

A Gospel adventure

**Confronting new poverties
and the culture
of commodification**





READ The Parable of the Good Samaritan

(Lk 10:29-37)

*What is the Gospel
saying to us today?*

BIBLICAL ICON

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a simple Gospel adventure. There is a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho. Robbers attack, strip, and beat him. They leave him on the side of the road half-dead. A priest and a Levite pass by without helping him. But a Samaritan stops and cares for him, taking him to an inn where he pays for his care.

The parable of the Good Samaritan has been interpreted in many ways and the story has proved to be a popular one for homilies, meditations and retreats. The General Council invites Lasallians to re-read this parable in the light of our personal and collective responsibility to respond to the poor in our midst. This is a journey that requires us to embrace the condition of the poor with mercy and compassion. This is a journey of understanding of what it means to be human in a world that is increasingly consumerist and commercial.

PUTTING THE HUMAN PERSON AT THE HEART OF OUR LASALLIAN RESPONSE

1. “The cry of the poor”

Today poverty can no longer be considered solely as a problem arising from the social exclusion of individuals from the labor market. We live with a reality that is disconcerting in many ways. Unfortunately, other forms of poverty affect a diverse range of marginalized people and give rise to weak family and community relationships, crime, regional conflicts and violence, employment instability, social insecurity, illness, homelessness, social migration, and human trafficking.

As Brother Álvaro Rodríguez, former Superior General, emphasized, poverty takes many forms: there is the poverty of isolation and abandonment; the poverty of the excluded, who live on the edges of rich and opulent cities, those branded the society’s “failures”; the poverty of the victims of a culture of identity that refuses to accept what is different; the poverty of AIDS’ victims; the poverty of those entrapped in addictions; yet another poverty is the condition of those with physical or mental problems; the poverty of migrants and refugees, many of whom live in hiding; the poverty of those who are enslaved and trafficked; the poverty of those who live without God, of those who have deliberately removed God from their lives; finally, there is the poverty of those young people who live without meaning or trust in their lives.

2. “They carry out their mission as a witness, a service, and a communion”

It is now 336 years since De La Salle took the initiative and set out on a new way of life. He reached out to those who, like the half-dead



traveler, lay neglected and rejected at the side of the road. He saw that the children of the working class and the poor were neglected and rejected, without training or education. He formed a group of laymen into a body of teachers, and organized schools with a program that assured effective and excellent education for the young, especially the poor. As an Institute and as a Lasallian family, we continue to give to

the Church and the world a spirituality that is altogether original, one that is uniquely suited for people who are dedicated to Christian education.

Since the beginning of the Institute, it has responded boldly and creatively to the signs of the times to address forms of poverty through the educational works it has established. Throughout its history it has discerned often what is right and just. In the last 15 years, many of our responses have been documented in Bulletins 247 (*The Rights of the Child*), 248 (*Educational Innovations*), 249 (*Educating in Justice*), and 253 (*Children and Youth at Risk*); and MEL Bulletins 7 (*Priority of the Poor*), and 20 (*Educational Service of the Poor*).¹ Today, more than ever, we are called to make a qualitative leap in the way we share the joy of the Lasallian Mission as a Gospel adventure. We do this in the face of striking forms of poverty that often have at their root the commodification of both the human person and the earth we call our common home.

As Lasallians, we have always considered poverty and its impact on young people. Youth are the most vulnerable, and have the least choice and capacity to defend themselves. There isn't much they can do to help their families, nor should they have to. When they are first victims of poverty we know this is not right and just.

3. "What we have seen and heard"

We know very well that nearly all possible causes and effects of poverty have an impact on the lives of the young. Their lack of education, malnutrition, the violence they confront in their own homes, child labor, diseases of all kinds, are caused by poor infrastructures, unemployment, lack of basic services, inadequate income and deteriorating environmental conditions. We see that their sense of identity is under attack, from

pressures coming from people and nations with vested interests. Youth, especially the poor, are often seen as objects to be manipulated and with a price tag. One can often see that they are not treated as persons but as bar-coded commodities. Is this right and just?

a. *Commodification of Migrants*

One image of humanity that has shocked the world earlier this year was that of a dead 3-year-old boy, Aylan Kurdi, lying face down in the surf



at one of Turkey's main tourist resorts. This image once more put a human face on the dangers faced by hundreds of thousands of desperate people, especially the young, who risk life and limb to seek a new life beyond their country of origin. The migration crisis in Europe, that mirrors a phenomenon happening in many parts of the world, has reached an unprecedented level moving Pope Francis to call on every Catholic parish and religious community in Europe to take in a refugee family.

