

Carlos G. Gómez Restrepo, fsc

The Lasallian Mission in Latin America and the Caribbean: A challenge full of hope



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44

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English translation: Br Allen Geppert fsc

Brothers of the Christian Schools
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Presentation

As it faces the reality of each of the Lasallian Regions, the Lasallian Educational Mission has made significant contributions in improving the social well-being of people, especially children and the young, in terms of their right to an education.

In this new MEL Bulletin, Brother Carlos Gabriel Gómez Restrepo shares with us his thoughts on the reality of Latin American and the Caribbean, and the contributions which the Lasallian Educational Mission can continue to make on this continent.

This reflection was given by Brother Carlos in a talk at the Latin-American Lasallian Education Conference held in 2010 in Brazil.

The MEL Bulletin 44 offers a new opportunity to continue sharing the Lasallian Educational Mission in our Institute.

Br. Jorge Enrique Fonseca Sánchez

Introduction

For many years and on many occasions we have considered topics very similar to the one which is the object of this presentation. The situation in this continent continues to be challenging, although it would appear, the ways we have responded to it have given rise to conflicting feelings, which range from enthusiasm and euphoria to dissatisfaction and a resigned acceptance of what has been done; from a feeling of being inadequate to deal with social, political and economic issues, passing through a stage of critical passivity desiring renewal, to autistic entrenchment in institutions in a search for certainties which give us security but hinder our searching.

As this topic has been treated frequently, what I should like to do is simply go back to questions which are liable to resurface, and perhaps add a few observations, wishing more than anything else to rekindle hope and invite you, on an occasion such this, to continue searching, and above all, to risk some of our historical assets to promote the cause of justice through education, with creativity, determination and opportuneness. I shall try to illustrate some of my observations both from our own context as well as from that of our Lasallian colleagues, but avoiding value judgments. I am quite aware that my subjectivity can creep in wherever it can in my presentation; I do not claim to say everything there is to say on this topic, nor do I feel that what I say is indisputable. In fact, everything can be questioned, and if it provokes discussion, I think it will have served its purpose. To exorcise certain demons, I should like to be clear from the start about an idea which I am deeply convinced about, and which will be a clear leitmotiv in my approach to contexts, and regarding the signs of hope I encounter. The idea is obviously not new, but it may be uncomfortable, or may have been discarded. I think that the Lasallian mission has meaning only if our work and our thinking - formerly, we would have called this "praxis" - come together in our commitment to the poor and the promotion of justice. Over and above contexts and what happens in them, macro-economic models, the development of technology, political practices and new contemporary ideologies; over and above all these, the founding and refounding

act of De La Salle has as its starting point the following of Jesus Christ in the world of education through a commitment to promote human dignity, through a fight for the suppression of poverty and new forms of marginalisation, and the building of an equitable and inclusive society. I felt it necessary to express this conviction at the start for the sake of honesty and clarity.

1. A glance at the situation in this continent

There is a difficulty I feel it is important for me to explain: it is not easy nowadays to speak of Latin America and the Caribbean (ALC) in terms of a homogenous whole, or in the way in which, in the 20th century, we referred to it as a Region. In those days, there were many trials, especially of a political nature, which made it easier for us to speak of such common things as the existence of dictators, of the quasi religious monopoly of the Catholic Church, of theories which were applied almost dogmatically in the analysis of dependence or national security. Today, however, things vary quite a lot from place to place. And so, to base our thinking simply on a geographical entity would be pointless and very difficult to work with. There are in fact many writers who question the validity of this approach and the usefulness of any analysis on the basis of it. Hence the impossibility, for example, of speaking about Latin-American literature, as was done in the 60s and 70s; and the difficulty of broaching the subject of present-day socio-political trials without arousing passions and opposing alignments¹.

Heterogeneity may be the common characteristic of this geographical entity, but it still preserves cultural influences and historical factors which make us feel we are Latin Americans, even though we certainly do not know what this sense of belonging means, nor how to find any tangible links we can analyse. In our days, magical realism, the impossibility of democracy, tragic fate, the back yard, on-going revolution, the Church of hope, the young continent, failed countries, and many other vibrant and striking examples we could find, are not the best way to describe the present situation, because they are imprecise, or not equally applicable to existing conditions in the various countries. No doubt, the days when reality was stranger than fiction, so typical

¹ Jorge Volpi, for example, in "The insomnia of Bolivar" makes a serious and well-documented survey of political and literary themes. He concludes, however, that the political history of the Continent is a failed history, with more failures than successes. I do not agree with his views, although I recognise the important line of argument in his work.

of our literature, have given way to a time in which the global, interconnection, the virtual, information, technologies, migration, all are everyday factors which make us turn our attention more to the complexity and interaction of all kinds of systems, than to the romantic and sentimental description of all our tragedies. Despite all this, the United Nations - or more exactly, the UN Development Programme (PNUD) - continues to publish information under the heading "Region", meaning by this the geographical entity; and in addition to this focus on geography, it presumes in practice that conditions are identical, and that each country has the same historical advantages and functions in the same way. In the same way, the Church - which no longer exercises any kind of hegemony - publishes and composes its documents on a regional basis. The same can be said of the strategic and socio-political analyses produced by researchers, governments and government or non-government organisations; as also when we Lasallians meet as members of RELAL, and when we try to think about ourselves or perhaps launch projects on a regional level, even though we know the difficulties this will create.

And yet, despite all the difficulties, we continue to think of ourselves as Latin Americans, even though as such, we look for different ways of becoming part of the global world, and we do this, no doubt, because the direction taken by some countries of this area in the last few years has enabled them to grow significantly in terms of equality and the solution of great problems, and the improvement of the living standards of significant groups of people. Perhaps this reality is a challenge for us to think of the Region with greater imagination and creativity, at this favourable moment of history - the celebration of the bicentenaries; and when many observers of world politics see that, never before, have there been the conditions that exist now for growth which can be capitalised on to overcome centuries of poverty, exclusion and injustice². I believe that if we manage to think imaginatively, setting aside ideologically-based polarisation or temptations to create a hegemony - this time of a national character - we shall have a better chance of succeeding in becoming players in the world economy,

² Cf. The Economist "Nobody's Backyard", September 9th, <http://www.economist.com/node/16990967>

in the new centres of power and growth, and make the most of our resources for the benefit of the majority.

1.1 The appearance of new actors and readjustment of institutions

The last decade of the 20th century and the first of the 21st made possible the appearance of new organisations and the replacement of actors within the Region. These are beginning to have an effect on it which it is impossible to ignore, and reveal in some way very important political trends.

After the signing of the Free Trade Treaty (TLC) by Mexico, the United States and Canada in 1993, a trend began to be noted or formalised which had serious consequences within the countries. In fact, the question of trade began to be the focus of interest, more than political concerns properly so called. The North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has had an impact on the labour market, on import duties, on ability to negotiate, on the foreign policies of the member nations. Nevertheless, unlike trade integration, this has not meant, for example, for Mexico, a different policy regarding migration and free circulation of people. The problem has been exacerbated by State laws as in Arizona, and by the inability of the United States to draw up a less discriminatory policy regarding immigrants.

Central America and the Dominican Republic negotiated a free-trade treaty en bloc. As such they signed the agreement with the United States, and although some governments, such as that of Nicaragua, have not approved it, the treaty still holds and is beginning to be implemented. Peru and Chile count on free-trade treaties with the United States, while Panama and Colombia are waiting for the ratification of theirs. In the same way, treaties with the European Union have been signed. I am making no value judgments about this: enough of these have been made in each of the countries concerned by those who support them and those who oppose them. What I should like to point out is a factor impossible to ignore, and which on the one hand, demonstrates the difficulty of thinking of the Region as a homogeneous entity; and on the other, shows also that the regulations and dreams of regional integration which were current only two decades ago,

can no longer be entertained without bearing these changes in mind. Also, in these discussions, we cannot fail to notice the very high degree of political polarisation that these questions create in the population.

Two countries in the Region have joined the Organisation for Cooperation and Economic Development (OCDE): Mexico in 1994, and Chile in 2010, joining already existing members Brazil, Argentina and Peru. This body, consisting initially of countries involved in the implementation of the Marshal Plan, evolved into an organisation to coordinate the economic and social policies of countries with high incomes, which sought stability in their policies and in their political system. Today, Brazil, Mexico and Argentina are members of the group of the 20 richest countries, at a time when integration with Pacific Asia has enabled Peru and Chile to do much of their trade with the Asian Tigers and especially China. Mercosur comprises Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, while the Andean Community of Nations, much weakened now because of problems involving the international relations of these countries, is formed of Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. ALBA (which includes Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Ecuador and some other English-speaking Caribbean countries) also has been formed under the leadership of Venezuela. At the same time, the countries of South America, under the leadership of Brazil - today an economic giant - have recently approved Unasur (2008), and the Central American countries endorsed SICA in 1991, (System for the Integration of Central America). The message is clear: it has been very difficult to integrate all the countries of the Region, either because of the very different economic situations, ideological positions, or the personalities of those who govern us. Perhaps this has meant that opportunities were lost as well as the ability to negotiate en bloc, but perhaps also this was a way to go forward and grow, without the burden of a Region which is reluctant to accept coordination and convergence, and which instead perhaps continues to engage in eternal discussions involving ideology and history, without however ever arriving at decisions which can bring about a greater possibility for development.

