

Justice in the World and the Mission of Lasallian Education Today
Enacting the Common Good
LACU Livestream Symposium
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A Reflection: For Whose Children Do Our Hearts Break?

Service of the poor *and* the promotion of social justice are not separate tasks in the mission of Lasallian education. They should not be. Both involve and implicate each other in the Christian prophetic call of the Institute not only to find Christ in the poor, but also to follow Christ to be in solidarity with them.¹ One of the foundational insights from the 1967 *Declaration* is precisely this inseparability, where educational service of the poor also engages itself with “the struggle against poverty as frustration.”² This language of “poverty as frustration” is significant as it points to those structural conditions “born of injustice” that systemically enslave persons, depriving them “from developing in a way that accords with their dignity as human beings.”³ The *Declaration* is clear that Lasallian educational service of the poor must commit itself to the promotion of justice that seeks to resist and transform these structural conditions which impoverish life, even to the point of troubling the status quo:

Jesus Christ is not the solution for material deprivation, however much he may be a source of comfort in such situations through that inspiration that faith brings for action in the temporal order. It would be blameworthy to make of Christianity an endorsement of the established social order, thus dispensing with the need for social protest and efforts to establish peace.⁴

The symposium calls us to examine where we are as Lasallians in relation to this singular commitment to serve the poor *and* act for justice in providing a human and Christian education. It returns us to reflect on *Circular 412*, which, following the *Declaration*, not only affirmed the radicality of this commitment, but also revealed the tensions and challenges of enacting and living it in diverse social, cultural, economic and political contexts. These tensions and challenges are still alive today in Lasallian education, as Dr. Kevin Ahern highlighted in his keynote address that helpfully unpacked *Circular 412* alongside and within the Catholic Church’s post-conciliar engagement with the world as reflected in *Justice in the World*. “Does this promise [of our Lasallian commitment to the poor and to justice] match our performance?” he asked. Indeed, it is one thing to say that the promotion of social justice is integral to the service of the poor and yet another to *want* to do the arduous work of *integrating* both in the communities where we find ourselves.

In my theological and educational doctoral research on conceptions of children and childhood in the Lasallian tradition, one of the most significant developments is the Institute’s

¹ *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (1967), 25.1; 28.1. Henceforth referred to as *Declaration*.

² *Declaration*, 30.1.

³ *Declaration* 29.5

⁴ *Declaration* 30.2.

incorporation of children's rights in its articulation of mission. I wonder how the promotion of children's rights may serve as a lens to integrate service of the poor and the work for justice.

What is the place of children's rights in our Lasallian commitment to the poor and to justice?

A question that was in the background for me throughout the symposium is this: who are 'the poor'? In my research, it strikes me that Lasallian tradition has a distinctive but not exclusive focus on the young when referring to the poor. Reflecting on the *Declaration's* chapter on the educational service to the poor, Brother Michel Sauvage notes: "The Institute's 'missionary' emphasis must also be determined by its *preferential option to serve poor young people* through education."⁵ The *Declaration* was also careful not to downplay the effects of material poverty even as it "avoid[ed] a rigid interpretation that defines the poor only from an economic point of view."⁶

However, I suggest that a pivotal shift happened when the then Brother Superior General John Johnston, in his 1999 pastoral letter - *On the Defense of Children, the Reign of God, and the Lasallian Mission* - urged the Brothers and the wider Lasallian community to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to its mission of educating the poor. His proposal did not only catalyze the eventual inclusion of children's rights as part of the mission of Lasallian education in the 43rd General Chapter. It also shifted and expanded our consciousness, where the focus is now not only on poor children and young people. The UNCRC pushes us to recognize children and youth *as the poor* in that their humanity continues to be systemically marginalized. Children and youth are, in the terms of *Justice in the World*, "'marginal' persons."⁷ They are the least among the poor. Perhaps, the Institute has yet to recognize and reflect more fully on the significance of this shift.

Yet, this shift in consciousness opens up new possibilities for thinking about and acting for justice in our educational service to the poor. The UNCRC does not have to be yet another agenda that competes for our attention in the work for social justice. It could serve as a lens that connects various social justice concerns because children and youth as marginal persons also already find themselves further marginalized at the complex intersection of classism, racism, xenophobia, ableism, heterosexism, homo- and transphobia. The UNCRC in its articulation of participation rights also pushes us to reframe our enactment of the common good, not only for the protection of vulnerable children, but also one that engages their participation as agents through education. Are we as Lasallians awakened to this shift in consciousness brought about the incorporation of children's rights to our educational service of the poor and the promotion of justice? How might we accompany one another in dialogue and action such that we become more cognizant of its possibilities in renewing and sharpening the prophetic edge of Lasallian educational mission today?

