

Faculty Convocation January 15, 2019

Happy New Year and happy spring semester to all.

As many of you are no doubt aware, April 7, 2019 marks the 300th anniversary of the event commemorated in the window here: the death, or, read more spiritually, the completion of the earthly life and entrance into eternity of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

Beginning with the feast of Christ the King this past November, Lasallians around the world have been gearing up to celebrate and reflect on the life and legacy of De La Salle, and on the continued value and vibrancy of the Lasallian charism today, in a constantly changing and always challenging world. Across the 65 Lasallian universities in our network—as well as in the more than 1,000 primary and secondary schools and other ministries that identify as Lasallian—the coming year will be marked with events and programs under the broad theme of the tercentenary: “One Heart; One Commitment; One Life.”

And so, by way of introduction to our faculty speaker (somewhat extended introduction, but I promise not too, too long!) let me take just a moment to provide a context within which I believe we can see this event itself as part of these tercentenary celebrations!

I'll begin with a text. The most recent issue of the Lasallian journal *Axis* contains a particularly helpful guide to thinking about where we are and where we're going in light of the Lasallian charism.

In the article, “The Lasallian Educational Network Today,” our own Brother William Mann, FSC, reflects on the anniversary, drawing upon his extensive experience, as a former Vicar General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, a university president emeritus (serving as president of St. Mary's, Minnesota from 2008-2018), and as past president of the International Association of Lasallian Universities.

Among the many insights in Brother William's essay, I find particularly compelling its challenge to us during the tercentenary year to re-examine and to re-tell the story of La Salle's life in light of our present moment—and in ways that both capture the imagination—the hearts and minds—of our students and help inform our way of proceeding as educators. Brother William selects just a couple of exemplary moments, asking how the 65 Lasallian colleges and universities around the world are drawing—or might draw—in their own unique ways, upon particularities of LaSalle's experience as a guide or “lynchpin” for putting in action the spiritual depths of the founding vision.

As I read each exemplary moment cited by Brother William, I was both heartened and challenged—*heartened* because for each example I could name many ways in which we do indeed put the charism into action here at Manhattan College; *challenged* because in every instance there is so much more to do!

For example, he asks, what do we or might we draw upon from the fact that in 1671-1672 . . . [La Salle], then a 20 year old university student like our students today, was forced to interrupt his studies when, within a very short period of time, both of his parents died and he was called home to serve as guardian for his six orphaned siblings?

In response, I think of all of the people in this community who, day in and day out, work with students who come to us from tremendously varied backgrounds, meeting them where they are as full human persons. I think of our commitment to excellence in our School of Continuing and Professional Studies, and the tailoring of its courses and pedagogy to students, many of whom have not been privileged to have a “traditional” uninterrupted path to a degree. I think of the many programs we have in place through which we try to identify and assist students who are going through significant disruption in their lives—or for whom past disruptions have put them at a disadvantage in some aspect of their studies.

I think of our efforts in support of commuter students, or our military veterans—efforts that recognize and address the fact that many of these students struggle to balance significant responsibilities outside of the College community with their studies. I think as well of our investments in counseling services, including efforts to assist the growing number of our students who are carrying the burden of anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues. All of these reflect and embody what it means to be Lasallian. What more can we do?

Another “moment” cited by Brother William is 1678. In that year and into the next, *before* the founding of the schools that would eventually bear his name, La Salle worked assiduously with a group of women, the Holy Infant Jesus Sisters of Rheims, accompanying them and assisting them to establish themselves as a legal entity in civil society.

He thus, in Brother William’s words “helped make it possible for [these women] to remain the protagonists in their own project,” which involved “caring for hundreds of working class and poor girls . . . a number of whom had been left vulnerable orphans due to the wars, famine, and disease of the times.”

Is this a part of the story that we tell and reflect upon often enough? What does this moment and this part of La Salle’s religious calling tell us about what it means to be Lasallian?

Here, I think of the exciting work of our faculty, in collaboration with students and our Student Life administration, in the establishment last year of our Lasallian Women and Gender Resource Center and its great promise in assisting us to mine the depths of our heritage in addressing pressing contemporary issues.

I think about the many and varied ways in which our faculty guide students to identify the root causes of inequality, including inequality based on gender, preparing them not just to recognize and potentially ameliorate their effects, but to correct them.

I think of all of the powerful research our faculty are doing on complex issues such as the plight of migrants and refugees, the struggles of those living in poverty, or the effects of climate change on vulnerable populations. Much more could easily be cited; and how much more needs to be done!

Citing the well-known events of 1680-81—the actual founding of “a new kind of school for working class and poor boys”—Brother William lays particular emphasis on the fact that the *excellence* of these schools attracted within just a few years “students from families who could afford to send their sons to other schools,” producing an extraordinary blending of pupils from across the economic spectrum in the classroom of these new schools.

Here, I think of how from its founding Manhattan College has worked creatively to instantiate this aspect of the charism, ministering to the new immigrant communities of New York City (from generation to generation) with programs whose excellence made the College a school of choice, even for those who had a choice. The commitment to first-generation students, to recent immigrants and their children, and to students from across the economic spectrum continues. As does the unstinting commitment to providing the challenge and support that all students need to achieve academic excellence and personal development.

