brother Alvaro also said in his opening talk that the entity we call La Salle must be a sanctuary for all. To provide sanctuary is let people burst in on us and change our routine, our goals and our lives. It is what Adrian Nyel did to John Baptist de La Salle and it is what De La Salle did to his early Brothers and still does to us today through his legacy. While not using the word *sanctuary* to describe the role of a Brother, including today other Lasallians, St. La Salle said of abandonment of children in the first Rule of the Brothers: *All disorders among the working class and the poor, usually arise from their having been in childhood left to themselves and badly brought up. As the principal fruit from the institution of the Christian schools is to forestall these disorders and prevent their evil consequences.* (Common Rule, Ch.2 Art.6)

De La Salle actually makes some sociological statements saying *a great number of these children who otherwise would have been abandoned*(MTR 193.2) and you shall look upon the children you teach as poor abandoned orphans; in fact, though, many have a father on earth they are still as if they had none and are abandoned to themselves. (MTR 193.2) (Cited in Jacques Goussin, *The Mission of Human and Christian Education*, Lasallian Educational Services, Melbourne, 2003)

We see and we know from our earliest history that De La Salle saw the school as a refuge and a sanctuary for the children he taught. We can see it in the kids who come looking for us, who hang around our classrooms before and after school seeking a parent figure, who do not really want to go home because there is no real home in their house. How important is the role you play in giving this kind of sanctuary or sacred space as the word means to them. I do not exaggerate when I say sacred. Providing this kind of attention, guidance and presence is sacred. God is present when we act in this way. Thus, providing a sanctuary for the young from the crisis of personal disasters as well as global disasters is Lasallian. We provide help for tsunami victims, as we do in India or kids in trouble with the law as we do at Ocean Tides in Rhode Island; we provide an orphanage for refugee children in Sri Lanka or an adult presence to a lonely teenager in St. Louis, Missouri. Sanctuary is local and global and in the tradition of our Institute.

Three hundred years ago, in their own way and in their own understanding, De La Salle and the early Brothers were dealing with families and family systems as you social work professionals say. Now as then, sometimes families need sanctuary also. You know in the Gospels we do not get much comfort for families. Jesus takes a rather tough view of families. If you remember, when told his mother, sisters and brothers were seeking him outside, Jesus retorted “who are my mother, brothers and sister?” and went on to refer to the larger community. This happens several times in the Gospel. We, or at least I, sometimes get uncomfortable with these episodes in the Gospel that seem to disparage family. For those who use the expression “family values” might get nervous when trying to find those explicit notions in the Bible. But what we do find is that Jesus tells us that those who listen to my word and follow the commandments of my Father are my mother, brother and sister. He was also the first to refer to God as father. So in the Scriptures, there are family values but they call us out of just one family to embrace the global family of humanity and this way we do the “will of the Father”. We are indeed called to give sanctuary, sacred protective space. Had John Baptist de La Salle followed the will of his own family, there would never have been the Institute. Those strangers who became the first Brothers would never have gotten in the door. So, we are called to be family to those who have none or for those whose families are broken. We must provide sanctuary for families as well.

On the local level, we have Lasallian ministries in this Region that directly provide Sanctuary to young people in works as Ocean Tides and its allied agencies in Rhode Island, La Salle School, Albany, New York, St. Gabriel System in Pennsylvania and at Martin de Porres where I spent a wonderful day at the beginning of this journey meeting with students, staff, teachers and everybody in all the centers and saw first-hand what sanctuary means thank to the hospitality of Brother Ray Blixt and Betsy. In our history we have maintained other such agencies as places of refuge for young people with legal trouble or from troubled families. This work finds its tradition in John Baptist de La Salle’s work at St. Yon, near Rouen, France where he and his Brothers took in *problem and unmanageable boys* (Blain, Vol 2, bk. 3). Here they received education and discipline to form them in to responsible young men.