Ideologically-based political polarisation has become more intense in the region in the last few years, although it has not created radical divisions or polarisation in all cases. Brazil, Uruguay,

Argentina and, until recently, Chile, have shown a tendency to embrace the new left, which accepts and promotes the free market and do not base themselves on historical socialist models, most of which disappeared following the events of 1989 and 1990 in Europe. Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia and, with less enthusiasm, Ecuador, appear to have aligned themselves with the Cuban model and the so-called "Socialism for the 21st century", although the very obvious terrible divisions and internal wrangling make it impossible to see clearly if the model will manage to be consolidated, or will undergo surgery with a reserved prognosis, as it begins to resemble Cuba itself, and Bolivia, where the spectre of secession is a recurrent presence in the background. Other less boisterous alignments have appeared, which promise to be more effective, with their attention fixed on the Pacific and the Asian Tigers: such is the case of Chile, Peru and Colombia. Venezuela is constantly looking for an opening onto the Pacific; and Panama has pinned its future on it by the enlargement of the canal because the economic powerhouse of the world seems to be rapidly moving to the Far East. Also there are the unforeseeable consequences of the ever increasing prominent presence of Iran and Russia in the Region, among other things, they share their anti-North American views with numerous Latin American countries and groups, at a time when the United States views the Region with indifference.

While what we have said above refers to socio-political and basically financial operations, it is equally important to recognise that the power of the drug trafficking and criminal activity of the cartels and of organisations, whose power is as gigantic as it is underestimated, has checkmated governments and entire societies. Limited initially to Colombia and considered by others as local and someone else's problem, it now threatens various countries in the area, either because it is underestimated, ignored or because of connivance. Mexican society is a prey to its onslaughts, and its turmoil contaminates Central American countries. In any case, it does not sound intelligent to turn a blind eye in the face of such a scourge which is metastasing in various ALC countries. Its power of corruption knows no limits or frontiers, and its consequences affect complete generations, not only to the extent that it represents the cancer of consumerism, but also the cultural notion of easy money, and "everything has a solution", because every-

thing has its price. Perhaps, as never before, we need to think about the political, educational and cultural and all kinds of consequences, in which persons, institutions and all things have a value but not a price.

1.2. Economic growth and the smaller impact of the world financial crisis

The Region has witnessed in the last few years, and especially in the last 10, a marked trend of economic growth. Although this growth slowed down in 2008 and 2009 on account of the financial crisis in the United States and Europe, the forecast for 2010 and 2011 is a return to growth. Table 1 shows how our countries grew once the crisis of the early years of the decade had been overcome, and the projected growth for 2011. And although the figure shows sustained growth - a factor which has been elusive in our Region - this growth has not automatically resulted in having a real impact on improving the living conditions of the most poor. On the contrary, as we shall see later, poverty has increased, and the gap between the rich and the poor has as a consequence widened.

| | | True GDP | | | | GDP per capita | | | |
|-----------|-----|--------------------------------|------|------|------|-----------------------|-------|------------|--------------|
| | | Annual variation in percentage | | | | | | | |
| | | Terms | | | | US \$ (present value) | | Human Dev. | |
| | | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2007 | 2008 | 2007 | Rating in HD |
| Brazil | 5,1 | -0,2 | 5,5 | 4,1 | 7013 | 8205 | 0,813 | 77 | |
| Mexico | 1,5 | -6,5 | 4,2 | 4,5 | 9715 | 10232 | 0,854 | 53 | |
| Argentina | 6,8 | 0,9 | 3,5 | 3 | 6645 | 8236 | 0,866 | 49 | |
| Colombia | 2,4 | 0,1 | 2,2 | 4 | 4684 | 5416 | 0,807 | 75 | |
| Venezuela | 4,8 | -3,3 | -2,6 | 0,4 | 8299 | 11246 | 0,844 | 58 | |
| Peru | 9,8 | 0,9 | 6,3 | 6 | 3771 | 4477 | 0,806 | 78 | |
| Chile | 3,7 | -1,5 | 4,7 | 6 | 9851 | 10084 | 0,878 | 44 | |
| Ecuador | 7,2 | 0,4 | 2,5 | 2,3 | 3432 | 4056 | 0,806 | 80 | |
| Bolivia | 6,1 | 3,3 | 4 | 4 | 1378 | 1720 | 0,729 | 113 | |

Source: Report on World Economy Prospects-FMI.April 2010

World Bank- Indicators of World Development/Report on Human Development for ALC Region 2010

Nevertheless, and for the first time in many decades, a very important fact comes to light: the realisation that the countries of the Region have felt to a lesser extent the crisis of the developed countries, and the turmoil created was less dramatic than in pre-

vious times of crisis. From this one could infer a number of positive signs, such as, less dependence on the economies of the countries with which traditionally we trade; an extension of internal and external markets; a healthy and robust financial system; and the diversification of trade links which extend today to other latitudes. This could be an interesting point of change of direction in order to reduce dependence, and be able to grow on a more solid basis.

1.3 Economic growth without equity

*“Latin America is the most unequal region in the world. There are normative and practical reasons which determine that high levels of inequality and constitute an obstacle for social advancement. Inequality and its visible manifestations in society are an unquestionable reality for any citizen”.*³

These words are from the opening page of the latest report on the UN Development Programme distributed in Costa Rica last July.

| GINI INDEX | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|---------------------|----------|-------|-------|-------|
| Poverty and distribution of revenue value if between 0 and 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1999-98 | | | 2002 | | | Year* | National | Urban | Rural | |
| National | Urban | Rural | National | Urban | Rural | | | | | |
| Argentina | 0,539 | 0,542 | | 0,578 | 0,590 | 2006 | 0,519 | 0,510 | | |
| Bolivia | 0,586 | 0,504 | 0,640 | 0,614 | 0,554 | 0,632 | 2007 | 0,565 | 0,499 | 0,599 |
| Brasil | 0,640 | 0,625 | 0,577 | 0,639 | 0,628 | 0,581 | 2008 | 0,594 | 0,586 | 0,534 |
| Chile | 0,560 | 0,552 | 0,494 | 0,552 | 0,547 | 0,507 | 2006 | 0,522 | 0,517 | 0,506 |
| Colombia | 0,572 | 0,564 | 0,525 | 0,569 | 0,576 | 0,499 | 2005 | 0,584 | 0,587 | 0,495 |
| Ecuador | | 0,526 | | | 0,513 | | 2008 | 0,504 | 0,480 | 0,458 |
| Guatemala | 0,560 | 0,525 | 0,510 | 0,542 | 0,525 | 0,472 | 2006 | 0,585 | 0,547 | 0,526 |
| Honduras | 0,564 | 0,517 | 0,512 | 0,588 | 0,533 | 0,519 | 2007 | 0,580 | 0,494 | 0,571 |
| Mexico | 0,539 | 0,507 | 0,486 | 0,514 | 0,476 | 0,498 | 2008 | 0,524 | 0,466 | 0,546 |
| USA | | | | | | | 0,41 | | | |
| France | | | | | | Average 1992-2007** | 0,38 | | | |

* Last year available

** United States as continental reference and France as reference for Top Ten of IDH International.

Source: CEPALSTAT-Banco Mundial

³ PNUD: UN Development Programme in Latin America and the Caribbean 2010.

This whole report merely demonstrates by its figures and its warnings a situation which is not a secret for anyone, because it is enough simply to look at everyday life in our countries. However, the report is not a simplistic view of reality. Every page makes us look at the magnitude of the problem, and tries to sort out the data in a way that can help us to understand the complexity of the problem. I shall not try to summarise the report, but, basing myself on its data as well as on the data in other reports, I would like to extrapolate some elements which can help us to see the seriousness of the question, especially those which affect aspects which are connected with our mission. The most irrefutable and sad conclusion is that, in the last few years, poverty, destitution and inequality have been growing. There is certainly more wealth, but it is distributed worse than before, which shows regrettably a greater degree of inequality which, in some cases, is scandalous.

Nevertheless, as we shall see later, it has to be admitted that there has been progress, although uneven, regarding the reduction of poverty, and greater educational possibilities.

1.4 A glance at the educational sector

The Region reports significant progress regarding the provision of education, especially in the primary and secondary school sector. The various States have made a lot of efforts to eradicate illiteracy, to promote universal primary education, to increase secondary education provision, and to a lesser degree, the number of places available in higher education. While it is clear that significant progress has been made, it is also true that it is insufficient especially in some areas in the various countries, basically, in rural areas and in the poverty-ridden suburbs ringing our big cities. It is worth the trouble to look at the situation from the point of view of provision and quality - which do not always go hand-in-hand.

1.4.1 Educational provision

The increase in the provision of proper schooling for children is one of the great achievements of the Region as a whole. Although information varies substantially from country to country, in general, there is more progress regarding primary education, the pop-

ulation completing between 5 and 6 years of schooling. It is true that the countries of the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay) had achieved almost universal provision of basic education by the end of the 90s. However, today, most of the countries have done the same, and a few stragglers have almost done so. Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela and Brazil have reached the target of making complete primary education universal, producing figures indicating close to 100% provision - a reason why the quantitative increase is impressive. There are countries which are lagging behind, such as Guatemala, Nicaragua and Haiti, the latter with the distressing figure of 58% provision. It is important to point out that at a time when provision is being improved, governments have made an effort to provide children in primary State schools in deprived sectors and in rural areas, with supplementary food (breakfast, afternoon snack, etc) to help the children to maintain nutritional levels which will enable them to learn and to stay at school to complete their schooling. This is no doubt a very important achievement. A hungry child cannot learn and develop his or her basic powers of thinking and have a good education.

