

*Huether Panel Discussion Opening Remarks:
Responding to the Signs of the Times*

*Br. Chris Patiño, FSC
November 19, 2022*

Good morning! Everyone with me this morning? I have to admit, when I saw the schedule and saw this panel on a Saturday morning after District dinners, I wondered, will anyone show up? Thank you for showing up!

And in being here, I have the opportunity to express gratitude. Gratitude for your commitment to the mission. YOU are the experts in the field. I am also mindful of the “wear and tear” that committed educators have experienced and are experiencing, especially since the onset of the pandemic. We are all mindful that the educational field, our vocation as educators, is experiencing more than a shift. At the same time, our context can perhaps blind us to the ways the current educational crisis is experienced globally. This is not to say that there are not critical issues in the U.S. context that call us to offer a Lasallian response. But, as the encyclical *Laudato Si* clearly articulates, “Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity” (LS, 240). Or as the 46th General Chapter reinforces, co-responsibility for one another, becoming more and more One La Salle.

With this as our backdrop, I will offer this morning some of the reflections the General Council has been having in response to the calls before us and what we perceive as directions we can take in response to the mission-moment before us.

First, some realities we must consider.

You, more than I, are directly experiencing the educational crisis involving the departure of those leaving the profession, leaving behind our common vocation as educators.

Not new, but perhaps much more apparent, we continue to see the lack of access to quality education. Our own Lasallian ministries continue “the good fight” to offer quality education while remaining accessible. But, we must acknowledge that some of our institutions are not always accessible to all.

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We are also being confronted by those who question pedagogical practices and the painful reality that some do not experience belonging within our own institutions.

Some of our institutions are experiencing existential threats.

And then there are the deeper, more personal, challenges surrounding young people today, the focus of our conference: disaffiliation, loneliness, and mental health.

Lasallians, let us not despair. We do not despair because our Lasallian story begins with a similar crisis and John Baptist de La Salle, discerning the will of God in his regard, responded with prophetic audacity—something the 46th General Chapter has called us to once again.

What will be our 21st century response?

In 2016, Fr. Mark Massa SJ, a Jesuit scholar dedicated to studying the Catholic experience in the United States, when speaking at the Lasallian Association of Secondary School Administrators gathering, offered a challenge then that I think is important to recall now. In his address, he reflected,

“...the Lasallian community in the U.S. has the opportunity to offer signal service at this moment by talking about not what this or that specific school is doing, but about what the Lasallian community as a whole is about, I would ask you to consider how you might better model what you are already doing so well in [Lasallian] schools to the entire Catholic community... challenging the whole community to remember that one of the signs of the kingdom is that the poor have the gospel preached to them is everybody’s business, and not just the Lasallians.” (Fr. Mark Massa, SJ, LASSCA, 2016)

There is no doubt that this challenge was taken up as modeled by the contributions Springtide Research is making. And so as we respond to the signs of the times—we have the opportunity to continue to model a Church, through our educational ministry, that reflects the Jesus who

meets people where they are and where community becomes a means for mutual transformation.

This is why it's important to recall, especially in light of the conference's theme and our panel discussion this morning, that De La Salle was not an entrepreneur on a mission to open schools. No, rather, he formed a community of teachers who could respond to the educational needs of the time re-envisioning the educational model. This, I believe, is what is so important about our conference—the question is being asked: how are we taking care of each member of our educational community, especially the young people entrusted to our care?

As the recently published Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission articulates, "The cornerstone that sustains the construction of this mission has been and always will be community. It was undoubtedly one of the great intuitions of the Founder and of the first Brothers. Several other projects similar to that of John Baptist de La Salle failed because they were not community based. The community educates, strengthens its members, cares for the weak and nurtures their spirit. It is the best guarantee to respond to the greatest imaginable challenges" (Declaration, 3.2).

THIS is what we are about, and so we, Lasallians, are well-positioned to offer a response, to once again signal the reign of God through our educational communities. But, we must have the courage to confront the truth. To identify the realities that urge a response from us because we know, once again as the Declaration puts it, "...education has a profound social impact that we cannot disregard." And therefore, "we must have a clear understanding of its intentions, approaches and emphasis. Today as never before has it been more important to be clear about the type of society and person we want to help build, as well as the role of the educator and the school in today's contexts" (Declaration, 4).

The questions then become: why do families choose our schools? Why do students remain with us? Would their answers involve: because it is a nurturing environment? Because this

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school will strengthen my sense of faith? Because the education offered will allow me to challenge inequities and fill me with a sense of purpose to create a more just society? Perhaps initially these would not be their answers, but we hope that in time, as Lasallian alumni, they can look back at their time with us and recognize this kind of impact on their lives.