Later a special section opened to young men having troubles with the law. Blain tells us: *Confirmed criminals were assigned there, some by the decree of Parliament, others by court orders and some by the authority of their parents ...It is hard to believe then how many rebellious and unmanageable young men lost their belligerence and impiety; how many others began to walk in the path of salvation...A few even asked to become members of the Institute.*

These were the same sanctuaries, sacred places that provided “salvation” for young people that you provide today, a chance for them to regain their dignity, their hope and their place in the human family. Our methods change and through psychology, pedagogy, and other research, we find new ways to carry on this idea of sanctuary within the Lasallian Mission which is about a human and Christian education—two inseparable ideas. Whether it is in the classroom, the office or the childcare agency, the tutoring centers as we have at LEO Center, in Kansas City and Racine, Wisconsin, we do offer sanctuary, safe and sacred places to young people. On behalf of the Institute, I express our gratitude for all that you do in this Region.

The Rights of the Child

It was ten years ago, that our former Superior General, Brother John Johnston wrote his great and excellent circular to the Brothers, *On the Defense of Children, the Reign of God and the Lasallian Mission*. In that circular he named the violations of the rights of children, abortion, destitute poverty, homeless children, whether from homeless family or street children, sexual abuse, lack of medical care, illiteracy, child labor and child soldiers, youth violence, and youth suicides. In these ten years since the writing of that circular we still have abortion, more poverty, more homeless children, lack of medical care throughout the world, increase use of forced child labor in Asia and Africa, child soldiers in conflicts in the Congo, and outrageous numbers of gang deaths in our major cities like Los Angeles and Chicago. Nothing has changed, in fact things are worse.

How do we provide sanctuary on a global scale now that we know these things? What do we do? How do we respond? It is so very daunting. There are several temptations. One is to retreat into a false sanctuary by putting our heads in the sand and worry only about my own family, community, or agency. It makes sense since it is something we can control and imagine. Another is to say that we cannot really do anything about all of this; we are too small, too old, young, too involved, have no money and so forth. Essentially, do nothing but shake our heads and wring our hands. We can play the blame game; it is society's fault, it is the media, it is the Church, or the government. The university people can blame the high school people who blame the grammar school people; the social agencies can blame the counselors who blame the families who can't understand the kids. It is like the song Officer Krumpke from West Side Story.

Or as Brother John recommended we can open our eyes to the world around us. Universities can research, have seminars and find young volunteers to make an impact in agencies with the young. We can encourage high school level students through education to be aware of the causes of these issues and to become active in helping and finding solutions to these problems. We can encourage involvement in those agencies and activities that raise consciousness and fight against abuse of the young. We can continue to encourage grow our present childcare agencies and have District and regional programs to give them the Lasallian formation and support and to make them more a part in our Region. The most important is that the District and Region find systemic ways to heighten awareness of these issues and become agents for change in how we view the abandoned, the lost and the alienated and become providers of sanctuary for them.

We might encourage our own Lasallian Student Convention at the United Nations that will focus on the Convention on the Rights of Children which has been ratified by all nations except Somalia and the United States, but not only press for ratification by the United States Senate but also begin to focus on those countries in Africa that signed the treaty but have soldiers, Asian and Latin American countries that signed the treaty but have child labor and those European countries that exempt themselves from parts of the Declaration they approved.

Last week in Costa Rica, with Brothers Alvaro and Edgar, I was honored to sign the pact of support of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child put forward by the Visitors of Latin America. Can we not do the same in the USA and Toronto Region?

We can give more attention to BICE, the International Catholic Child Bureau of which one of our Brothers, Stephen Tuohy, Director of SECOLI, is Vice-President. We can advocate in this country for the chance of children of undocumented immigrants to attend state universities through the DREAM ACT (The Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act). These young people, children of undocumented people, are eligible to attend public schools are ineligible in most states to attend public universities. Some of our own Lasallian Universities deserve great credit as do our secondary and San Miguel Schools who do not bar undocumented students.

Most of all we can be a sanctuary for students that we meet each day, providing a safe place, from family difficulties, from bullying, and all the problems that beset kids today, but not only sanctuary but the tools, the hope and the encouragement, to move ahead as young adults.

In the General Chapter that I was privileged to attend in the year 2000, each delegate received from the District of France, a pen set in a box made by students who were learning practical skills as job training. On the box was the statement: *We are Lasallian so the young may have a future.* It was a memento that I kept for in one phrase is captures what we are all about.

We often say *Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God*; perhaps, we should say at times, *Let us remember that we ARE the presence of God.* Perhaps we are called to be the only presence of God that a young person experiences in his life at a given time. Now that's Lasallian.