

***LASALLIAN ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL CHIEF  
ADMINISTRATORS***

*PRESENTATION*

**FROM MEANING TO MEANINGFULNESS:**

**To Find A Solution You Must See the Problem**

Brother Louis DeThomasis, FSC

Atlanta

February 23, 2014

## ***INTRODUCTION***

**I imagine none of us has to be reminded or cautioned that we in Catholic education today probably have a more difficult time being a Catholic school than ever before in our history. And, I am not only referring to the never ending difficulties of balancing our budgets, paying bills, keeping up with higher costs in technology, health care and salaries. I can remember in my thirty-two years as a school administrator on the high school and university levels that there were times-many times- when I wished that my only problems were of the financial kind. Very rarely-well in fact never-did a faculty or staff member come into my office and give me a great big hug saying, "Louis, thanks for all you are doing for us and all your wonderful decisions!" Perhaps you have a different experience in that regard.**

**Today Catholic school administrators are right smack in the middle of a minefield. A minefield of strongly competing forces and constituencies trying to tell us what a Catholic school is; how we should operate; what topics are appropriate to talk about or not talk about with our students; and, the institutional Church many times telling us who we may hire or who we must fire if it determines that the private and personal lives of our colleagues are in or not in conformity-in their opinion- with "appropriate" Catholic values and life-styles. We try to please our students' parents, our alumni and alumnae, our donors, the accrediting agencies and the hierarchy of the institutional Church.**

**And, as if this were not enough for us to encounter, we see the ever-increasing intrusions on our mission to be a Lasallian Catholic school by those ideologues that I call the "Catholic Taliban SWAT Teams!" I am sure we each have our own horror story of encounters with those types. Increasingly, from the institutional Church's perspective they judge that Catholic schools are not orthodox enough.**

## ***HOW JESUS TAUGHT***

**Saint LaSalle's charism that inspires our educational essence always embraced the pragmatic approach of Jesus teaching real people in their lived realities through parables, stories and actions animated by the zeal of Christian faith. Look again at Scripture. Jesus did not rely on doctrines or rubrics in the Beatitudes to teach the essence of His message. In fact, in all His teachings Jesus talked about loving actions that included everyone and excluded no one. He never said, "Obey me." He taught Christianity by always saying, "Come, follow me." That is Christian orthodoxy. That must be the essence of Lasallian pedagogy.**

**It was three hundred years later after Jesus' Resurrection as the infant Church became institutionalized that we were given the Nicene Creed. In that Creed there is not one word about what "to do" as Christians. It only states what dogmas to believe. If you don't obey these dogmas you are excluded. Christianity, is it "Obey me" or is it "Come follow me?"**

**If we try to walk a "tight-rope" in order to avoid that treacherous minefield in an attempt to balance and keep all competing forces happy, we will necessarily have to twist and consciously work around the truth and our own integrity as a Lasallian Catholic school. The alternative is for the chief administrators to enter an intensive psychological, residential treatment center for those who thought that they could influence fundamentalist, Catholic, religious ideologues. And, let us not forget that ideology is to reason as gluttony is to fine dining!**

**As Lasallian educators our core values and main dynamic that make us worthy to be called followers of St. John Baptist DeLaSalle is that we "Teach as Jesus Did" which means that we must serve our students first. We must serve them where they are on their life journeys in their societal culture. We must accommodate their needs without the coercion from our or the institutional church's**

**predispositions to rely on the command “Obey me.” To acknowledge this certainly will cause us considerable uneasiness and tension. Unfortunately, our principles are sometimes compromised when Catholic schools are bombarded with misguided intrusions, demands and controls from ideologues whether from within the institutional church or from others outside, no matter how well intentioned they profess to be.**

**If we Lasallian educators try to please everyone and be all things to all people, then we will not be a school nor will we be Catholic. We certainly will not be Lasallian. We all know that Saint LaSalle never consciously circled around the truth and never placed his students in second place to anyone or any institution including in his time the strong organized tutorial master teachers, governmental agencies, his very own Brothers or the institutional church’s hierarchy.**