The current migration crisis brought about by

¹ See <http://www.lasalle.org/en/resources/publications/>

brutal wars, dictatorships, religious extremism, the collapse of states such as Libya and Syria, environmental disasters and grinding poverty has caused immense strain within the international community, especially in Europe and the developed countries. The focus of the media has been on the European response to this crisis. However, recent actions taken by some countries to address this migration issue highlight the increased dehumanization. We



have learned that a developed country has made an agreement with a third world country to effectively outsource its migrant issue. In this case, the price tag that has been put on the lives of immigrants is \$40 million in aid money that the developed country has traded for resettling them. By attaching a monetary value to this process, both countries have effectively condoned a form of cross-border commodification. Such a transaction turns the lives of people into commodities to be traded for aid money. If adequate attention is not given

to this type of crossborder commodification the crisis will continue to degrade the dignity of these migrants. Is this right and just?

b. Commodification of Urban Poor

Another reality is an increasing commodification in the way poverty is represented and marketed as part of urban planning. Many cities are eager to “beautify” their common spaces and move beggars, street children, and other undesirable citizens out of view in order to present a favorable image to tourists and potential investors. Other urban planners draw attention to marginalized people, social exclusion, gang life, drug districts, slums and poverty-ridden urban areas as tourist destinations. They see urban planning not with the eyes of a Good Samaritan but through the eyes of the robbers. Turning an impoverished area into a tourist attraction has its own dire consequences. Who actually gains or benefits when social inequality becomes part of urban planning and a project of potential investors? Is this right and just? How can we bring the mercy and compassion of the Samaritan to those who are excluded and dehumanized by market forces in our surroundings? As Lasallian educators, what is our responsibility in these kinds of situations?

c. Commodification of Youth

In the last two decades, the youth market has expanded dramatically, in terms of both their buying power and their influence on parental purchasing behaviors. We are also witnessing a lamentable process of commodification that is promoted by advertisers and marketers who treat the young as “saleable” objects. We see this in the way that youth are exploited in advertisements, in the proliferation of child pornography, child labor, organ and child trafficking, and other forms of modern human slavery. Indeed, poverty and commodification is a terrifying reality that upsets not only the social



order but also our sense of what it truly means to be human. Is this right and just?

4. “The urgent challenge to protect our common home”

Our Lasallian response must be right and just. Jesus’ parable was offered in response to the question, “And who is my neighbor?” Who then, today, is *my* neighbor? Who are my *new* neighbors? How can we bring the mercy and compassion of the Samaritan to the young, the poor, and the migrants who suffer the demoralizing effects of poverty? As Lasallian communities, how do we respond?

We are all created in God’s image, called to live in community, with responsibilities for sharing resources and caring for creation. We have a common project, to work toward the common good, and we do this in our common home. When people are reduced to instruments for gain and enrichment, they are no longer agents and authors of their own history. They lose their inherent dignity in this spiral of dehumanization. The world is trapped in a death-dealing system that defies God’s gift of life and creation, freely given to humanity to serve as its responsible stewards. It is in this context that, Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si’* (13), reminds us that,

“The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change.”

Pope Francis is calling us into an urgent, global moral conversation. Inherent in that is a conversion and transformation at every individual and social level. Catholic social teachings on stewardship, solidarity, and sustainability also invite us to act and advocate for those who endure poverty, especially the young and migrants. These are “our neighbors” with whom we share this common home. With Pope Francis, we too know that things can change.

The challenge is to take on the adventure of seeking sustainable and integral development. As Lasallians, we ask ourselves: Have political, social, and economic arrangements become ends in themselves, instead of means to integral development? What is the impact of these changing arrangements on those most impacted today, particularly the young and the migrants? Are the effects of these changes right and just?