There has been important progress also regarding secondary-school education. Although complete universality has not been achieved, policies implemented by the various countries, especially in the last 10 years, have produced good results. According to the most recent data available, from 2007 or 2008, Argentina, Uruguay and Chile have extended education for their population to 11 years; Costa Rica to 8A7; Colombia and Ecuador to 7A9.

| | | Raw enrollment figures (%) | | |
|-----------|------|-----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | | Most recent year available | | |
| | Year | 6-12 years old | 13-17 years old | 18-23 years old |
| Argentina | 2008 | 98,8 | 90,3 | 48,3 |
| Brasil | | 97,9 | 89,8 | 34,4 |
| Ecuador | | 97,7 | 83,4 | 42,2 |
| Mexico | | 98,1 | 76 | 33,2 |
| Peru | | 98,2 | 89,3 | 41,5 |
| Colombia | 2006 | 94,5 | 82,9 | 31,7 |
| Venezuela | | 97,5 | 84 | 53 |
| Chile | | 98,9 | 94,1 | 44,5 |
| Bolivia | 2005 | 95,5 | 88,3 | 50 |

Source: *Regional Report on Human Development for ALC 2010.*

In the case of Guatemala, Nicaragua and Haiti, in this area also, their schooling provision is the shortest. The following table illustrates rate of enrollment in school by year and age, in some countries.

Greater investment in education is a question of basic social justice. The extension of access to education should produce as a result better opportunities for social mobility, but not in the way in which it did only 10 years ago. The very high correlation between level of education and level of income is not so high today, although it is significant. A low level of education, however, means exclusion and very low wages. In other words, a completed course of primary and secondary school education does not automatically give access to better-paid work; and this is even true in the case of persons who have completed university studies. We could be faced with erudite unemployment.

1.4.2. The problem of quality

This is a difficult question to broach, even though we agree with the idea that poor-quality education produces more inequality and the lack of opportunities. The understanding of what is meant by quality varies greatly from writer to writer, so it makes sense to put what education offers into a context. In any case, there are indicators which enable us to identify some basic qualities education should have today in Latin America and the Caribbean. This education should provide expert communication skills permitting competent use of basic languages (native language and another language), and of media technology; offer training in citizenship as a means of strengthening democratic society, its institutions, civic ethics and respect for human rights; instruct in the use of mathematics and its abstract operations; and provide a good grounding in the natural sciences in order to understand the world better, and respect habitats. To this we need to add, as part of the process, training for work.

A world which is moving at increasing speed towards globalisation is also beginning to look for a way of establishing comparative standards to make it possible to measure quality, or at least, some aspects of it. Without falling into the trap of absolutising these indicators, we should not either reject them out of hand. What happens is that, although in many cases we do not agree, it is not a reason for not applying them or using them to assess our-

selves. The Pisa⁴ tests were designed to be used to promote the standardisation of educational policies by the OECD. However, the number of countries which have adopted them has increased gradually, and these tests are beginning to be used as a means of measuring the quality of the basic education provided in the area of mathematics, sciences and languages, three areas of learning considered fundamental for access to higher education, and also as basic elements, without which it would be very difficult to say that our educational process is working to promote a society or an economy based on knowledge.

| PISA Tests | Scores | | |
|---------------------|----------|---------|-------------|
| | Sciences | Reading | Mathematics |
| Argentina | 391 | 374 | 381 |
| Brasil | 390 | 393 | 370 |
| Chile | 388 | 442 | 411 |
| Colombia | 410 | 385 | 370 |
| México | 428 | 410 | 406 |
| Uruguay | 438 | 413 | 427 |
| Prom. Latinoamérica | 408 | 403 | 394 |
| OCDE | 500 | 492 | 498 |

It is obvious that the role of education, or its principal aim, is not to ensure that students score high marks in these tests. According to the Ancient Greeks and to history in general, the fundamental aim of education is to help people to grow and to make good citizens. Catholic education, and consequently Lasallian education, has always defended the holistic approach to education, in such a way that results in different areas of learning are merely components of a much more complex process. In fact, we would maintain here that the role of education in the construction of civilisation can be equated with its capacity to produce men and women critically aware of the unbridled consumerism which imposes the current economic model; of the media and communication technology; of basic human values such as solidarity and compassion; of the reinforcement of democracy, and of political participation.

Hence, my invitation is not to absolutise, but neither is it to discount the fact that educational quality lies in the acquisition of

⁴ Programme for International Student Assessment.

competence in the sciences, mathematics and languages. So it might be worthwhile to search for indicators which will enable us to assess whether the education we call “holistic” is of a recognised quality, and is therefore officially evaluated. It would be useful also if we asked ourselves how we evaluate the quality of the pastoral element in our educational provision, since we are not speaking here of assessing by means of standard tests, but rather by a critical examination with clear benchmarks regarding approach, reflection and the impact of the approach used.

Most of the countries in the Region have set up assessment procedures and specific forms to “render an account”. There are processes going on of accreditation or certification of schools and colleges, which concentrate on how an establishment functions, meets standards, and checks on the state of the premises. Countries have developed ways of testing knowledge and ability by means of standard tests, in view of access to higher education, but also to check on improvement in quality. These tests are given to students at the end of their secondary education, and frequently at other times in the course of their studies. In the same way, evaluation procedures have been put in place in various countries for the assessment of teachers which, in many cases, can affect the professional stability of teachers in the system. The thought is beginning to gain ground, if only timidly, that perhaps the results of the students should be a criterion in the evaluation of teachers.

This is a thorny question in the Region because it is closely connected with the working and living conditions of our teachers. It is clear that a system which wishes to improve its quality requires better teachers, who are better trained and have better opportunities. The working conditions of teachers differ greatly from country to country, but in many cases, their conditions are still precarious. Here, therefore, two policies are needed. On the one hand, assessment procedures and accountability on the part of the teachers; and on the other, more and better opportunities for training and incentives, not only to improve the working and living conditions of the teachers, but also to make the profession attractive.

1.4.3. Higher education

The case of higher education is somewhat different and it is difficult to identify a general homogeneous trend in all the countries of the Region. It is understandable that essentially the main thrust has

been concentrated on the basic stages of education, and therefore attention to higher education has been neglected. All the same, the more developed countries are also those which have made significant progress in the provision and quality of their universities.

The number of State universities has remained stable in the majority of countries in the last ten years. Some countries have made a great effort to increase the provision in existing public universities, as well as to promote higher technical and technological studies. However, at the same time, there has been a great increase in the involvement of the private sector at the higher education level to run courses, but at the same time, this involvement gives rise to doubts regarding the quality of what is offered. There are also virtual or partial-attendance courses which are rapidly increasing in number and are giving rise to the same questions regarding quality and the measurement of effectiveness which are applied to courses requiring personal attendance. In the case of on-line courses, the question arises whether it has really been possible to create educational courses and teaching methodology which can challenge traditional forms, and can offer a more effective form of higher education.

The rate of access to tertiary and/or higher education can be seen in the following table.

| Enrollment at tertiary level | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <i>Raw percentages</i> | | | | | | |
| | 2000 | 2002 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 |
| Argentina | 53,4 | 61,5 | 65,4 | 65 | 68 | - |
| Bolivia | 36 | 38,2 | 41 | - | - | 38,3 |
| Brasil | 16 | 20,1 | 24 | 25,4 | - | 30 |
| Chile | 37,2 | 41 | 43 | 48 | 46,5 | 52 |
| Colombia | 24 | 24 | 27,5 | 30 | 32 | 33 |
| Costa Rica | 16,1 | 19 | 25,3 | 25,3 | - | - |
| Ecuador | - | - | - | - | - | 35,3 |
| Guatemala | - | 9,5 | - | - | 9 | 18 |
| Honduras | 15 | 17,1 | 17 | - | - | - |
| Spain | 59,3 | 62,2 | 65,4 | 66 | 67 | 68,4 |
| USA | 67,5 | 79 | 81 | 81,5 | 81,4 | 82 |

Description; The raw/gross proportion of enrollments is the proportion of all enrollments regardless of age, with respect to the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the level of education shown. Third level education, although it does not represent the step to a qualification of advanced research, normally demands, as a minimum requisite for admission, the satisfactory completion of second level education.

Source: *Institute of statistics of UNESCO.*

We need to say a few words about Lasallian universities. In Latin America, there has been an explosion of Lasallian higher education establishments. Today, there are about 35 of them in 11 countries in the Region⁵. This has created a feeling that we need to organise our thinking so as to be able to offer our universities some kind of inspiration, which, to tell the truth, was not easy because, perhaps, we Lasallians are better “doers” than thinkers. This, however, does not exempt us from the responsibility of doing so, since we have chosen to become involved in higher education. It is urgent for us to step up our search for common areas of concern which can serve as a point of reference for the thrust of the universities, and offer the possibility of working as a network, which already exists, but does not always operate. Equally, I do not think we will find anything exclusive about what we offer at this level, but I think it is urgent for us at least to be clear about what we want to do, and the kind of response we need to give in the present-day context.

Today we recognise that Lasallian universities need to be a significant presence in our society, and that their contribution to education should be clear regarding their intentions and in the choices which inspire the creation and provision of academic courses, lines of research, social outreach and impact, and their whole pedagogical thinking. Also, because of the complexity of the present-day world, and because of the historical importance universities have in the formation and planning of a new society, universities have to assume also other functions which are proper to them: the political function which obliges Lasallian universities to be proactive in what they propose, daring in the position they adopt, and effective in the formulation of public policies and development plans, and not be simply reactive to decisions made by others, and in which they could have taken part through debate, research and the proposition of concrete projects; in their ethical function, which identifies universities as a part of the moral conscience of a nation; and their systemic function, which impels them to coordinate their efforts with those of other social

⁵ Mexico, with the greatest number and the pioneer: ULSA (1962), Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Brazil, Argentina, Haiti, Bolivia, Chile, Venezuela and Peru. It should be noted that some are tertiary institutions which in their country belong to the higher education system, as in the case of Teacher Training Colleges in Peru. Universities properly so called, exist in Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica, Brazil and Bolivia.

agents, such as the government and business and, evidently, with those of the educational world⁶. EL PERLA points out two central aspects, among others, which have a great deal to do with Lasallian universities: sustainable human development, and the democratisation of knowledge.