#### ***TRADITION vs. TRADITIONALISM***

**Since the election of our new Pope Francis it is obvious that formal dogmas and doctrines have not been changed, but certainly the spirit of openness, inclusion, mercy, joy and concern for the poor is now permeating the walls of the institutional Church; yet, make no mistake, there are still those ideologues from within fighting this new attempt to openness and inclusion in the Church. Pope John XXIII and Vatican II opened those stained glass windows fifty years ago. Yet, let us be honest, during those fifty years since Vatican II we experienced resistance from “traditionalists” under the rubric of the “hermeneutic of continuity.” The attempt was to bring back some nostalgic Church of the past in which the faithful were docile, contained, controlled and comforted with formulaic prayers and rigid prescribed answers that supposedly insured our eternal salvation.**

**Whether we like it or not, we are no longer in a world or a Church in which some nostalgic medieval culture is even remotely relevant to the lived experience of the People of God, especially our students. Therefore, we are no longer Lasallian educators who can**

be content even with our own rich and magnificent past. Jan Pelikan, an historian of Christian doctrine wrote, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose, I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition a bad name."

- Tradition brings people together. Traditionalism focuses upon rules, regulations, and doctrines to determine how a person can come to Jesus. "*Obey me*" or "*Come follow me?*"
- Tradition tries to knock down barriers and unify people. Traditionalism is content with the status quo. "*Obey me*" or "*Come follow me?*"
- " Tradition is open to new ideas. Traditionalism ignores ways to respond to people in their variety of cultures and various lived life styles and realities. "*Obey me*" or "*Come follow me?*"

What I hope that you see that I am sharing with you, my Lasallian colleagues, is that our Lasallian tradition calls forth to us right now to find new ways to make real-not only for our students, but also for ourselves- the Good News of Jesus Christ for today's world. I believe that if we are willing to embrace our tradition, instead of institutionalized and forced traditionalism, we will see anew Saint LaSalle's dynamic charism at its true core, and we will be able to design and structure our schools for today's students.

### ***FROM MEANING TO MEANINGFULNESS***

Of course, this understanding will cause tension for us with traditionalist in the institutional Church or for that matter even within our own schools. But, we must be courageous enough to make real the true charism of Saint LaSalle for today's students. Lasallian education from its inception over three hundred years ago always embraced a deep love for the Church and a Christian spirituality that placed the importance and inestimable dignity of each student at the core of its mission. We may say that Saint LaSalle *made* that love of the Church the *meaning* that was

foundational to his commitment to Catholic education. However, we also see that all his innovations and zeal were not necessarily first focused on bringing his students to the Church; but rather he did everything to bring Jesus to his students. That was his faith and zeal. That was his greatness. That was Catholic Lasallian education. That will be our Lasallian education's greatness in the third millennium.

However, none of us has to be reminded that his genius as a Catholic educator was also his concurrent pragmatic response to the material circumstances and needs of his students at that time over three hundred years ago at that geographic locus, France. And, it was that pragmatic response that made it possible for his students *to find* for themselves *meaningfulness* in their lived reality which gave life, action and dynamic results to Saint LaSalle's *meaning* for Catholic education.

*Meaning and meaningfulness*-this complementarity of the sacred and the worldly did not make Lasallian education less Catholic. It made it more Holy-true Christian holiness. It makes Lasallian education truly "incarnational"-the very mystery of our faith in Jesus Christ: true God and true human! The problem for people in the third millennium world is no longer "the other world" vs. "this world", i.e. the sacred and the profane. No, that "dualistic" thinking whose "*meaning*" is still part of many in the institutional Church is in no longer *meaningful* for our students. Holiness today is understood by our students as a new human integration of the spiritual and the worldly, or as I have personally tried to pragmatically frame it for the past thirty years-Faith and Finance!

Without both in the world today our Church's *meaning* of the "preferential option for the poor" and "social responsibility and justice" tend to be pietistic exhortations in a nice sounding homily! Not too many people today want to live in poverty while they wait for relief in the next life. With Pope Francis' leadership we make a serious mistake if we think he is "romanticizing" poverty. No, not at all. His vision in his *Joy of the Gospel* is to eradicate poverty. And, that takes more than formulaic prayers—it takes a Lasallian

education that is *meaningful* for our students in their lived reality of the third millennium.