Where do 'children' figure in Lasallian Higher Education?

⁵ *Lasallian Studies No. 18* (2014), *The Fragile Hope of a Witness: The Itinerary of Brother Michel Sauvage (1923-2001)*, p. 417. Emphasis mine.

⁶ *Declaration* 29.2-29.3.

⁷ *Justice in the World*, par. 10.

How might Lasallian higher educational institutions help advance the rights of children as integral to our commitment to the poor and to justice? I do not have much experience in higher education to offer a substantial response. More concrete responses would also need to be in context. However, any response ought to go beyond a mere listing of children's rights as another research item, even as more work is still needed to break open the theoretical and practical complexities of the UNCRC in ways useful for Lasallians. The academia could be part of this effort.

The deeper question is whether and how faculty and staff in our Lasallian higher educational institutions are intentionally and critically conscious of how their work affects and serves real children – directly and indirectly. As Dr. Carol Ann Gittens, a respondent at the symposium, highlighted, the work of justice calls us to be critically reflective and self-aware of how we are interpersonally present to our students. Where then do 'children' figure in our thinking about teaching and scholarship, and in our connection with students in higher education? If we were to recognize each student in our lectures and seminars not as an autonomous individual but as someone's child with a childhood that has been societally shaped, how might this influence the manner and quality of our educational presence? Whose children are we encountering while teaching, and through them, whose children's children might we be affecting? Regardless of our field of study, how mindful are we about the impact of our scholarship on the lives of children, and whose children are they?

If Lasallian higher education is to take seriously the defense and promotion of children's rights as integral to its work for justice, it needs to begin with a raised consciousness of the marginality of children and youth in its adult-centric concerns. The world of higher education *can* and *does* remove us from the actual presence of real children and youth in their concrete social realities. Even for those of us who teach and research on children and youth, I recognize how so much of it could be about me reporting *about* them rather than *being and working with* them as social agents in participatory ways. Indeed, to what extent have structures in higher education and our conceptions of the academic vocation marginalize the concerns of children and youth? Yet, at the same time, how might we leverage on the resources we have in the academy to develop partnerships with schools in the Lasallian network to lift up and engage with the voices of children as agents building up the common good now, and not later when they become adults? Has Lasallian higher education recognized these as questions worth wrestling with in its educational mission to the poor and for justice shaped by a preferential option for children and youth?

For Whose Children Do Our Hearts Break?

I conclude this reflection by returning to these stirring words in Dr. Mary McConner's invocation at the start of the symposium:

Can our children become the healing agents of our national and world transformation and future spiritual and economic salvation?

Protecting today's children-tomorrow's Mandelas and Mother Teresas-is the moral and commonsense litmus test of our humanity in a world where millions of child lives are ravaged by the wars, neglect, abuse, and racial, ethnic, religious, and class divisions of adults

These words capture powerfully how the promotion of children's rights must be a central part of our Lasallian commitment to the poor and to justice in its educational mission. Educational service to children and youth *of* the poor must also engage with their marginality *as* the poor under conditions that degrade and diminish their full humanity. This returns us to the founding vision, where John Baptist de La Salle was "seized" by the neglect and abandonment of the children of the artisans and of the poor.⁸ For De La Salle, the dignity of who we are as God's children makes a claim on us to take seriously the struggles of real children in our midst because they are one *with* us and *of* us in Christ. Are we "seized" by the presence of children as marginal persons in our world today? For whose children do our hearts break that will spur our prophetic witness as Lasallian educators to defend and promote their human right to the fullness of life?

Ultimately, our Lasallian commitment to serve the poor *and* act for justice is rooted in faith that calls us to an ongoing and often slow conversion to the poor in Christ. The tensions and challenges in integrating both tasks as a singular commitment will not go away. They are in fact part of this journey of conversion that forms and transforms us to live our prophetic witness more authentically in Christ. In this journey, we can trust in the faithfulness and creativity of the Spirit of Christ, who encounters us not only among the poor but in the least as a child.

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⁸ John Johnston, FSC, *On the Defense of Children, the Reign of God, and the Lasallian Mission*.