But if we recognise that something has been an inherent element of the essence of universities in their almost thousand years of history, we need to promote it passionately in our establishments of higher education. I am referring to the ability of self-examination and self-criticism, essential in our work, and which we have to resort to when necessary, especially now that the number of establishments is increasing. This is to say we should ask ourselves the “why” and the “what for” of Lasallian universities. As Joaquin Ortega put it so well:

“The university which learns, or the thinking university, reduces complexity and rationalises threats, increasing sometimes paradoxically the same complexity from which it started. In the same way, the institution which adopts this model, incorporates in its structures modes of behaviour of a certain intelligence in order to survive in a proactive form. If it were not for this poetic act on the part of the systems, organisational cultures would not survive the inexorable evolutionary crises to which they are subjected, and they would be reduced to archeological rudiments, overcome by sclerosis, such as can be found in decadent civilisations”⁷.

1.4.4. Science and technology: impact and challenges

The vertiginous development of science and technology in the last century has resulted in present-day society being built on economies based on knowledge. This is a fact we cannot ignore, nor can we avoid responding to the challenges it poses. The educational provision, as critical as it was traditional, up to the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, was tuned to respond to the needs of a type of society based on an economy of land-ownership, the ownership of means of production, on relatively stable employer-employee relations, and characterised by the power of work.

⁶ See Gomez C (2006) in “Thoughts on Lasallian Higher Education. Present-day opportunities and future prospects”. AIUL, St Mary’s Press.

⁷ Agustin Escolano. Preface of Ortega, Joaquin. Thinking Universities: a philosophical perspective. Published by Laertes, Madrid, 2005.

Today, however, these factors - although not superseded nor well-managed in some places - have given way to an urgent need to become involved in scientific processes which contribute to the social and productive development of our peoples. New technology, especially information technology, was making inroads into institutions in the 90s at a time when new political situations were taking root everywhere. To brush all this aside or think that these are simply public political problems, restricted to governmental bodies, can lead us to cut ourselves off from present-day developmental processes dependent on the ability to generate knowledge, to adapt and apply technology, and innovate so as to grow responsibly, and with equality and justice. In fact, these factors create new forms of marginalisation different from those we perceived in other eras.

The development of sciences and their applications, and the new information and communication technology, have brought about a Copernicus-style change in the generation of wealth, in the very concept of development, in the way of understanding work, in the management and control of the flow of capital, in the concept of sovereignty, in the character and role of social and political institutions, and in the role of governments in the regulation of society, in the control of citizens, in the scope of laws and in the very notion of democracy. There have been so many changes that often we have not assimilated them, nor do we always understand them or even discern their consequences. Everything happens so fast that reflecting about history does not keep up with the speed at which the world is moving forward; and this produces a state of uncertainty and lack of meaning difficult to visualise and understand. Is education moving at the same speed as history? What does education in a society based on knowledge mean? What kind of school responds to the needs of present-day men and women? What is the role of the teacher? Are our countries coupled to the train of history? These are all valid and important questions we need to answer. Do the efforts made by our countries allow us to look to the future with confidence? Have they drawn up serious policies and are they being implemented in a consolidated fashion so that we do not end up with a new kind of marginalisation, and this time not of the economic system but of history itself?

Economies based on knowledge imply substantial changes in the generation of wealth and in the necessary search for equality. The

data we have about the various countries, including the most developed ones, reveal a trend of increasing inequality, which means, on the one hand, a greater concentration of wealth and, on the other, very complex labour problems. However, for our countries, the effort that has to be made in order to share in these new realities is enormous. For centuries, our countries have been producers and exporters of raw materials, whether mineral or agricultural. The society based on knowledge obliges us to change the pattern, and work courageously to create the ability and the necessary conditions to be able to increase the value of what we have and produce. It is no longer a question of exploiting mines in order to export minerals, nor of producing food and exporting it as such: future economic stability lies in the possibility of innovation and transformation to make it possible to trade with products finished by those who have used acquired knowledge in their production; that is to say, in the ability to research in order to generate the technology which transforms raw materials into finished products which increase in value and attract better marketing conditions. But we cannot limit ourselves solely to the export of finished products, because present-day economies offer great scope for the service industries, and there is a great demand for them. But these service industries should be with added value based on knowledge. There is here a great opportunity for the ALC.

Looking at the indicators which are usually used to measure the state of science and technology, we can see our disadvantage by comparison with other countries which began earlier; which took this matter seriously, and which have been training their people for some decades now. The countries which are ahead of us took their education seriously, and identified their aims with great clarity, made substantial investments, and set in motion the formation of teams of scientists and innovators to promote development.

Most of the ALC countries have encouraged universities to be promoters of the processes of scientific production and research, and for this purpose, bodies have been created in the last few years to take responsibility for this area. Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina and Costa Rica have Ministries of Science; Colombia, Mexico and Chile have Institutes which specialise and are classed as ministries. In other countries, there are Vice-Ministries and other organised bodies to promote Research & Development. These facts suggest a way forward in the sense that this question is seen

as one of primordial importance and, for some countries, a strategic and fundamental element of their agenda. Most governments have been increasing their budget for science and technology, which is reflected in the national budget for this purpose. Some companies, universities, other research institutes and private foundations have made an effort to invest more and better resources to this area. The result of this has been that the percentage of the GDP allotted in each country to science, technology and innovation, has risen. It is obvious that there is much progress to be made, and that budgets continue to be low, above all, given the immense social needs that exist. However, this is an investment which, if it does not take place, will create greater poverty and exclusion in the years to come. The following table shows the percentage of the national GDP in certain countries allotted to science.

GDP by countries: Percentage of GDP invested in research and development

| | 2000 | | 2005 | |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| | GDP* | % GDP en I+D | GDP | % GDP en I+D |
| Argentina | \$ 284.204 | 0,5 | \$ 183.193 | 0,5 |
| Bolivia | \$ 8.397 | 0,3 | \$ 9.549 | |
| Brasil | \$ 644.702 | 1 | \$ 882.185 | 1 |
| Chile | \$ 75.210 | 0,5 | \$ 118.250 | 0,5 |
| Colombia | \$ 94.053 | 0,2 | \$ 144.581 | 0,2 |
| Ecuador | \$ 15.941 | | \$ 37.186 | 0,06 |
| Guatemala | \$ 19.290 | 0,03 | \$ 27.211 | 0,03 |
| Honduras | \$ 7.105 | 0,06 | \$ 9.670 | |
| Mexico | \$ 581.426 | 0,4 | \$ 846.990 | 0,4 |
| Spain | \$ 580.673 | 1 | \$ 1.130.200 | 1,1 |
| USA | \$ 9.764.800 | 2,7 | \$ 12.364.100 | 2,6 |

| | 2006 | | 2007 | |
|-----------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| | GDP | % GDP en I+D | GDP | % GDP en I+D |
| Argentina | \$ 214.066 | 0,5 | \$ 262.421 | 0,5 |
| Bolivia | \$ 11.451 | | \$ 13.120 | |
| Brasil | \$ 1.089.060 | 1,5 | \$ 1.333.270 | 1,5 |
| Chile | \$ 146.773 | 0,6 | \$ 163.878 | 0,5 |
| Colombia | \$ 162.347 | 0,2 | \$ 207.786 | 0,2 |
| Ecuador | \$ 41.763 | 0,2 | \$ 45.789 | 0,2 |
| Guatemala | \$ 30.231 | 0,05 | \$ 34.030 | 0,06 |
| Honduras | \$ 10.863 | | \$ 11.985 | |
| Mexico | \$ 948.865 | 0,4 | \$ 1.022.820 | 0,4 |
| Spain | \$ 1.232.350 | 1,2 | \$ 1.437.910 | 1,3 |
| USA | \$ 13.116.500 | 2,6 | \$ 13.741.600 | 2,7 |

* Scale in thousands of millions

Source: Banco mundial - Indicadores de Política Económica - Ciencia y tecnología

Other science and technology indicators in the Region are not more promising. The table which follows allows us to see two of the most used indicators in this connection: the number of doctorates, academic output and patents awarded:

Researchers devoted to research and development (for every million people)*

| | 1999 | 2000 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 |
|------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Argentina | 712 | 715 | 823 | 896 | 980 |
| Bolivia | 74 | 72 | | | |
| Brasil | | 367 | 588 | 629 | |
| Chile | 404 | 410 | | | |
| Colombia | 83 | 50 | 116 | 151 | |
| Costa Rica | | | 122 | | |
| Ecuador | | | | 75 | 69 |
| Guatemala | | | 31 | 25 | |
| Mexico | 223 | | 460 | | |
| Spain | 1541 | 1904 | 2548 | 2657 | 2784 |
| USA | 4432 | 4481 | 4584 | 4663 | |

* The researchers devoted to research and development are professionals who devote themselves to the design of new knowledge, products, processes, methods or systems and the management of the corresponding projects. They include doctoral students dedicated to research and development.

