

Lasallian head finds hope in young people

Joshua J. McElwee | Feb. 17, 2012

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Lasallian Br. Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría visits with seventh-graders at the San Miguel School of Washington, D.C., Nov. 7.

You might call Br. Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría the superintendent of the superintendents.

The global head of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, Rodríguez is responsible for a religious congregation that oversees more than 1,000 teaching establishments in 82 countries, where about a million students are educated.

Adding to the responsibilities, Rodríguez, originally from Costa Rica, also oversees and cares for the institutes' 6,000 brothers and 100,000 lay colleagues.

In a phone interview with *NCR* during a comprehensive, two-week visit to the congregation's communities and ministries in Eastern United States and Canada in November, Rodríguez focused on his order's unique integration of religious and lay vocations and what the brothers' dedication to education says about the importance of the teacher globally.

Following is that interview, edited for clarity and length, which first appeared in shortened form in the Feb. 17-March 1 print issue of *NCR*.

***NCR:* There are many laypeople working in Lasallian institutes across the world. Can you talk about the relationship between Lasallian brothers and laypeople? How do they work together?**

Rodríguez: For us today, association with laypeople and with the world as a whole is not a new idea. We had association in the beginning of our congregation. In fact, our first vow is the vow of association for the service to the poor. Association for us is not a practical or programmatic way to do things, but mystical.

At the beginning, the association was among the brothers, between the brothers. Today, we think that this association is brother and laypeople and others living this mission together in the service of young people.

Everyone is called to holiness, not only the religious or a small group in the church. We all receive this call to holiness, and that is a new reason to continue the charisms of religious congregations. In the past, we thought those charisms were only for religious, but now the majority of the congregations recognize that charism is a gift of God for the church and that it can be lived in different ways. For us Lasallians, one way to live it is as a brother, but there are other ways to live it, too.

For example, I think we are living a change in our schools. Before, they were known as "the brothers' schools."

Now they're "the Lasallian schools" -- where brothers, laypeople, other religious and priests work together. We are all responsible for this mission.

I think almost all the roles of a brother can be done by laypeople. Here in your region, you have laypeople serving as presidents, principals, campus ministers and in all the other roles that before were only held by brothers.

But it is also important to remember that the brother cannot be replaced. As well, neither can laypeople. I think we have complementary vocations. We need one another in our mission.

Also, I think in our case we have another reality. In the United States and Canada, many people are Christian. But we are present also in other societies, especially in Asia and in the Middle East, where the majority of our partners, students and teachers practice other religions.

I think it's another dimension of our mission that we must speak of association with them as well -- whether it's Buddhists in Thailand or Muslims in Pakistan -- and build a world where all the people can live with dignity and respect.

I think the fact that we are called brothers is a great help to live association with laypeople. I think as we call ourselves brothers, we are a sign of baptismal equality. After Vatican II, it is very clear that the most important sacramental sign is this baptismal equality. After that, there are differences -- mission, vocation -- but at the beginning, we all live this baptismal equality.

I think the brothers' vocation is not always appreciated in the church, but I think it's an extraordinary vocation to point out this dimension of our life. Because of that, I think our process of association can be an inspiration for other congregations. At the same time, I think we need to live association not only with laypeople that we are working with, but also with other congregations.

In the United States, many Lasallians teach in low-income areas or work in the midst of very difficult conditions. What do you think their dedication says to society about the role of the teacher?

I think it's a very important question today. I have a great appreciation for the work of the brothers and the laypeople here.

In the case of many brothers, I see that in spite of their age, they continue working. Sometimes in their free time or even after retirement age, they continue working. It's a wonderful witness of zeal for young people, and of the continuing response to the new needs, the new poverties that we are living today.



I am very proud of this attitude of the brothers here, and of Lasallian laypeople.

In many countries, people do not have a great appreciation for teachers. This is opposed to the reality. I think the teacher continues to be one of the most important professions in the society today.

I remember always the words of Blessed Pope John XXIII, when he said in a papal audience once that for him there are three very important professions: doctor, priest and teacher. He said the doctor was important because he has a very strong relation with the body and the priest with souls. But the teacher developed the entire person.

