

THE LASALLIAN YOUTH MOVEMENT

by Brother John Johnston, Superior General

*Extracts from a talk given to young people from De La Salle Schools all over Europe
at the Lasallian Youth Assembly in Worth Abbey, 29 July -2 August 1999.*

I have been watching the Lasallian Youth Movement grow and develop during the past two decades, but particularly during the last twelve years. Frankly, I never expected the movement to blossom (or better, to explode) as it has. In 1987 I participated in two congresses: the first, a gathering in Toulouse, France, of Lasallian youth of Europe, and a few weeks later, an intercontinental congress in Quebec, Canada. Five hundred young people from many different countries participated. Some of these young people were already very active in the Lasallian Youth Movement while others came because they were curious, interested, and open to learning. The assembly was a stimulus to the creation of the movement in other countries, such as the United States and English-speaking Canada.

In the past decade I have had the privilege of participating in other assemblies of Lasallian youth: in Manila, Philippines; in Bujedo, Spain; in Rheims, France; and in Memphis, Tennessee. Next Tuesday I leave directly for a Lasallian Youth Assembly in Moraga, California, one of three gatherings taking place this summer in various parts of the United States. During my visits throughout the Institute, I have had many meetings with young Lasallians from our schools and universities. I have met Lasallians who have volunteered for service during vacation periods of the school year, as well as Lasallians who are full-time volunteers. Some of them were living with the Brothers in community. Each of these meetings has been a special moment for me. I am excited and even "energised" by what I see happening.

This Assembly

Your general theme is thought-provoking: Building the Future Today. I like the emphasis on building: the word expresses a stance that is proactive, a stance that calls for initiative, creativity, boldness. The title is correct in its affirmation that we build the future by living fully today. Yes, we have to be perceptive, sensitive, and active today. To build the future is not to dream about it or to wait passively for it to arrive. On the contrary. To build the future we have to live fully today. The future does not exist. Only today exists. Nevertheless, what we do today and what we don't do today shape the future.

To participate in this Lasallian Youth Assembly, some 250 of you have come as representatives of young people from a number of countries of Europe. You also have with you guests from Canada and the United States. You are of different cultures and you speak different languages. Nevertheless, I am sure that already you have sensed how much you have in common; as human persons, as Christians, and as Lasallians. Take full advantage of the marvellous opportunity you have for sharing experiences, questions, perplexities, pre-occupations, dreams, plans... Do all you can to get beyond the language barrier. If you have some knowledge of a second or third language, use it! Don't be afraid of making mistakes. The important thing is not that we speak a language perfectly, but that we communicate by means of that language.

My Experience of Lasallians throughout the World

I mentioned the diversity that is evident in this gathering of European youth. But when I call to mind the incredibly rich experience I have had during thirteen years as Superior General, and before that ten years as Vicar-General, I can say that the diversity here today is quite relative! I recall, for example, meetings of pupils, teachers, parents, former pupils during my visits to some twenty countries in Africa where, obviously, everyone, except some missionary Brothers, is African; and in Japan, Hong Kong, India, and ten other countries of Asia, where the members of our Lasallian Family are from very distinct races and ethnic

groups. Moreover, some Lasallians live in countries that are well developed economically, while thousands of others inhabit some of the poorest countries in the world. Some Lasallians live in politically stable situations. Others live in areas of civil strife and even war.

One of the most striking features of our great family today is the variety of religious beliefs among Lasallians. They are Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, followers of traditional religions, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Shintoist.. many of our schools have pupils, teachers, parents, and former pupils from three or more of these religions; and they very successfully form a Lasallian educative community! It may surprise you to know that many persons of other religions are enthusiastic participants in every aspect of the life of the schools and in associations of parents and of former pupils. In the Lasallian Youth Assembly I attended in Manila, participants included Buddhists and Shintoists from Japan and Muslims from Malaysia and Pakistan.

These realities show that one can share in some of the values that we consider Christian and Lasallian without sharing in all of them. Thousands of Lasallians appreciate, for example, our educational philosophy, but do not believe in Jesus Christ. Our policy is to centre attention on what unites us rather than on what divides or separates us. Our experience is that because we share so many values with others, we readily establish unity; unity in diversity. In this spirit of communion, we encourage Lasallians of all faiths to live their own tradition authentically and to respect totally the right of others to live their tradition.