Source: *Institute of Statistics of UNESCO.*

Article on scientific and technical publications

| | 1999 | 2000 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
|------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Argentina | 2636 | 2846 | 2919 | 2982 | 3058 |
| Brasil | 5859 | 6407 | 8330 | 9573 | 9889 |
| Chile | 1059 | 1115 | 1406 | 1464 | 1559 |
| Colombia | 240 | 332 | 325 | 358 | 400 |
| Costa Rica | 69 | 80 | 89 | 85 | 105 |
| Cuba | 257 | 284 | 268 | 254 | 261 |
| Mexico | 2884 | 2971 | 3659 | 3870 | 3902 |
| Spain | 14514 | 14795 | 16099 | 17025 | 18336 |
| USA | 188004 | 192743 | 196427 | 202075 | 205320 |
| Venezuela | 498 | 516 | 577 | 475 | 534 |

Source: *World Bank – Indicators of Science and Technology.*

| | Patents registered in country** | | | |
|-----------|---------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| | 2000 | 2003 | 2005 | 2006 |
| Argentina | 1062 | 792 | 1054 | 1020 |
| Brasil | 3080 | 3689 | 3905 | 3810 |
| Chile | 241 | 329 | 361 | 291 |
| Colombia | 75 | 5 | 7 | 10 |
| Ecuador | | | 11 | 16 |
| Guatemala | 30 | 6 | 18 | 28 |
| Mexico | 431 | 468 | 584 | 574 |
| Spain | 2710 | 188941 | 207867 | 221784 |
| USA | 164795 | 2813 | 3040 | 3111 |

| | Patents registered outside country** | | | |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| | 2000 | 2003 | 2005 | 2006 |
| Argentina | 5574 | 3765 | 4215 | 4597 |
| Brasil | 13582 | 10258 | | 20487 |
| Chile | | | | |
| Colombia | | 285 | 249 | 206 |
| Ecuador | | 489 | 580 | 740 |
| Guatemala | 250 | 285 | 278 | 297 |
| Mexico | 12633 | 11754 | 13887 | 14976 |
| Spain | 134109 | 157683 | 187957 | 210062 |
| USA | 485 | 376 | 326 | 329 |

** Patent applications are applications filed with a national or non national patent office to obtain exclusive rights over an invention, product or process that provides a new way of doing something or a new technical solution to a problem. A patent provides protection for the invention to the patent holder for a limited period, generally covering 20 years.

1.4.5 By way of a summary

Ten years after the UN declaration of the Aims of the Millennium the results have not been resounding, and the aim to eradicate poverty at the end of a 15 year period ending in 2015 seems at this point unattainable. Nevertheless, in a 10 year period characterised by two serious economic crises and a recession, the ALC has made a substantial investment in education, increased the provision of schooling, improved its fiscal system, diversified its markets, and has created important organisations at sub-regional levels. Inequality and corruption continue to exist in our countries, factors which continue to affect great numbers of people in the Region, and which call on all social agents to take rapid planned and deliberate action so that in the next 10 years it will be possible to build a more just society, which raises the living standard of the majority, and which creates democratic mechanisms to strengthen institutions, and ensures a better distribution of wealth. Conditions are propitious, and circumstances are more

favourable to make the second decade of the new century “the decade of inclusion and awakening”. An article published in the second half of September in *The Economist* describing the ALC of today has a very significant title “*Nobody’s backyard*”.

2. The Work and the establishments of Lasallians in the Region

Lasallians have been in the Region since the second half of the 19th century. Arriving initially in Ecuador in 1863, they gradually set up schools in various places, reinforcing their presence on the Continent mostly with groups of French Brothers who arrived in 1903 following their expulsion because of the Combes Law. In the space of the first 20 years of the 20th century, there were Brothers in most of the countries in the ALC.

2.1. A glance at our establishments

Lasallian establishments in the Region include all levels of formal education and all age groups, and extend as well to formal and informal education. Historically speaking, the Brothers set up primary schools and private schools at primary and secondary levels, with schools for the poor attached. In some countries they became part of the State system and, less frequently, established tertiary level institutions. Likewise, we can note that most of the educational undertakings were centred on formal primary and secondary education. Provision of non-formal education, or of non-school education has made a tentative appearance in the last few years.

The evolution of institutions has taken various forms. In some cases, establishments continue to serve the same public and at the same educational level as they did when they started. However, there are institutions which started out as schools for the poor and which have turned their attention to the middle classes, in response as much to the transformation of the geographical context in which they had established themselves, as to the improvement of the economic situation of the population where they were located; or as well, to the presence of the children of former pupils whose financial situation had changed.

In this educational survey, special mention should be made of the recent appearance of institutions of higher learning. Although the

first attempts to establish these were made at the beginning of the 20th century, it was only in the 60s that the first universities were founded: the De La Salle University of Mexico City in 1962; the De La Salle University of Bogota in 1964; and the De La Salle University of Leon in 1968. The 90s and the first 10 years of this century have seen a proliferation of new universities and university colleges.

It is not easy to draw up an inventory of the establishments and, in particular, to try to classify them. In fact, depending on the criteria one adopts, they can belong to two or more categories, if one takes into account educational levels or age groups. It is more difficult, however, to classify them according to the socio-economic level of the students attending; in some cases, because students attending come from various social groups, or, and why not admit it, because we have not always had the courage to look objectively at the reality of the situation in each establishment. We are used to making classifications which are based more on intuition - which can be accurate - than on trustworthy data and on factors sound from a conceptual point of view, or on standardised indicators used in this type of study.

If we consider the overall picture of the educational work of Lasallians, we can say that most of the establishments offer formal education at primary and secondary level for the middle classes. The fact that most of them do this does not mean that education is not provided also for the low socio-economic and other classes through a variety of projects such as teacher training, education for ethnic groups (indigenous and Afro-American), vocational education, non-formal education, further education, etc. Of course, some establishments cater also for the higher-income groups of society. Generally speaking, our Districts have tried to diversify their work to respond to the needs of the country, and have establishments catering for the whole range of levels and classes.

2.2. What is a Lasallian?

We need to ask ourselves often what is the Lasallian mission, or better still, what makes an educational approach Lasallian. I recognise the value of the many written works on this topic, which offer very important clues regarding how to answer this

question⁸. Safe in the knowledge that I am conducting an exercise in reductionism which is open to all kinds of questions, I should like to consider this topic from the point of view of theology when it speaks of kerygma⁹, or when the Fathers of the Church define the Creed, that is, in few words, what it is fundamental to believe, or in our case, what is essential in order “to be”. If I dare to do this, it is because, on many occasions at university, I have been asked point blank to explain in a few words the meaning of Lasallian. It worries but also intrigues me when the answers we give are couched in terms which say everything, or more frequently, nothing, such as “a place of salvation”, “the pastoral ministry of the intelligence”, “the temple of knowledge”, “space of integral education”, “a project of Christian growth”, etc.

I do not like to think in terms of there being something exclusively Lasallian in our approach to education, in either formal or non-formal education, in primary education or in university education. I would much more prefer to say that there are various elements that are inherent to Christian education and, therefore, to Lasallian education; and while not being exclusive to any institution in particular, if they are lacking in the education we provide, that education is not Lasallian. In other words, the aspects we consider to be fundamental can be found in education provided by others, including, by seculars. But if these elements are lacking in the education we provide, I do not think we can call it Lasallian. Perhaps, if there were something specific about our education, it would be something made explicit in educational inter-relationship, stemming from a spirituality based on the values especially favoured by Lasallians - faith, fraternity and zeal - which, correlatively, need to be redefined for the world of today. I could expand this statement a little by suggesting the following components: a spirituality which invites us to encounter God and

⁸ The work of Brother Edgard Hengemule is of capital importance: “Lectura de unas lecturas” (2002) presents the thinking of De La Salle in the context of the history of pedagogy, its influence, and what many writers have thought of it; “Educating for Life” (2008) which examines the significance of Lasallian education.

⁹ This has to do with the “founding experience of Christianity” or better “designates the global preaching of the Good News of salvation”... The unifying element of the kerygma, in brief terms, is the person of Jesus, identified as Christ and Lord... The kerygma does not belong to the past... has no past”. Cf. Dictionary of Basic Theology, Latourelle and Fisocheila, San Pablo, 1992.

meet him in the students and colleagues, and which proclaims Jesus Christ basically by the manifestation of the merciful face of God; a respectful teaching relationship, one that is creative and conducive to the growth of the individual in freedom; an option based on the building of community and on concern for the poor; education that is contextualised in the existing economic, social and political reality; a teaching approach which takes into account the ability and potential of each individual, and a commitment to the building of a just, equitable and peaceful society.

I am not one to make value judgments, or even less, to question the “Lasallianess” of our establishments. Nevertheless, as Bertrand Russell said: “In all activities, it is salutary once in a while to put a question mark against things that have been considered certain for a long time”; among other things, because it was always typical of De La Salle and his first Brothers to revise their practices continually, to rewrite them, to change them, to question them: this was the origin of the Conduct of Schools. Is what we do and what we offer genuinely Lasallian?

2.3. Spinning out the past and failing to seek new future horizons

Brother Superior General has urged us with great insistence to be creative and to seek new responses to existing situations. Specifically, he has urged us *“to invent new responses to social, economic and political changes in the towns in which we are established, focusing our attention especially on the young children and youths who are excluded from benefiting from globalisation in both rich and poor countries”*¹⁰. There is a question which Brother Alvaro put to us at the closure of the 2004 intercapitular meeting, to which, perhaps, we have not attached sufficient importance: “Are we convinced that what is more important is not administering the past, but looking ahead, despite everything, and adapting to the future?”

I think this question is something we should consider during this Lasallian Educational Conference which has brought together so

¹⁰ Br. Alvaro Rodriguez Echeverria . Opening address at the Intercapitular Assembly 2004.

many persons dedicated to the mission, from many different parts of the Region, who know their own situation, who know that together we can move further forward, who know the power of networks and the powerful explosive mixture of faith, fraternity and zeal. We cannot spin out the past any longer: it is now a time to be daring and to channel our thinking and our activity in a new direction. During his visit to the ALC, Brother Alvaro insisted on “islands of creativity”, on the kind of projects that can be replicated elsewhere and which show another face of Lasallian commitment. His calls to create these have not always been listened to, or, more often, they have been marginalised, restricted to small groups, with little chance of being replicated.