### ***THE PROBLEM***

And, herein we find the tension and the problem that we in Catholic Lasallian education must confront with the institutional Church. Of course, the *Magisterium* of the Church is entrusted as the depository of the faith that makes meaning for Christianity. As Catholic schools we have the solemn responsibility to present the fullness of what the Church proclaims. Yet, as school we must permit our students to question, to dialogue and to explore everything that they encounter in this globalized society. We are a Catholic school not the Catholic Church. And, the Catholic Church is not a Catholic school!

We are attempting to assist the Church by exploring with our students Christian “faith seeking understanding.” As such, we are morally obligated to accompany our students where they are on their life’s’ journeys in today’s culture. We are compelled to help them to find *their* “meaningfulness” of the faith. And that means our obligation and mission is different from the institutional Church in that we must not only present dogmas and doctrines. We must also explore pragmatic ways that will educate our students to understand the human condition; to respect diversity in global cultures; to engage competing values within societies; and to experience how Christian faith brings to fruition life that is both spiritually and materially enriching. We do not indoctrinate. We educate. . We do not only “catechize”. We educate.

To do this we must be open to competing values in the culture of our students and we must accompany them as *they* freely explore reality. Today’s generations don’t live *definitions*; rather they *define* living “with” and “in” the mystery of *their* lives in *their* personal relationship with God. We accompany our students in *their* “faith seeking understanding” as Lasallians faithful to the

**Church because we are a Catholic school but we are not the Catholic Church.**

**Today, I believe that we must expand, perhaps transform, our traditional understanding of Saint LaSalle as just a *Patron of Teachers*, a founder of schools and a pedagogical reformer. Of course he was all of those things, but he was more-much more. He was a “change agent” of society and of the Church. He creatively used education as his means to empower students with a more dignified material existence in society and to be a thinking and intelligent contributing member of the Church as the People of God. His timely response and creativity to those students needs was the *meaningfulness* that gave life to the *meaning* of Saint Lasalle’s spirituality at that time. He knew that his charism was to be a Catholic School and not the Catholic Church.**

#### ***TODAY’S TECHNOLOGY—PROBLEM OR SOLUTION?***

**So we must ask ourselves, “What is the context in today’s globalized society that compels us to transform our Lasallian schools?” Does in fact, the world’s exploding, global technological advances mean that our Church and our schools must change?” Most of us are not experts in technological applications and design as the magnificent speakers that you will be hearing from during these next few days. But, as Lasallian educators we have the tradition of Saint LaSalle’s insight and charism that, indeed, make us experts in finding the *meaningfulness* of that technology for Lasallian Catholic education and our students.**

**We now live in what has been called a new “spiritual geography” that had been unknown to Saint LaSalle, to the Church and to the world *writ-large*. It is a spiritual geography whose locus is not found any longer in one geographical area, or one institution, or one rigid doctrine, or even inside our very own classrooms; but rather a new existential reality that technology has transformed into borderless, timeless and instantaneous portals of unfathomable and uncontrollable information and possibilities.**

If we use our imaginations we may see that technology has not merely given us some new faddish educational gimmicks to work with. It has become the “sailing vessel”, if you will, that transports our students’ minds, thoughts and feelings even more than the great teachers standing in front of our classrooms or the mitered hierarchs on Cathedral altars. The billowing sails on these vessels are not taking today’s students on a journey to any familiar or predetermined “port-of-call” that we educators or the Church can control.

Rather the rudder of this technological global phenomenon is steering them, us, and the Church, not to some past charted “ports-of-call”, but to portals that expand and explode imaginations and knowledge. This intrinsically and qualitatively transforms the educational paradigm with a kaleidoscopic array of variety and diversity as never before experienced in education, in the Church or in the history of humanity. We seriously misread what has already happened if we look upon technology merely as tools and apps that will make us more efficient educators. Of course, we are still teachers and learners. But now we must be courageous navigators leading and accompanying our students in uncharted seas with obscure horizons to unknown “ports of call” with our faith as our compass.

