

Our Lasallian Mission: Providing Sanctuary to All in Times of Crisis

Huether Lasallian Conference

November 19, 2009

The theme you have chosen for this Conference seems to me to be a highly current one. Today we are going through a deep economic crisis which seems to be giving signs of ending, but which no doubt will continue to impact the lives of millions of persons. Paradoxically, times of crisis are moments of grace and discovery of new paths and new responses. As Einstein put it very well: *We cannot pretend that things will change if we do everything the same way. Crisis is the best blessing that can happen to people and nations, because crisis brings progress. Creativity is born from distress, like day from the dark night. It is in crisis where resourcefulness, discoveries, and great strategies are born...Without crisis there would be no challenges, without challenges life would be a routine, slow agony. Without crisis there would be no merit. It is in crisis where the best of each person surfaces, because without crisis every wind would be a caress* (Einstein). Saint Augustine said that there is no bad or good time, we are all bad and good and we have the possibility to change.

But the theme is also a burning issue because it invites us to provide sanctuary to all. This reminds us of a reality that has been around for more than 3,500 years, what in western society has been called the *right of asylum*. The fugitive who sought refuge in certain cities at the altar of the Church was untouchable. As the United Nations puts it: *When all other protection fails, asylum is the final human right* (World Refugee Survey, 1993). A personal experience I had in Guatemala made me understand what very well what it means to provide sanctuary to all. In 1981, during the very violent years in Guatemala, a group of indigenous people from the town of Quiché peacefully took over the Spanish Embassy in order to assert their rights. The army attacked the Embassy and burned it, killing everyone. Family members who had accompanied this group to the capital took refuge at the National University and then they came to our house of formation in the suburb of San Cristóbal that evening to seek asylum. If the army had not respected the Embassy grounds, even less were they going to respect the National University, they thought. At that time I was the Director of the Scholasticate and I asked the Brother for advice about this situation. By chance, the Brother Visitor happened to be present with us. We acceded to their request with much fear on our part and for their part, they were very distressed. They spent the night in our house and the next day they returned to their villages very discretely.

We know, unfortunately, that there are many people today who need to find a sanctuary for their lives. I am going to advance to you a citation that I will use in my next Pastoral Letter to the Brothers, because it seems to me that it is very appropriate to touch on it in some depth given the theme of your Conference. The citation is from Ernesto Olivero, the founder of the Armory of Peace in Turin, a military structure that has been transformed into a welcome and assistance center for young people and for the abandoned: *For many today the Church is synonymous with severity, boredom, prohibition. It would be nice, on the contrary, if people were to see the Church as having open arms, as Jesus thought it to be. When Jesus says: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11: 28), he gives a specific face to his Church. If a person experiences unending anguish, where can he go? If unforeseen hatred bursts in on someone's life to the point of driving him crazy, who can lend a hand? If a person is divorced, what future does he or she have in the*

Church? If a kid is fighting against homosexuality, if his body is exploding with feelings, who can help him or liberate him? If a former prisoner who murdered someone, after having paid his debt, continues having sleepless nights due to his remorse, who can calm him down? If thousands of young people are attracted to self-destruction, who can look them in the eyes with tenderness and listen them? If men and women in the Church have a stick in their hands, judgment on their lips, hardness of heart, and are very severe, to whom will these people go? Possibly to a fortune-teller, or a guru, or to some sect, but not to the Church.

One of the Lasallian sanctuaries which we should give more importance to is that of the defense of the rights of children and adolescents. Tomorrow we will commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As we will remember, Brother John Johnston wanted to make this defense a banner for all Lasallians. Today we can consider this cause as one of our sanctuaries. Nevertheless as the Director of the food agency for the United Nations just declared, every six seconds a child dies from malnutrition and it is estimated that 85% of the children suffer some type of violence. In both Northern and Southern societies it is children who constitute the most fragile and vulnerable link.

Among others, the following seem to be the most concrete problems:

- An increasing problem in Third World countries is the phenomenon of child workers – using minors for industrial work, service and farming, exploiting them for work and depriving them of access to education. Instead of grabbing a toy to play with, they are grabbing hold of a work tool.
- The majority of street children come from unstructured, numerous families, normally under the direction of a mother and in general these children prefer to live on the street that in their home where they are victims of violence; they live in organized, hierarchical groups where glue sniffing is frequent for its calming effects and to diminish the need for sleep and nourishment.
- Victims of armed conflicts. According to data provided by the United Nations at the end of the nineties, there were 25 million children who were displaced or who were refugees (five million of them living in refugee camps because of war) and another 12 million have lost their homes. On the other hand, it is estimated that three years ago at least two-hundred thousand (200,000) minors under the age of 15 were enrolled in armies.
- Kidnaping and buying minors. In Mexico they talk about 20,000 (twenty thousand) children who are kidnaped annually and sold to Northern countries (Source: El Día). In the majority of countries in Latin America these events are reported. The three main causes are: illegal adoption, organ transplants and child prostitution.
- Malnutrition. According to the World Food Program more than 200,000,000 (two-hundred million) children under the age of 5 are not growing adequately due to the lack of nutrition. Child mortality rates in each country can give us an idea of why this is so.

Today the entity we call La Salle must be a sanctuary for all. The Founder made a clear option for poor children and, therefore, faithful to his spirit, we should be open and willing to

lend a hand against any type of poverty, wherever persons are suffering, where they experience poverty or abandonment, or where they their lives have lost meaning. No should stay on the outside, all can find a welcoming place – families in crisis, victims of alcohol and drugs, the mentally challenged, immigrants...

There is a meditation from the Founder that can strongly motivate us to live what I said above by broadening our horizons not only to children, but also to all those today who need a sanctuary. In speaking about these children the Founder has in mind, as we can see especially in the first two Meditations for the Time of Retreat, families of the artisans and the poor, working families, with uncertain employment, not much of a possibility for advancement, threatened by poverty, children without jobs or discipline to work, with no aspirations, without decorum, civility and, on the contrary, they are very rude and offensive.

You should look upon the children whom you are charged to teach as poor, abandoned orphans. In fact, though the majority of them do have a father here on earth, they are still as if they had none and are abandoned to themselves for the salvation of their souls. 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, and undertakes to give them everything you ask of him for them (Meditation 37.3).

So I say to you, dear participants in the Huether Lasallian Conference, as members of the Lasallian Family, the call that was made to us at our last General Chapter, is directed also to you: *To be Lasallians with open eyes and burning hearts.* With open eyes to see the needs of our neighbors, and with burning hearts to offer a sanctuary to all those who feel alone and aimless.

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