

**Justice in the World and the Mission of Lasallian Education Today:  
Enacting the Common Good  
LACU Livestream Symposium  
April 7, 2021**

**Some thoughts after the Lasallian Education and Justice Symposium**

Two terms were used in last evening's discussion sometimes interchangeably, sometimes as a distinction, not always clearly: "Social Justice" and "Service to the Poor." I agree with the speaker who said that they should be seen integrally. But I think the distinction is important, and it has been helpful to me. A young graduate of La Salle University told me that she had a wonderful experience as a full-time volunteer after graduation, working among the poor in New York City. But she learned from that experience that she felt called to address the issues of justice macrocosmically. She described her volunteer experience as microcosmic. Both approaches are important. She went on to graduate school at the Kennedy School of Government and became involved in her city's effort to make available decent and affordable housing.

I am more comfortable in the microcosmic effort. The last 28 years of my ministry were in direct service *with* the poor (my preferred preposition) at St. Gabriel's Hall and two San Miguel Schools. During two years of training in clinical counseling I served internships at an inner-urban high school and at a mental health clinic for enlisted service men and women. I like the terms one of the speakers used to describe those to whom I felt called: *underserved, underrepresented*. I like even better Pope Francis call to be with *those on the margins*. By whatever name they are those who suffer from the unjust political, economic, legal, and educational systems they encounter.

I respect and value the macrocosmic efforts of those who work to change the systems, especially those who work to educate young people who can and might work to change unjust systems as they grow in age and wisdom. I respect and value those who become involved in the political, legal, and economic systems and work from within to bring justice to them. These are slow processes. They require patience and persistence. In the meantime, there are people, individual persons, who live within these systems who feel helpless and are hurting.

One of the speakers said that work for social justice had to be imbued with love. Yes! I find it easy to love people. It has been more challenging to love individual persons, especially if they are slow to trust, stingy in expressing gratitude, at times unwilling to give up the code of the street and try another way. But continued, unconditional love enabled me and my colleagues to help them to navigate the unjust systems in which they live and work, to encourage them that they are not helpless. They cannot change *the* world, but they can change some things in *their* world. It was a privilege to be able to enter into the lives of young people and their

families. From them I learned a deeper meaning of the virtues of humility and generosity. In turn I tried to help them to develop the virtue of hope.

One of the great blessings at St. Gabriel's Hall and the two San Miguel Schools was working with Lasallian Volunteers. I am in awe of the faith and love of these young men and women and their willingness to give one year, usually more, to serve the marginal directly. Virtually every one of them experienced the transformation of the idea of social justice in the abstract to service with persons in need in the here and now. Even more inspiring to me is that most of the volunteers with whom I worked returned home with the determination to use what they learned to continue to serve others, especially those on the margin. Many continued careers in education, a lot of them in Lasallian ministries, a number in urban public education. Some chose involvement in larger social justice issues, in particular housing. A few chose to train in mental health. One is the director of education for vision-impaired students in a large city school system. In one way or another, they have taken their "small world" experience to a larger world. They have experienced the adverse impact on real persons of unjust systems. They have experienced how love makes a difference.

Almost all of the volunteers were graduates of Lasallian schools. They had a good foundation. But I think it was the volunteer experience that helped them to discover how they want to promote social justice – macrocosmically or microcosmically.

I guess my recommendation from all of this to leaders and decision-makers of Lasallian universities and secondary schools is to put greater emphasis on volunteer service during and after their time as students. I believe that the volunteer experience needs to be over an extended period of time with the same people or in the same agency. It takes time and patience to be transformed by those on the margin.

Many years ago I visited a Catholic high school that had an especially active volunteer program among the students. Community Service was a required course for sophomores. They did their service during the school day and had weekly seminar classes to review and plan. I asked the principal of the school how he fitted the program into an already loaded curriculum. He replied, "We don't fit this in. It's the first thing that's put into the schedule. Everything else fits around it." That is commitment! (In the junior and senior years service was voluntary and on the students' own time, with great participation.)

Evaluate what level of commitment you can give to providing your students with a volunteer experience that allows them to develop a relationship with those affected by injustice. This may help them to find their way of doing justice.

- Joseph F. Mahon, FSC  
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