Brother William's fourth "moment"—the establishment in 1865 of the *first teacher training school in the world*—reminds us of a particular characteristic of specifically Lasallian academic excellence, excellence in teaching.

So we are justly proud of the work of our School of Education and Health in continuing the legacy of teacher preparation. But beyond that, we stand in a tradition that regards teaching as extraordinarily important work.

For La Salle, nothing less than the "salvation" of the young people "entrusted to [our] care" is at stake in the teacher-student relationship, and therefore the teacher needs all of the support possible to assure that his or her teaching is particularly effective. Teaching, if I may be permitted an un-Lasallian paraphrase of La Salle, is hard work! Done well (as no one here needs to be told) it involves a level of relational commitment that is sometimes exhilarating, sometimes profoundly disappointing, sometimes deeply satisfying, always demanding, and often exhausting.

And this brings me to another powerful point made in Brother William's essay: that is, that, while the "key to Lasallian education" is "the relationship of teacher and student," in which the teacher invites the student to enter into a new way of being in relationship with other students, the "real wisdom of De La Salle" was the importance of the teachers' modeling for students the kind of relationship they wish ultimately for the students to be able to have with one another. Thus, the power of the idea of Brotherhood (or today, of Brotherhood and Sisterhood!). The teachers support one another in order to support students in their development of a capacity for deep relationship.

As I read this, I realized that this understanding of the importance of these relationships—relationships among our faculty—was really what inspired the shift, five years ago, in the focus of these spring convocations. In the past, the main focus had been similar to that of the fall convocation, basically an update on the kind of "state-of-the-college" overview that is presented each September.

Starting in January 2015, the main focus of this event became the work of the faculty, as colleagues were asked to reflect on their own work, in teaching and/or research, in light of some aspect of their understanding and adaptation of Lasallian mission.

The idea was to provide an opportunity for colleagues to share with colleagues some of the creative and innovative ways in which our Lasallian heritage is being brought to life every day in our classrooms, laboratories, service-learning sites, and above all in the relationships that we model and help create among our students, between students and faculty, and among the faculty themselves.

So, in 2015, religious studies professor Andrew Skotnicki spoke to us about the extraordinary work he has been doing for many years at the intersection of theological ethics and criminal justice, including his tireless efforts to provide to incarcerated students the single-most important thing they need to break the cycle of poverty and despair upon release: access to education. Indeed, it is difficult to point to an initiative that is more directly in the founding spirit of Lasallian education than is the work of Andrew and his students at Rikers Island and, more recently, at the Westchester County Jail.

In January 2016, we heard from Heidi Laudien of our department of English, who has taken a leadership role in Manhattan's participation in the New American Colleges and Universities (NAC&U), a national organization of like-minded institutions "dedicated to the purposeful integration of liberal education, professional studies, and civic engagement." NAC&U's mission has obvious affinities with ours, in its stress on what Brother William calls (as one of his six "characteristics of the Lasallian Educational heritage for our time") "practical" education, by which he does not mean mere training in technical competence, but preparing students fully, through an education that is both broad and deep for work (or "Career craft"), life (or "Soul Craft") and civic engagement.

Jessica Wilson, of our department of civil and environmental engineering, was our featured speaker two years ago, in 2017, and spoke about her work, through a faculty-enrichment program sponsored by Catholic Relief Services (CRS), in connecting her research on emerging technologies for drinking water treatment with CRS initiatives to serve the immediate needs of people in the developing world for whom access to potable water is a major, life-and-death, matter. As I remember those remarks, Professor Wilson also spoke with us about how the association with CRS had energized her teaching as well, providing a focus for her students who were tremendously motivated by the real-world implications of what they were learning in the classroom, lab, and in the field.

And last year we heard from philosophy professor David Bollert about how he, building upon the work of his colleague Stephen Kaplan with our military veterans, created a course (War and Return) and a forum (Open Table) through which these students were able to explore their own journeys through the lens of Homer's *Odyssey* and its complex and powerful depiction of the warrior's journey back into community.

All of these talks, I would argue, were excellent examples of our Lasallian heritage in action—all featured faculty members who model for our students the connection between learning and living, reflection and action, and personal development and preparation to be of service to others. All were deeply embedded in an ethos of collaborative work, as well, modeling for students the power of the community of scholars supporting one another's efforts.

And this year's speaker is no exception.

While I don't know precisely what Dr. Poonam Arora has prepared to speak with us this afternoon, I think I know enough about her work—in research, teaching, and mentoring—to be confident that we're about to hear a fifth chapter of this series, "Lasallian education in action."

Currently serving as chair of the management and marketing department of the O'Malley School of Business, Professor Arora specializes in interdisciplinary research into the “influence exerted by social factors on individual and organizational tradeoffs in social and environmental dilemmas.”

Of special interest in her research are the decision-making practices of agribusinesses, especially in South America, and recently she led a group of students on a study trip to Peru, where they explored such tradeoffs in a real-world situation, working with landowners to understand what kinds of systems and incentives might be employed to encourage more environmentally friendly and more sustainable alternatives to gold mining.

Professor Aurora, thank you for sharing your work with us today—and for helping us in our continuing celebrations of La Salle @ 300!