The soul, body, hands, heart, head -- the entire person is important to the teacher.

I think it's a wonderful vocation, and I value the capacity of our Lasallian brothers and others to respond to the needs of young people today with creativity and zeal.

Our founder, St. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, said we should be open to give even our lives in the service to young people, and maybe the best example I have is the story of American Br. James Miller, who was killed in Guatemala in 1982. He was very young when he was killed. He was 37 years old, but all his life he lived very close to young people.

I remember that the day after Miller was killed, I was told of an American couple who had provided for a scholarship for a student in our school in Huehuetenango [in Guatemala]. One of the brothers at the school told me the student was not doing well. The brother said the teachers wanted to expel the student.

"I am going to take charge of this young man," the brother told me. "I will speak every night with him. Please find a way to continue the scholarship."

That was very moving, this witness of one of our brothers who gave his life in the service of young people.

What trends are you noticing in terms of vocations in the global south, Africa and Latin America? What benefits and difficulties are you finding?

I feel that it is a priority to think in plural when we speak about Lasallian vocations. It is not a vocation to be a brother, but a vocation to be a Lasallian. It is important to work hard to encourage vocations for men to become brothers, but at the same time we have to be aware that there are other Lasallian vocations.

I think we are living a different reality than 50 years ago. When I entered with the brothers, I was one of the first

brothers from Central America. All the other brothers were from Spain, the United States or other countries. Now, the majority of the brothers are from Central America and I think in Africa, we are living a similar situation.

We now have a fewer number of missionaries, and most of the brothers are local brothers. I think we are now an international institute. I don't know if in the future we'll have brothers from Africa, Asia and Latin America working in the United States, but I feel we need to think now in terms of international communities.

I think one very possible way to start forming an international community is to think of brothers from United States and Latin America working together for immigrant people in the U.S. and Canada. We need to work more at this international level.

As brothers and laypeople join the Lasallian mission in Africa or Latin America, what benefit of viewpoint, knowledge or experience do you think they'll bring to the order?

Well, in Africa, it's more difficult. In Africa, the principal concern now are young brothers. In many sectors in Africa, we have no elder brothers or middle-aged brothers. All the brothers are very young, and the initial formation in that moment is very important.

On the other hand, the economical situation for lay teachers is very difficult because many of them need to have two or three different jobs in order to live. It becomes more difficult to ask a teacher to focus solely on a Lasallian engagement in only one center or one school, but we are working on this.

For example, we have a wonderful group of volunteers in Cameroon. They are former students of our vocational technical school in Douala, and they have created a technical school in a small village. Some of them live together in community. Others support them, and it is a wonderful reality of laypeople in Africa engaged with the Lasallian mission.

Thinking more broadly, what's the bigger picture of your hopes and fears for your order?

In our last general chapter meeting, we brothers were asked to have open eyes and bonding hearts. I think that is the central call of all Lasallians.

I think what's most important is not the number or prestige of our schools. What's most important is to respond to the needs of young people. I think we must live this together, brothers and others, to feel that we are responsible for the Lasallian mission.

For me, this is my first challenge. The second is centered on the brothers. It is to live with authenticity our brother vocation and to remain a sign of hope for young people and partners. I think the most important thing for our brothers today is to be men of hope because young people need hope today.

The situation of our world is not easy, and all Lasallians need to be people of hope.

Our greatest hope, I think, is not in ourselves. We are all sinners and weak, but our hope is in God because God continues to wish for the salvation of all people, which was essentially the idea for our founder.

Our congregation was born to be an instrument for the salvation of young people. And God continues to wish for the salvation of all people, and it's important that we are instruments of this salvation as Lasallians.

For me, the experience that gives me great hope is the quality of the relationships that we are living in our schools worldwide. I think we are called to be witness of the possibility of living as brother and sister. A very important dimension of our mission is the witness of brotherhood and sisterhood.

Finally, I have a great hope in young people. They are very open and have a great concern for serving others. I have a wonderful image of the young American Lasallians. I think young people continue to be very generous, and I think we need to believe in them.

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