Of course we must say that while religion plays an important part in shaping the identity and culture of persons throughout the world, not all persons live their religious tradition in an explicit manner. Every Lasallian youth gathering I have attended has included young people (like some of you I am sure) who are wrestling with fundamental questions concerning the meaning of life and the place of religion, and are not ready at this time to declare themselves believers in Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

In the lived experiences of our humanity, we are all the same, because we are all sons and daughters of the same God. Therefore, we are all brothers and sisters. Yet how evident it is that we don't live very well in this world as brothers and sisters. We see so much war, violence, crime, corruption, injustice, oppression, and unnecessary suffering from poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, hunger, inadequate health-care...

How sad it is that we have not learned to have mutual respect for differences. Many of us insist on the freedom to live our particular ethnic, religious, cultural identity, but all too often fail to admit that others have similar rights. We know about the ethnic and tribal conflicts in parts of Africa and Asia. Still, look at Europe, Canada, the United States. Look at Northern Ireland, look at ex-Yugoslavia, look at the problems with so-called minorities and immigrants in each of our countries. We have not yet learned to live together as sisters and brothers.

Pope John Paul says that God calls Christians to be universal brothers and sisters: as such, they have to overcome barriers and divisions of race, ethnic group, tribe, caste, or ideology. The Lord calls us, therefore, to be signs of God's love — a love which excludes nobody. Christ calls us to break down the fences of a restricted brotherhood and sisterhood and to love universally. Pope Paul VI once lamented that the human heart often appears small and egoistic, having place only for oneself and for a few others of one's own family and of one's own caste. What we need, he said, is a heart with universal dimensions.

The Reign of God

Jesus spoke day after day about the Reign of God; the kind of society that God wanted, the kind of society the two Popes have just described: a society where all live together in justice and in peace as sisters and brothers. Jesus revealed the characteristics and demands of the Reign of God through his words, his actions, and his own person. John Paul II says that for Jesus the reign of God demands that people learn to love, forgive, and serve one another. It calls for union among us all, with one another and with God. The Reign of God must embrace all, including those that society often marginalises. The Pope says that Jesus drew especially near to such persons. He said that his mission was to preach good news to the poor. He

reached out to victims of rejection and contempt. He enabled them to experience liberation even now by being close to them, going to eat in their homes, treating them as equals and friends, and making them feel that God loved them. He always revealed tender care for the needy and for sinners.

John Baptist de La Salle said that the mission of the Institute he founded was to promote the Reign of God. The Rule of the Brothers says that the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools must establish, renew, and diversify its work in accord with what the Reign of God requires. That is precisely what we are striving to do. Every day some 68,000 Lasallian teachers and educators are at the service of 800,000 young people in more than 900 institutions. What are we trying to accomplish in our Lasallian schools and universities? We are trying to help our youth receive a solid human and Christian education. We are trying to assist them to be faithful and loyal sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters among themselves.

Brothers and Sisters to and for Others

Nevertheless, what I have just said is not at all complete. A Lasallian school that is truly authentic must do more. It must help young people learn to be brothers and sisters to and for others.

What do I mean? I mean that our schools must never be enclave communities, that is to say, communities, so-called communities in my opinion, that are closed in upon themselves. Such groups exist primarily to protect and promote the interests of their members and to help them develop their gifts for their personal and selfish motives. No! We cannot consider our schools to be Lasallian (we cannot even justify them) if they are not fulfilling another expectation: helping young people learn to be brothers and sisters to and for others.

Our schools must have a strong and effective orientation toward education in social justice. We need to have well-organised classes that help the pupils know and understand the social and economic realities of the world, their nation, their city, their neighbourhood. In addition pupils must have the opportunity to learn the essentials of the social teachings of the Church.

Nevertheless, instruction is not enough. Young people need the opportunity to participate regularly in demanding and well-planned programs of service. Such volunteer assistance can include catechetical and pastoral activities, animation of scouts, sports, and other kinds of youth activities, various kinds of service of the economically poor, the illiterate, slow learners, the aged, the sick, the mentally or physically disabled... You can add to the list. Some of our schools require a certain number of hours of service. Other schools make service voluntary, but expect it of all.

Educators are recognising today that service is formative, that is to say, service changes people. I cannot tell you how many young people have told me that service has changed their lives. I am sure that service has affected many of you here today.

From the description of the Reign of God that we find in the stories of the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son, we recognise that to be Christians and Lasallians, we have to volunteer for service not only in our youth, but throughout our lives. At the same time we have to work constructively for justice for everyone.

Lasallian Youth

Now we are ready to talk about Lasallian Youth and Lasallian Volunteer Movements. These movements give service a clear Christian and Lasallian focus. Earlier I mentioned that there has been an explosion of Lasallian Youth activity during the past several years. That is not an exaggeration, although situations vary considerably. In some areas of the Institute there has been a remarkable development. In other areas, there is less development or even none at all.