5. “Those who instruct many in justice”

Jesus’s story of the Good Samaritan is meant to stir our heart so that we, at last, see the abandoned person at the side of the road to be embraced, as a neighbor. Investing in the integral development and protection of youth and migrants then becomes a Christian and Lasallian priority. We can no longer step conveniently to one side once we see the impact of commodification. When our most vulnerable neighbors are sold and used, we are compelled to act. We understand that our response requires an integrated and holistic approach supporting the communities in which migrants and youth live. We must be aware of their needs. We also recognize that there has to be a participatory involvement that will not only

produce active citizens of the future, but also provide sustainable solutions to the causes and effects of poverty and migration.

We do this “together and by association” and with radical availability. At the same time, we welcome the insight of the 43rd General Chapter that “the Institute does not presume that it alone has an effective educational approach and strategy to deal with present forms of poverty. This is why it considers it important to maintain relations and collaborate with other organizations...” Certainly, this calls for a new way of being in communion, a new way of being Church that can enrich our own understanding of our Lasallian vocation and mission.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, and human history we see over and over again that God’s people are on the move, fleeing oppression, war, enslavement, or other calamities and we always see the living God accompanying the poor, the migrants, and the young. For us, there is no clearer teaching from our faith tradition and ongoing Lasallian story than that we respond in justice to the plight of the poor, the migrant, and the young through education. For over 330 years of this God-is-with-us-story, we have shared St. La Salle’s love for the young, especially the poor. Our century, like the 17th and 18th, also suffers from indifference to those abandoned at the side of the road. Our challenge is to offer a radical welcome, the oil of mercy, compassion, and inclusion.

In Jesus, God knew what it meant to be a migrant and poor. Jesus gave us a blueprint in the Parable of the Good Samaritan of what our Gospel adventure involves. We should not fear the migrant or the poor. We can learn and be enriched by persons who are different to us. In fidelity to our Lasallian identity and ideals, we can discern what is right and just.



“Those who instruct many in justice shall shine like stars throughout eternity...”

(Daniel 12:3, St. La Salle, Med. 208.2)

PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. John Baptist de La Salle heard the Gospel question, “Who is my neighbor?” in 17th and 18th century France and responded as far as he was able and as God required of him. Who then, today, is *my* neighbor? How can we value *our* neighbor who has been devalued by society?

2. “School curricula are marked by their concern for the promotion of justice and peace, and the integrity of creation” (Rule, 17.1). How can we ensure that our educational centers become a powerful instrument of showing mercy and compassion to *our* neighbor, and at the same time challenge the unjust structures and policies that dehumanize the poor, migrants, and youth?

3. Pope Francis calls us to abandon the “economy of exclusion.” This encourages us to find space for treating *our* neighbor as a subject with dignity and inherent value rather than an object with a price tag. How can we practice a lifestyle of stewardship, solidarity, and sustainability towards *our* neighbor and help re-order society so that it promotes inclusivity and integral development rather than prejudice, dehumanization, and exclusion? What can we do in the face of the crisis of migration in different parts of the world? What actions can we undertake “together and by association” with Lasallians, policy-makers, non-governmental organizations, etc. to advocate for a just distribution and share of resources and inclusive growth on behalf of *our* neighbors?

4. In my own evangelical journey, which character do I identify with in the Parable of the Good Samaritan? What invitations do I hear from the Lord? What conversion is required of myself and within the Lasallian community? St. La Salle wrote that, “God expects you to touch hearts” (Med. 139.3). As you meditate on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, what kind of Gospel adventure do you find yourself called to in order to touch hearts?

5. “The Institute’s primary concern is the educational needs of those whose dignity and basic rights are not recognized. By its mission, it seeks to make it possible for them to live with dignity as sons and daughters of God” (Rule, 13). In my educational or religious community, what do we propose to do as a concrete response to the appeal of Pope Francis for every Catholic community to reach out in support of migrants?

Know more about the initiatives taken to respond to the poverties that surround us. Go to <http://www.lasalle.org>

Share your experiences and send them to comunicazione@lasalle.org

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2016-2017

“One Call, Many Voices”



November 29, 2015