Pope Francis, when addressing the delegates to the 46th General Chapter this past May, acknowledged the opportunities and calls before us well. He addressed us Lasallians, directly, saying, “You are in the front line, educating so as to move from a closed world to an open world; from a throwaway culture to a culture of care; from a culture of rejection to a culture of integration; from the pursuit of vested interests to the pursuit of the common good... And you also know that you cannot do this work alone, but by cooperating in an “educational alliance” with families, with communities and ecclesial aggregations, with the educational realities present in the territory...” And then, in very Pope Francis fashion, encouraged us while clearly challenging us, the Holy Father reflected, “You cannot give to the young what you do not have within yourselves. The Christian educator, in the school of Christ, is first of all a witness, and he is a teacher to the extent that he is a witness. I have nothing to teach you in this regard, but only, as a brother, I want to remind you: witness. And above all I pray for you, that you may be brothers not only in name but also in fact. And for your schools to be Christian not in name but in fact” (Pope Francis to FSC, May 2022).

To me, this echoes what we heard from our panel with young people yesterday, in the words of Springtide, trusted adults who are authentic witnesses. Authentic witnesses who create spaces where the love of God is encountered.

The General Council has been reflecting on the calls of the 46th General Chapter, the Lasallian Family, and the Church. For us, the response we are proposing is something we are naming Proyecto Levadura or the Leavening Project; an action-oriented way to bring together the seven transformation pathways identified by the General Chapter, the ten lines of action

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established by the recently completed International Assembly on the Lasallian Educational Mission, and the seven commitments from the Global Compact on Education.

As Brother Armin succinctly described at the recent gathering of the International Association of Lasallian Universities, our starting point for Proyecto Levadura “is the question, “*Where is your brother?*” that God asks Cain... The starting point of our journey to conversion is [this] uncomfortable question—one that bothers us, moves us, worries us, and helps us begin anew the discernment of our place in the world, in the world of education, and in the mission of the Church.”

The Leavening Project will invite the Lasallian Family to mark its path by making the peripheries, to encounter the God of the poor, a starting point for discernment and decision-making.

Many of us are familiar with the Founder’s exhortation to the first Brothers that the need for this Institute is great. It begs the question, *is Lasallian education needed today?* While in Colombia a few months ago, our Vicar General, Brother Carlos Gomez, reflected with us that perhaps today, more than being needed, the call is for an Institute and Lasallian Family that is significant. One of the young panelists yesterday provided a glimpse of this when she shared that it was not only about being needed but wanted.

Lasallian education that is significant then is one that rediscovers again and again the founding intuition of creativity, innovation, and counter-cultural courage. An education where a culture of care and accompaniment make us identifiable. An education that recognizes that Lasallian pedagogy begins with touching hearts if we are to teach minds.

So, to conclude, what are the seeds of hope? Or, if I might say, where is the leaven to which we can look?

I offer three examples.

The first one is exemplified here. Today, more than ever, our sense of “together and by association” is the leaven which allows us to respond to the educational challenges of our time. As our Church works towards becoming more synodal, we should be proud that while we have our own work to do, we are on the way. In many cases, we have Lay Partners more and more becoming protagonists in the mission. The opportunity for us Brothers then becomes to reflect on how we can generously offer our consecration and become leaven for the Lasallian Family. Together and by association is our Lasallian way to respond to the signs of the times and recognizing, as *Fratelli Tutti* articulates, “We have the space we need for co-responsibility in creating and putting into place new processes and changes (FT, 77).

The second place we can look for leaven may seem paradoxical. It is places that call us to see the difficulties and grow in solidarity with Lasallians where the mission appears threatened—the peripheries within our own Lasallian Family. I think of places like Eritrea where our schools have been confiscated by the government and our Brothers forbidden to teach. Or, as I learned in a conversation just a few days ago with a Young Lasallian attending the international symposium in Rome, the commitment by our Lay Partners and Brothers in Nicaragua to keep the mission going even when the socio-political situation seems hopeless. There is Gospel leaven even in desperation!

Finally, I think of the recent experience a few of us on the General Council had to visit Utopia, a Lasallian university campus in the rural lands of Colombia, transforming the lives of young people by offering agricultural and agronomic studies that allow them to return to their homes where they contribute to the transformation of villages and peace-building.

Lasallians, as seek to respond to the signs of the times, as we focus on better accompanying our young people and members of our educational communities through the particular call for addressing mental health and truly becoming places where all feel seen, named, known, let us do so with the belief that our Gospel mission, our desire to build the reign of God through

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education, our belief in vocationally living the Gospel through the ministry of education, is needed and significant!