The movement takes different forms, as you have probably already discovered. In some areas there are annual national or regional assemblies and periodic international assemblies. Sometimes the programs are a week in duration and include well-organised service projects. There are active groups of Lasallian youth in many schools. They meet weekly or monthly for prayer, planning of service projects, and reflection on their experience. They commit themselves to service on a weekly or monthly basis. Some have more extensive projects during the vacation period.

Lasallian Volunteers; vacation periods

Throughout the last fifteen to twenty years, especially in Europe, increasing numbers of volunteers have offered themselves for service in poor countries during vacation periods. These volunteers have included pupils, former pupils, teachers, parents, friends, and Brothers. A number of young people, including probably some of you, have served during two, three, or even four vacation periods. That there has been such remarkable progress in recent years is for me a source of great satisfaction.

Ordinarily Lasallian volunteers are engaged in programs of education or of development that contribute in an important manner to the life of the people. At the same time these activities are valuable educational experiences for the participants. They come to know the richness of cultures previously unknown to them and grow in understanding and esteem for them. Because of the concrete service they have rendered and the personal relationships they have established, they become more aware of and more sensitive to the situation of third world peoples and frequently become more involved in the long-range struggle against poverty and structural injustice.

Lasallian Volunteers; one or more years

The movement of volunteers on a long-term basis has been evolving in diverse ways for many years. France, for example, has a long history of "co-operants". Numerous young men have collaborated in the apostolic works of the Institute overseas, as an acceptable alternative to mandatory military service. Some of them have lived with the Brothers. In recent years the Institute in France has transformed this programme into a volunteer program.

In 1988 an organised movement in North America emerged from an informally structured volunteer activity. The Institute named it the Lasallian Volunteer Movement. A very distinct feature of the Lasallian Volunteer Movement is that volunteers share all aspects of the community life of the Brothers, including community prayer and Eucharist. This past year there were thirty-four volunteers. Seventeen of them will continue for another year. Most of the volunteers are assigned within the United States to schools or centres that are at the service of the poor or lower middle-class. They work as teachers, teacher aids, catechists, youth ministers. Some are involved in literacy programs, sports, and a variety of youth activities. Others, however, work overseas in economically poor countries. Volunteers have served in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, and St. Vincent (in the Caribbean). A number of former volunteers are serving as teachers and youth ministers in Lasallian apostolates. Some of them are asking for some form of close "association" with the Brothers. Mexico has a different kind of program. All of their volunteers live together with a community of Brothers in a very poor area. They live an intense life of prayer, community, and service.

Lasallians are Men and Women of Service

I have spoken at length of the dimension of service. That is appropriate because the Lasallian movement is a movement of service. As such, it is demanding. It involves extraordinary sensitivity, generosity, and a willingness to sacrifice some leisure hours. As you perhaps know, De La Salle insisted that ardent zeal should characterise the life of the Brothers. That is a strong expression. Some shy away from the word "zeal" today, because it suggests to them fanaticism. The word certainly does suggest (and I think De La Salle wanted it to suggest) passion, fervour, eagerness. It is interesting to note that he frequently added for emphasis

the adjective ardent, which means burning. While avoiding fanaticism, we must give ourselves with loving enthusiasm to the service of others.

On many occasions, I have listened with great interest as young people have reflected on their particular experience of service. They invariably speak of the tremendous impact the experience has had upon them, asserting that they have received far more than they have given. Perhaps. Nevertheless, I think it important that young people recognise the good that their generous service renders to those in need.

I have heard Lasallians say that in serving others they have discovered or rediscovered religious faith. Very often a major factor has been the experience of living in close communion with persons, including young persons, who are firmly committed Christians. Some also relate that, as a result of having participated actively and personally in the local Church in a concerted effort to respond to the needs of the poor, they have discovered a new meaning of Church.

Young Lasallians, God has granted you the special grace of living your Christian faith as Lasallians. That is the meaning of the specific theme of this assembly: Walking together with De La Salle toward Jesus Christ. It is because of that special grace that you are here. God wants you to give yourself to the building of the Reign of God, a society where all persons can live in justice, dignity, and peace as sons and daughters of God and as brothers and sisters among themselves. This God of whom I speak is the loving and compassionate Father who forgave his young son and welcomed him back to the family. This God wants you to be loving and compassionate also, to be like the Good Samaritan, who generously and lovingly took extraordinary care of the man robbed and beaten nearly to death. It is not easy to be good Christians and good Lasallians. To be faithful requires faith, hope, love, and courage. We need to be aware that the euphoria of this assembly is not going to last. You are going to return in a few days to your everyday reality! To be faithful to the commitments you make during these days will require persistence and perseverance in the face of obstacles.