### *TO BE SPECIFIC*

Let me be specific. In our traditional educational model the “old taught the young”. That was “natural, of course. How else could it be? However, then came the 1960’s with the “hippie generations” and a revolutionary change occurs. The young no longer saw wisdom and relevance in their elders. So then, “the young taught the young”, i.e. “peer learning” (For those of us teaching in those times we know just how challenging it was to be a teacher then!).

Could it get any worse than that for our schools and the Church? Well, it did. The 1990’s came and the explosion of technology in our new globalized society brings a “super-revolution” to the learning paradigm, i.e. “the young now teach the old”. We, the older

generations and institutions, did not grow up with the previously unimaginable proliferation of technology and communications. Many saw this as just another fad. It wasn't. And, the young, indeed, became our teachers of this new technological society.

And now what do we see?

I believe that it is a fair, yet paradoxical, assessment to say that we have transitioned from the "Age of Aquarius" in which:

*Harmony and understanding  
Sympathy and trust abounding  
No more falsehoods or derisions  
Golden living dreams of visions  
Mystic crystal revelation  
And the mind's true liberation  
Aquarius! Aquarius!*

And, we are now in the "Age of Twitter" that has brought new generations together in our modern technological society that makes us feel alone together. In the past we saw our students calling a friend as soon as they had a feeling that they wanted to share. Now instead, it seems that when our students want to have "a" or "any" feeling for themselves about anything, they send a text or a twitter. Today many of our students are so busy communicating that they don't have time to listen and to absorb what is being communicated. Many seem to seek companionship without the depth and commitment of loving relationships and friendships.

It seems that the more we are connecting the more we are becoming isolated. So, where are we located as a people today in society or in The Church or in our Lasallian schools?

An incident that brings context to understanding the incredible paradigm shift that has taken place in our shrinking global society was captured recently. On June 6, 2011, the day the late Steve Jobs of Apple gave his last major speech, he talked to a group of engineers and scientists about the latest innovation that he was introducing to the public-"The *i Cloud*.

He explained that *i Cloud* permits a user to store five gigabytes of memory. They questioned him, “Where is it stored? (Remember one gigabyte can hold over 4,000 books, over 340 digital photos and much more). They asked, “Where is this “i Cloud?” “How does it work?” Jobs answered, “You don’t need to know. I don’t know. It just works”—It just works! Finally, they accepted Job’s explanation (UN-EXPLANATION?), applauded him and marveled at this great mysterious, inexplicable and omnipresent creation.

What an important lesson for Lasallian educators and the institutional church to learn and to understand about the new “spiritual geography” of so many, and growing numbers seeking a relevant and vital spirituality and education in this third millennium. It is not any longer the old teaching the young; nor is it the young teaching the young; nor is it the young teaching the old. In our third millennium it is that mysterious, unreal but experienced reality that envelops all of us- *cyberspace!*

We now have “*cyberspace*” that created a new kind of reality, *virtual reality*. This virtual reality is real but it does not exist—that is it does not exist in a *PHYSICAL* place-but it’s real! It exists in the realm of technological “space”. (Whatever and wherever that is!) And, just like Steve Jobs said—we don’t know where that is; we don’t need to know; it just works! In this virtual reality, objects are no longer measured as rationalized doctrinal statements or entities in time and space; rather they exist as virtual objects in mysterious places that are reachable only through the imaginations of people. Or as Toni Morrison wrote in her magnificent book, *Beloved* when the slave Preacher Baby Suggs told her fellow slaves: “*The only grace you will have is the grace you can imagine. If you do not see it, you will not have it.*”

Education, learning and faith development for our students have quantitatively and qualitatively been transformed. Our students are comfortable to operate, to learn, to move, and to create in a much different kind of reality; unencumbered by natural laws or barriers of time and space; unrestricted by classrooms; unrestrained by cannons, rules and regulations; unlimited by controlling authorities; and, completely free to let their imaginations explore the mystery of an unconditionally loving God who does not require them or us-and has