On the other hand, the present situation shows quite clearly that we have refused to accept certain things. Earlier I said that most of our countries had made huge efforts to increase educational provision, and in significant cases, its quality. This has brought about at the same time an increase of confidence in the State educational system. In recent years, much of the increase in the private sector contribution to primary and middle school education was in response to the low quality of the State involvement and its loss of prestige. Families were worried by the lack of continuity in the educational process, partly because the trade union movements in many countries frequently went on strike to assert their rights regarding working conditions, with the result that the number of school days was reduced considerably; or because investment in education was very limited and made it impossible to develop teacher training courses, nor provide the adequate funding of schools and teaching resources, all of which led to poor quality and a lack of competitiveness. Obviously this had a great impact, but it is noticeable that the trend has changed direction, and that in the space of a few years State education has imposed itself as an option especially for middle class families. The demographic situation and the consequent decrease in the birth rate and of the population below the age of 20 has had considerable impact in this context; and so we are no longer “the young continent” we used to talk about only 20 years ago.

These are the circumstances we Lasallians have to take into account or confront. It is a reality faced with much anxiety in Mexico, Costa Rica, Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Argentina, among others; and for more ideological reasons, in Venezuela,

which seems to be in a hurry to nationalise education. In the last ten years, we have witnessed a decrease in pupil enrollment in our establishments which, in many cases, makes them financially unsustainable. As this situation coincided with the economic crisis at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, we found it convenient to believe that it was temporary, and that when the economy recovered, things would return to where they were before. This did not happen, but what we saw was that the growth in the economy made it possible to allocate more funds to education in the national budget. As a consequence, the financial situation of our Districts could be better, but a greater demand for quality makes situations which, only ten years ago, gave no cause for concern, in many cases, now quite untenable.

One could envisage that, in the short and medium term, the only type of private education that will survive will be that for the elite, which demands very high standards of quality representing extra and differentiating values, which initially the State will not be able to fund, as it is obliged to cater for the average student, in terms of academic results, and socio-economic status. Private education - at least, as we know it - will therefore be restricted to those who are very rich and can invest large sums of money in order to have access to additional skills, such as mastery of two or three languages; exchanges and international mobility; lower student-teacher ratio; exceptional school facilities; the latest technology, etc. Multinational educational companies have gained ground and have made the most of the situation and turned it to their advantage. The progress made by these companies and their role is very significant in Mexico and Brazil, but it is also quite common in most of the countries in the Region. No doubt the financial backing they have enables them to expand and break into the "educational market" rapidly.

In this connection, in my own country and in others I have visited in the ALC, I have heard many Lasallians, and in particular Brothers, saying on more than one occasion and with conviction that leaves little room for disagreement, that the Christian atmosphere of our towns, the underlying profoundly religious sentiment of our people, and the preference of people for education which is centred on values and is denominational, would be like a buffer against this new factor. I think that we need to stop fooling ourselves - and quickly. Nowadays, people are looking for quality

which can be measured and greater competition; and if we add to this the scandals in the Church and the inevitable lack of trust in the institution, I think we are looking for the key in the wrong place. What is more, it is much more common nowadays for the ordinary citizen to be better informed and to be more critical regarding education. Perhaps this will make us consider more carefully and more honestly the possibility that our education is “simply more of the same”.

This reality, I think, has already been recognised by most people. And even though at the present time it is seriously affecting primary and secondary education, soon, in less than five years, judging by the way the demographic trend continues to change, and private education continues to grow and diversify, it will affect in the same way Lasallian higher education in our countries.

In recent years, in some countries, we have been able to run State schools or we have received grants for admitting students to our schools from low income families, for whom there is no room in State schools. This situation, however, is changing rapidly: nowadays, States are declaring themselves openly to be secular, with a separation of Church and State, and without special privileges for the Catholic Church, which causes problems regarding State subsidies for education, or the granting of “vouchers”, which is a common practice in the United States and some ALC countries. In the same way, the Venezuelan model which permitted State funding for Church schools, will possibly disappear, and it is most unlikely that it can be adopted by other countries.

This is not about adopting a pessimistic view of things. Rather, it is about seeing the opportunities this situation offers us. Perhaps, it makes it easier for us to consider more calmly and with more faith Brother Superior’s request to think of how can adapt ourselves to the future and leave behind our anxiety about managing the past.

2.4. An Exodus towards the victims of new forms of marginalisation

Once again, I refer to other calls made by Brother Superior. He has continually called upon the Institute and all Lasallians to consider their life and their mission as an exodus, as a process based more

on faith than on security, more on trust in God than on certainties. His pastoral message is inspirational and contains challenges we must not ignore. He expressed all this when he invited us¹¹:

- *To leave Egypt, the Egypt of our security and certainty, to see with new eyes the urgent needs of children and young people on all continents: children and young people with no schools, no families, living on the streets; child soldiers, abused children; working children without any technical training; children and young people displaced by wars; children and young people who are immigrants in countries which do not welcome them and which despise them. Our network of establishments has been invited to fight together for the rights of children. Our universities and our formal and non-formal educational establishments are faced with this great challenge of the 21st century.*
- *To cross the Red Sea of our insecurity and our uncertainty; of our lifestyles, which are secularised, lacking in passion, disillusioned and materialistic, which do not reveal to the world God's passion for the poor and the most dispossessed of this world; of our insecurity because of our diminution of numbers; of insecurity in our community and professional life; of insecurity because of violence and wars; of insecurity because of political and social situations which bring with them misery of destitution for so many men, women and whole families.*
- *And above all, openness to meeting strange races, in new areas of educational service, with new people, opening our tents to so many men and women who find also their own focus for their lives among ourselves, in St John Baptist de La Salle.*

The social and missionary point of focus for Lasallians will have to be, therefore, the new forms of marginalisation, in which the “founding experience” of De La Salle will have to be expressed and manifested, and in which the option for the poor at the beginning of the 21st century will have to be carried out. Many writers¹² have spoken about the new forms of marginalisation which have begun to come to light, and which go beyond what was envisaged

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Cf. Agustín Salvia “Forms of marginalisation”. David Segarra “The new technologies: a factor of social exclusion?”.

by the social sciences of the 20th century, which concentrated basically on the belts of poverty created around towns as a result of a drift from the countryside to towns, especially in the second half of the century. The new forms of marginalisation are characterised by unemployment or casual work; the lack of access to technology; rural areas not served or badly served by means of communication; displacement of persons because of rural violence and lack of security; scarcity of higher education provision for those who bear the burden of poverty, and who are also far from university centres; and other forms of marginalisation which have to do with questions of gender, sexual orientation, age and race.

3. Signs of a mission in touch with the signs of the times and of places

History has shown very clearly that nations which have opted seriously for high quality education have benefited from the living standards of their citizens and, as a consequence, have brought about human development; that is to say, they have created a society which is more equitable and just, have reduced poverty significantly, and have strengthened democracy. De La Salle's congregation was born in a period of dehumanisation, and for this reason it decided to make education accessible to children. This constituted, at the origin of the Institute, a way of democratising knowledge and creating a basis for better social mobility in a society firmly anchored in social classes based on birth and fortune.

As Pedro Chico put it so well in his monumental work on Founders¹³, Christian education has gone through three basic stages in history and in its relationship with the obligation modern times have assigned to the State: the education of citizens. These 3 stages were: Substitution, Competition and Presence. At the beginning, Christian schools substituted for the State and provided education because the State was not able to do so. We should add that for a number of reasons there are still places in Latin America where this substitution process is still going on. As both primary and secondary education became increasingly universal, Christian schools went through a period of readjustment and competed with the State. The 20th century is for the Region an era in which Catholic schools competed and won in their competition with the public sector. As I said earlier, the majority of States today have improved their educational provision both in its extent and in its quality; and so the time has come for "presence" in the world of education. Consequently, of course, we should feel happy because education is an increasingly important topic and area of action in our countries; because more sectors are becoming involved, and because education is gradually becoming a major topic on the

¹³ Pedro Chico Gonzalez "Institutes and Founders of Christian Education" Centro Vocacional la Salle, Valladolid, 2000, 7 volumes.

political agenda of the unions and of the productive sector. The scope for substitution has shrunk, the era of competition is coming to an end, and the happy time is coming for being present in a new way. What lies before us, therefore, is a time for creativity and hope; a time when the power, coherence and soundness of our approach - as a new sign - will bring a breath of fresh air and meaning to young people. It is a time for us to be significant in new scenarios, facing new challenges, for the rising generations.

And so we cannot postpone considering and deciding how we can be a presence in the new contexts and realities of the Continent. I venture to suggest some points which I think are urgent and important.

3.1. Interfacing with contemporary advances in education

The last few decades have witnessed a proliferation of developments in education. Advances in cognitive psychology, computer sciences, communication technology, neuroscience, genetics, philosophical thinking and critical analysis of social systems, among others, have had an impact as never before on education and, as a consequence, on teaching methodology and programmes. New educational paradigms have emerged, which no doubt inspire, consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, the educational process we pursue, as also educational policies drawn up by governments, and the formation given in teacher training colleges.

Liberatory Education has perhaps been the paradigm which has inspired most educational experiments undertaken by Lasallians, and has led to interesting thinking, stances and discussions, especially when most of the approaches to education reflected a traditional Lasallian style bequeathed by the French. The turbulent years of the 60s and 70s gave rise to the creation of alternative educational approaches and critical pedagogical viewpoints, and it continues still to have an impact through original experiments in education for the masses. Nevertheless, the range is greater today, and is very favourable for a profitable interchange between a 300-year tradition and theoretical trends which underpin present-day educational projects. The historical/cultural paradigm, the

cognitive aspect, the various forms of critical pedagogy, multiple intelligence, constructivism, among others, are part of the vocabulary and of the inspiration of Lasallian educational thinking.

This interchange, as urgent as it is necessary, stems from an unwavering critical attitude which examines the potential of paradigms in the light of the existing conditions in which particular educational projects are carried out. If our project is to make education accessible; to promote values such as solidarity, justice and dignity; to build up the individual; to form citizens; to fight for equity and opportunity for everyone; then this interchange with contemporary pedagogical approaches is a sine qua non condition if we are to renew our projects and create contextualised projects which respond to the deepest desires of the students, children, young people and adults, as well as to those of society and of the groups of people for whom the projects are intended. The Lasallian project must be not only consistent theoretically and coherent methodologically, but also explicit in the means it uses and the aims it proposes. Holistic education which our establishments extol so much must be transparent in its aims, clear in its definitions, its epistemological basis and in its methodology, and coherent in its teaching staff.

