

**Justice in the World and the Mission of Lasallian Education Today:
Enacting the Common Good
LACU Livestream Symposium
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Personal Connections: A Reflection on *Justice in the World and the Mission of Lasallian Education Today: Enacting the Common Good*

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I recently attended the virtual symposium, *Justice in the World and the Mission of Lasallian Education Today: Enacting the Common Good*. I am extra appreciative of opportunities to participate cross-borders as a New Yorker who lives in Ireland. I find that witnessing the worldwide Lasallian community collaborate for change is a major source of hope. This event was a much-needed refresh about how we as Lasallians can and must engage with a world that at times can feel beyond repair.

One of the most rewarding challenges of the Lasallian charism, to me, is discovering your personal connection to the Mission. Why are you an invested member of the Lasallian Family? Where do you feel Lasallians making an impact? What unique contribution can you offer? Gatherings like this past symposium are extremely formative experiences. These events contribute to Lasallians developing their vocations as they examine current issues, ask questions, and take action.

I first saw myself reflected in the Lasallian Mission because I wanted to be a teacher who helps struggling students. I am chronically ill and my experience navigating school as a Disabled student was heavily influenced by supportive teachers. I wanted to be an exceptional teacher who helps students thrive despite difficult circumstances.

My goals continued to develop in tandem with my studies at Manhattan College, Lasallian formation programs, service years as a Lasallian Volunteer, and now through my journey as a Legacy Lasallian in a new region. The more I learn about the motivations and aspirations of our shared charism, I am able to reexamine how I fit within our worldwide community.

Now, I connect to the Lasallian Mission because I consider it to be a mission of accessibility. St. John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers sought to eradicate obstacles to equality and promote full, authentic participation for all through education. My initial goal to “help struggling students” has been transformed by deeper understandings of charity and justice. We need those exceptional teachers. We also need people working at institutional level. I am reenergized by this symposium’s assertion that intersectional justice-seeking initiatives (as is the Lasallian Mission) can and must move beyond temporary solutions. This resonates with me because, while I began my Lasallian journey with the goal of helping struggling students, I have come to understand that there are many ways to do so.

A key realization for me was understanding how my early goals were influenced by internalized ableism. I saw myself as someone in need of extra support rather than a “normal” student

because I am Disabled. This notion followed me throughout my undergraduate career as I shamefully sought extensions, apologized to Professors for falling asleep in classes I knew were poorly timed for my body, even missing classes altogether. I was too fearful to participate in international service trips. I wasn't registered for supports because I didn't know that I qualified. I often suffered illness in silence because I didn't want to appear burdensome.

Critical Disability Studies is an overlooked area in Lasallian institutions. As we examine institutionalized oppression, we would be remiss to discount the experiences of the Disabled community. Higher education institutions—Lasallian institutions included—are ableist. This is a fact. Societies were developed to separate Disabled and nondisabled people so that nondisabled people would thrive, and Disabled people would perish. I challenge us to consider the impact this has on our campuses and in our ministries. As recognized by St. John Baptist de La Salle, the education system is uniquely positioned to perpetuate or dismantle inequalities. We must ensure to do the latter.

Have you examined the question “what is Disability” at your institution? Are the primary representations of Disability found in Special Education courses and specialized resource centers? What level of means testing is involved in the application process? To qualify for scholarships? Pursue honors and awards? Are there Disability awareness trainings to eliminate discriminatory practices and inform Disabled people of their rights? Do efforts to decolonize curriculum expressly include dismantling ableism?

Our discussions of Disability must move beyond characters symbolically losing their eyesight in a novel in English courses. Beyond future students in need of “extra services” in Education courses. Beyond a population to direct fundraising and community service efforts in student activities. Our understandings of Disability must move beyond the medical and charity models, where Disability is a problem to be solved, and towards a social model, where Disability is to be celebrated and obstacles to inclusion are eliminated.

I hope that we continue to build environments that improve not only in terms of accessibility, but also strive to become communities that celebrate Disability as a valued cultural group. We must ensure Disabled talent is not recruited to an ableist environment. To do so I believe Disability has to be examined not only as a component of intersectionality, but as its on entity. Lasallians should take special care not to perpetuate the “oppression Olympics,” where marginalized groups are forced to be the most discriminated against or the most vulnerable in pursuit of progress.

The symposium highlighted how systems of oppression –systemic racism, ableism, sexism, and so on—are a means of production that result in unbalanced power and how special concern for the poor and social justice means confronting these systems. The diverse fields of speakers were an exemplar in how to take responsibility for promoting justice, whatever your profession, the power of representation, and how to build decision-making teams with diverse skillsets and experiences. I valued how speakers, Dr. Kevin Ahern, Dr. Carol Ann Gittens, Dr. Jerry Kavouras, and moderator Brother Ernest Miller, came together from across disciplines for the discussion

because it underscores this interdisciplinary approach to justice. We are ALL called to upset the usual way of doing things.

The Lasallian charism has equipped me with the language, knowledge, support, and opportunity to act in service of equality. The *Justice in the World and the Mission of Lasallian Education Today: Enacting the Common Good* symposium was an incredible occasion to build on each of these areas. These lessons have been incredibly empowering to me personally, because I am more prepared to recognize oppression at work in my own life, self-advocate, and seek change—including within the Lasallian community.