***NEVER*** required anyone- to be the same as everyone and everything else. Jesus prayed for us that “*we may all be one*”-*not necessarily the same.*

### ***TODAY’S RECEPTIVITY TO THE FAITH***

**We must not conclude, as too many in the institutional Church have, that today’s people and our students are too materialistic and consumerist to be faithful Christians. The faithful followers of Jesus Christ in the world today are receptive to embrace the Holy Spirit in the mystery of our faith through the signs, symbols, sacred stories and sacraments that are in abundance in the Catholic Church and should be common place in our schools.**

**Certainly in this presentation or the days you are here for this Conference we cannot expect to develop the tools and programs that are needed for this transformation. However, if the context of my observations is anywhere near accurate then it falls upon us as Lasallian educators to collaborate in the future to develop our Lasallian schools within the charism of Saint LaSalle’s genius of teaching minds and touching hearts for today’s world.**

### ***CONCLUSION***

**In conclusion, I briefly present three transformational dynamics that I see as needed for Lasallian education in today’s globalized world:**

**First, we must become *ENABLERS*. Saint LaSalle enabled his students to learn because he transformed the expensive, individual tutorial model to the economical classroom model. Today, we cannot completely educate our students within that classroom model. It is too restrictive in a globalized society. Walls, desks, chairs or limits of geography must not restrict the new learning centers. We will educate our students to the degree that we enable them and us to immerse ourselves, not in a**

classroom, but in a *cyber-room* wherever that is in the limitless span of *cyberspace*. We Lasallians must work together and create this for our students. Why? Because it just works!

You will be hearing from Rob Mancabelli who with Will Richardson co-authored the fine book *Personal Learning Networks: Using the Power of Connections to Transform Education*. He will surely give us practical recommendations to help us to transform ourselves to meet student needs today.

Second, we must become *CREATORS*. Saint LaSalle created for his students the possibility to learn because he transformed communications for his students. They lacked classical language knowledge so he taught them in the vernacular. Today, within the realm of *virtual reality*, the vernacular or many number of languages are not any longer in themselves sufficient tools for the exchange of ideas and knowledge. The vernacular in *cyberspace* today is the limitless possibilities and occasions wherein the language of interaction is in the idiom of a communion of consciousness in the imaginations of people. I ask you to consider that though it is essential for us to be up-to-date with the latest pedagogical applications in technology that is not the totality of the answer or the context for a vital and relevant Lasallian education. Having all the latest “gimmicks” will not be enough unless *WE* enter the new spiritual geography with today’s students’ and re-invent our *imaginations*. Of course we must learn languages, but to be Lasallian educators today we must create our own “*cyber-room*” where we intermingle, interconnect and interact beyond the limits of words, syntax and rhetoric. Why? Because it just works!

We must become *NETWORKERS*. Saint LaSalle created a network of Brothers who came together so that in their power and energy through association they could effectively meet the needs of their students. Today, we have Lasallian educational institutions throughout the world. Today, we have not only Brothers but also laymen and laywomen who are our Lasallian family. But, we must honestly ask, “Do we truly work together and in association so that we are an effective power and force that are known on the globe as educators who provide a Catholic education for all that enhances the spiritual and human life of our students?” We must develop our magnificent networking possibilities

**that will transform what and how we teach on the shrinking globe of the third millennium. Why? Because it just works!**

**I believe that we, the followers of Saint LaSalle's charism, are best equipped to transform Catholic educators from seeing ourselves as teachers and learners to become *ENABLERS*, *CREATORS* and *NETWORKERS* accompanying our students. We can be a vital and relevant force in Catholic education for the third millennium. It will not be easy. It will take courage. It will surely get messy at times. But, I am reminded of an insight that Picasso related to his followers when he said, "God is just another artist. He made a giraffe, an elephant and a cat. He has no style." Let us not worry about our style or preoccupation with rules and order when we paint on the canvas of our students' lives by teaching minds and touching hearts with the unconditional love that Jesus has for all of us. We are Lasallian Catholic schools-it just works!**

**Live Jesus in our hearts-forever.**