3.2. Educating for depth and critical awareness: a challenge in the face of the new technologies.

It is impossible to deny the importance, possibilities and educational potential of the new technologies, and it is inconceivable to live without them nowadays. It is simply marvellous. Its usefulness enables us to have all information at the tip of our fingers; to navigate the immeasurable oceans of knowledge; to have access to millions of documents; to know in real time new discoveries, the areas scientists are working on, the state of the art of any subject we can think of; to stay in contact with persons we can discuss with, exchange ideas and experiences: in other words, an infinite number of possibilities. Of course, all this also entails dangers. We know already how many problems have been created by indiscriminate communication with others who, through the anonymity of the web, lie in wait, corrupt, destroy and attract, cheat and use. Regarding this last point, we have certainly done much work and are very aware of it.

Although clearly the new technologies have all the potential to have an impact on education and to improve the teaching process, there is doubt about the real impact all this has had. More information does not mean more or better knowledge. This impact has been reduced partly because of the difference between young people and their teachers in the skill of using this technology, and the lack of understanding or creativity when teaching-learning processes are formulated. It is clear that education has been greatly influenced: the memorisation of data or the revision of lessons have changed fundamentally the role of the teacher who is no longer the fount of all knowledge. However, neither have there appeared with any kind of real consistency teachers capable of creating conditions conducive to finding meaning, training a critical sense and, in the midst of an infinitude of information, learning fundamental values which make it possible to take advantage successfully of the new technologies. We are facing an urgent need, that cannot be shelved, to educate in contemplation and profundity: these two values are essential if we are to take the step from data to information, and from information to knowledge, that is, from knowing much to wisdom. In a word, we have to form the judgment, the ability to analyse, the ability to think critically, to question methodically, to take the time to ingest information and digest it through contemplation and reflection; to use it in order to understand the world and its relationships; to be able to communicate to others our own thinking calmly and logically. We need to educate in patience, in pondering, slowness, cooking on a low heat, as Joan Domenech Francesch invites us in his "In Praise of Slow Education" (2009)¹⁴.

Adolfo Nicolas, Superior General of the Company of Jesus, presenting the challenges faced by Jesuit higher education, and speaking of the "globalisation of superficiality", said the following:

We need to understand more deeply and intelligently this new and complex interior world created by globalisation so that we can respond in an adequate and decisive way as educators, in order to counteract the harmful effects of this superficiality. A world of globalised superficiality of thinking means the unopposed reign of fundamentalism, fanati-

¹⁴ J.D. Francesch "In praise of slow education" Grao, Barcelona, 2009.

*cism, ideology and all the lack of thought which causes suffering to so many people... people lose the ability to cope with reality, and this is a process of dehumanisation which can be gradual and silent, but very real. People lose their mental home, their culture, their points of reference.*¹⁵

Our educational propositions must promote reading which generates discussion, which increase arguments and leads to the adoption of personal viewpoints based on informed opinions and clear and precise conceptualisation. In the face of the impressive fragmentation implied by visiting websites, where hyperlinks - a powerful tool which makes it possible to illustrate the important points of a text - invite people to jump from one concept to another, from idea to idea, from writer to writer, to the point of drowning in information a process of reading, without their reaching a point which enables them to have a complete and clear idea about a subject. The reading of whole books, followed by their analysis, and group discussion are means which encourage depth, meta-analysis, a dialogue with the author, all the necessary conditions for more profound thought and the overcoming of the superficiality imposed by fragmentation. There is an urgent need to implement in all educational establishments, and in particular in universities, a reading plan which makes contact possible with humanism, with the great works of literature, with history, with the formation of the mind, as well as an abundant collection of subjects specifically related to the areas of study, together with the necessary pedagogy to make critical reading a fundamental pillar of the educational process. These are processes which take time, which are slow and are perhaps difficult in a world in which frenzy is daily; but these processes are necessary to help concentration, critical analysis, the deepening of thinking, the correlation of ideas, the existence of rational argument, the respect of other ways of thinking and attitudes. This will not be sufficient to counteract superficiality, but will help to bring about deeper thinking and form critical awareness sufficiently for navigating in a sea of information¹⁶.

¹⁵ Adolfo Nicolas "Depth, Universality and learned ministry. Challenges to Jesuit higher education today". Address to the Presidents of Universities entrusted to the Company of Jesus, Mexico, April 23rd 2010.

¹⁶ There are numerous writers who express their concern regarding the impact of the internet on the training of minds, and on the learning process. See, in con-

3.3. Educational responses to political problems

In the course of history, education has always had a political role. And not in vain: to a great extent it has been responsible for the formation of citizens. The school, a factor which appeared as time went on, and which in the early Middle Ages was considered to be the place par excellence for education, had a delegated function in modern States to socialise children and young people, with the additional responsibility of transmitting traditions and preparing for the new society which it was hoped would be built. All this means that it has a profound political impact which we must not undervalue, but on the contrary, we must clearly bear in mind in our aims, our approach and in what we emphasise. Today as never before, discernment is fundamental regarding the kind of society we want to help to build. As Francis Bacon taught, "Knowledge is power", but likewise, the whole of the educational process has an impressive political dimension. Education as such should always be considered as a response to political problems which arise from the social demands and wishes of the people, without, of course, the political aspect driving out the educational which addresses other human dimensions which also need to be built up and enriched by education. There are also some subjects of profound political significance which Lasallian education must address at the present time, such as understanding the educational process in a society based on knowledge, scientific formation and the strengthening of democracy.

3.3.1. Education in a society based on knowledge

Already in the 20th century there was a glimpse of what would become a reality in the 21st. The vertiginous advance of science meant not only that the structures of power were changed, but fundamentally, also the means of production and personal, family, social and working relations themselves. The Third Age Toffler spoke about some decades ago, was precisely the sudden onset of a profound change. If agriculture was the first age, and industry the second, society today is based on knowledge. By the end of the 60s Drucker and other theoreticians had already this idea, but with the sudden appearance and universal accessibility of

nection with this, for example, Nicholas Carr "The Shallows: what the internet is doing to our brains". W.W. Norton & Co., 2010.

information technology, and the enormous proliferation of knowledge, the world today is based on the power of knowledge. In the past, the people of Latin America fought for the ownership of land - still an unsolved problem - and for the capital necessary for the industrialisation of our countries; problems which, far from being solved, now present themselves in a very different light which has to do with the designation of a society based on knowledge, in which the incorporation of science and technology in all processes is what, in the final analysis, determines productivity, the generation of wealth, and the possibility of equity or inequity in society.

The society based on information, and the identical concepts of a society based on knowledge, and of economies based on knowledge, have been scrutinised from various ideological or theoretical viewpoints. They have been identified with the neo-liberal model of development, and their conceptual depth has been questioned. Nevertheless, beyond the ideological aspect - extremely important - we must bear in mind that, as it is impossible to deny the reality of globalisation, it is not possible either to deny that the ability to produce knowledge and to incorporate it in the activities of everyday life is a reality in the world today which conditions all human activity, especially economic and political activity. The problem is so serious that the debate has barely begun to try to understand the role of the State, and politics in societies based on knowledge which involve another type of social organisation, generate other kinds of poverty, and call into question concepts unassailable in the time of Nation-States, such as sovereignty, democracy, political parties, parliaments, representation and participation. It would be worth asking ourselves: "What does educating mean in a society based on knowledge?", "What formation is needed for a society based on knowledge?", "How can we rethink our teaching of values in this new context?".

Juan Carlos Tedesco points out in this connection: "The emerging forms of social organisation are based on the extensive use of knowledge and of cultural factors, both in productive activities, and in social participation. In this context, the bodies through which knowledge and cultural values are produced and distributed - educational institutions, educators, intellectuals in general - will occupy a central position in the conflicts and strategies of

social and political intervention"¹⁷. This question, therefore, is conditioning the viability of schools as such, and therefore their organisation, curricula, educational interaction, continuing formation for teachers, assessment, the axioms which inspire them: in a word, the real and explicit motivation of the schools, and not the splendid but unattainable mission statements promoting irrelevant goals.

3.3.2. Humanism and science in education

One characteristic of the establishment of Lasallian educational programmes in Latin America was the importance they gave to the natural sciences in the curriculum. The original French Brothers had a predilection for the teaching of biology, and the creation of museums, as a part of the education they offered. In fact, the modern French baccalaureate was a programme which stressed mathematics, physics, chemistry, geometry and biology. However, we should not forget how famous also the literary centres were which Lasallians organised in each of the schools in the first decades of the 20th century: the language was taught in great detail, and there was no shortage of authors of school texts for the thorough teaching of the mother tongue and its literature. Today, in a different context, we need to return to these subjects. And so we shall talk about the teaching of basic sciences and of means of communication, two areas and skills that good education has to develop. We must therefore continue to be clear about the purpose of an educational mission statement which promotes interchange between science and humanism. One might think that a university was the place for this kind of interchange; and no doubt this is so because it is there that this has to be done explicitly, and in addition, there should exist there the possibility for debate in which science calls into question ethics and the spiritual dimension of people, and in which at the same time, these latter consider and call into question scientific learning. This does not prevent the continued growth in primary and secondary education of coordination and holistic combination which encourages both the appreciation of the humanities and the kind of knowledge which sustains them, such as beauty and logic; and the charac-

¹⁷ Juan Carlos Tedesco "Educating in a society based on knowledge", Fondo de Cultura Economica, Buenos Aires, 2000.

teristic methods of science. As Bertrand Russell put it so well: *“There is only one path to progress, in education and in other human undertakings, and it is the following: Science practised with love. Without science, love is powerless; without love, science is destructive”*¹⁸.

Holistic education, extolled so much in our educational mission statements, cannot ignore the specific values necessary for the development of scientific skills: observation, analysis, procedures, the power of argument, all that combined with the values underpinning humanism: respect, contemplation, beauty, the value of life, difference, transcendence. If it is true that not all students, not even those in higher education, are attracted to research, it is essential for the majority to be able to understand criticism and scientific processes at first hand, combined with a good dose of humanism to coordinate and assimilate the knowledge.

3.3.3. Commitment to democracy and institutionality. Education for citizenship and political life.

The political dimension of education has often been discussed. In the turbulent but enriching 60s and 70s of the last century there was a great variety of views on this subject. Schools, and even more, universities, were considered to be a fundamental factor in the building of the new society, because they had the possibility of forming citizens, although there was also a body of opinion which called them seriously into question, or considered them to be the front-line trenches of the revolution. Education and schools are not the only ones responsible for the transformation of social systems or the consolidation of political models, a fantasy subscribed to by quite a number of people. But, neither does education, as the product of a social system, have simply a conservative function. Education is a factor of change and progress, a driving force of transformation, and a support for the process of holistic development; and therefore schools are a special place for education in values, for reinforcing ethical values on which are based social action and political practice; for reproducing on a smaller scale the vision of a society which promotes successfully pluralistic dialogue between groups, parties and institutions.

¹⁸ Bertrand Russell, “On Education”.

The denominational aspect of schools cannot be considered as a factor hindering the pluralism, which in fact it should reinforce. Being loyal to the identity denoted by its name, enables it to assume a critical viewpoint to judge reality, to present its ethical mission statement and implement it with the cooperation of everybody, always bearing in mind that the diversity of the individual has to be recognised in the everyday educational process. In fact, our schools cannot be seen as neutral, because neutrality regarding social and political matters is simply impossible. Moreover, the denominational aspect is based on religious freedom, a fact that cannot be set aside today when humanity has just been through a bloody struggle of religious intolerance which produced, contradicting the very essence of religions, conflicts, wars, crimes and all kinds of attacks on human dignity.

One of the great victories of humanity is precisely the democratic system. Many centuries of experimentation, starting with tribal and slave-owning societies, followed by imperial and monarchical absolutism, dictatorships of all kinds, and ending with one-party States, leads us to think that the most civilised political system is democracy. Imperfect and perfectible, with gaps and question marks, it is beyond doubt the best way humanity has found to preserve freedom, seek for justice, and administer the life of society. Perhaps, as Churchill said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the other forms that have been tried from time to time".¹⁹

If it is true that the advent of democracy in our ALC, following the disastrous military regimes of the last century, has not meant the development that was hoped for and the achievement of long-overdue equity, our task is not to deny the potential of democracy, but to commit ourselves to strengthening it. We have learned some painful lessons in this respect, and this too is a serious question mark regarding our educational work. Participation and political control - inherent to democracy - have been elusive in our formation and work, and we are satisfied with voting at elections, but we are not concerned about what follows and calling into account those we elect. The fragility of social organisations and the failure of formation to make citizens that are aware of their

¹⁹ W. Churchill, A speech in the House of Commons, 1947.

political responsibilities, have contributed to the growth of corruption which appears to be uncontrollable; to the existence of citizens who are indifferent to political problems; to the rise of dictatorial “messiahs”, and the return to the fateful period of the caudillos of the past, which is not all that long ago. All these problems carry with them the destruction of institutions and the withering of democracy. Caudillos are appearing once again in some of our countries, and we are witnessing what S. Fabrinni (2009) has called “the rise of the democratic princes”²⁰.

3.4. The Lasallian educational continuum

An important challenge facing Lasallians in the ALC is the coordination of the different educational stages of our establishments. The growth in the number of universities has not been consistent with the concept of an “educational continuum” which would open up for us a new dimension of holistic education. In this respect, our approach is not much different from the one adopted by a number of our national educational systems: they are used to thinking of the various different stages of education as watertight compartments, and they do not understand that education today is a continuous process from the cradle to the grave, even if the process consists of various stages. Even if it is true that evident specifications and differences differentiate higher education from pre-school education, or continuing education from secondary education, all of which require different teaching approaches and study programmes, this should not be an obstacle to coordination.

The same discussions within the Institute - fortunately, a stage already completed - on stages in education and on the kinds of establishments Lasallians should concentrate their efforts on, help us to find possible solutions for difficulties associated with coordination. We realise today that educational processes would be incomplete if they did not address the education of the whole person, at all stages of life. The coordination that is needed does not exempt us from the obligation and urgency to reflect on the meaning, methodology and aims of each of the stages: by doing so, we will avoid transferring uncritically models from one stage to

²⁰ S. Fabrinni “The rise of the democratic prince”. Fondo de Cultura Economica, Buenos Aires, 2009.

another. This has often happened in Lasallian higher education, in which we have no problem about transferring schemes which have worked in primary and secondary education, turning universities into big schools, and the university system into a school structure, forgetting that in higher education, disciplines, the freedom of professors, autonomy and the generation of understanding are its constitutive elements.

Coordination goes much further than thinking or hoping Lasallian pupils in primary and secondary schools will continue their higher education in Lasallian universities. I believe that this is wishful thinking, and generally speaking, the percentage that do so is, to say the least, quite low. Coordination fundamentally makes it possible to work out a Lasallian educational praxis with clear reference points, an analytical methodology which would enable us to evaluate stated aims, and consistent processes which allow conceptualisation and more intentional courses. On the other hand, there is the necessary and overdue task of training teachers by means of an approach that is well-planned, processual, methodical and forward-looking, which promotes thinking specifically directed towards a sustained and critical appraisal of new pedagogical trends. In other words, we have today an institutional apparatus which must turn us once again into an organisation which thinks, reflects, proposes and creates educational models in tune with reality and its challenges.

4. A time for hope and creativity

We read the following in the chapter which serves as an epilogue for the Brothers' Rule: "The words of St John Baptist de La Salle are still true: 'The need for this Institute is very great'. The young, the poor, the world and the Church still need the ministry of the Brothers. Despite the difficulties which they meet, the Brothers know, in faith, that God does not abandon 'his work', but that 'it pleases him to make it bear fruit day by day'"²¹. I would not like to be taken for an iconoclast and disagree with this article, but I do think we need to qualify it. In the world of today, our starting point needs to be reality and humility: we are not necessary. At least, I do not think De La Salle would say that our work was indispensable, as many of us tend to think. Such a view would explain the not infrequent adoption of an arrogant stance, a misuse of power, the resurgence of disguised but potential clericalism, being comfortable with a return to the past, and the inability to understand that today's Institute is more about a movement led by Lasallians inspired by a spirituality, than about the preeminence of the Brothers²².

However, to say that we are not necessary does not mean to say that we cannot be important. Of course, we can, but under certain conditions: that we are able to look with hope at what the future holds; that we make an effort to understand the dynamics of today's global and different world; that we can help to give meaning; that we can return to being serious and profound men and women in order to be able to lead the way, dare to believe and create even at the cost of making mistakes; that we condemn the tendency to maintain things and return to the past; that we are faithful to the founding spirit, and not to centuries-old structures we have built for other eras; that we accept with simplicity our limitations; that we feel part of the Church, not as a monopoly, but as the People of God, moving forward through light and shade, with sin and grace, and that we see

²¹ Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, art, 141.

²² In connection with this, see the recent Circular No. 461 "Associated for the Lasallian Mission ...An act of Hope", FSC, September 2010.

ourselves as offering just one way forward among many other different ways.

But perhaps, more than being necessary or important, what is worthwhile is being significant for promoting education seen as a factor which mobilises society and helps to transform it, and for the service of the poor, for whom we came into existence, and for whom we must gamble everything else and burn our boats. That is where our future lies in Latin America and the Caribbean, if we are to be the leaven of the Gospel in our times.

4.1. Education and social mobility: Democracy and social responsibility

Good-quality education continues to be the driving force behind the democratisation of a society. It makes access possible to other stages in education; makes it easier to find work and better working conditions; it generates opportunities frequently inaccessible because of birth and lack of resources; it provides tools and teaches skills needed for living in the society based on knowledge; it is a factor for integration into society; it creates conditions conducive to strengthening democracy, based on the idea that a society is more democratic to the extent that its citizens are in a position to participate and exercise political control. All this leads to more equitable societies, more responsible States, more solid institutions, more effective governments, societies more respectful of personal dignity. Societies with economies based on knowledge need well-informed citizens, with the necessary skills for the dynamics and relations generated around technology and science. As I have said before, present-day societies are based on knowledge which is something intangible, unlike land and companies.

The great challenge for Lasallians, if they are to be faithful to the founding spirit, is to be meaningful for the vulnerable masses of people created by the new forms of marginalisation. We were created for “the education of the children of the working class and the poor” which, in the 21st century, are the children of exclusion and the lack of opportunities. Today our commitment and our place in history is at stake here: making the poor in the ALC a part of the present-day historical dynamics as participants and with

dignity; and using our imagination to create new educational projects to make this possible. We are faced with very complex problems such as that of the sustainability of educational courses for the poor. We must examine the question of the social responsibility of employers and graduates in order to be able to propose original ways of making inclusion and social mobility possible. In this connection also, we will be able to assess the effectiveness of our educational projects which focused their attention on the education of political leaders and better-off social groups. Are these persons more socially responsible today in their companies, in their exercise of power, in their management of labour relations? Can we count on them for the funding of projects to democratise society and include the poor of this world?

4.2. Towards a common agenda

I believe we need to draw up a common agenda for educational work in the ALC, which contains shared lines of action and projects, solid structures for reflection, joint programmes, agreed curricula, etc., and is an invitation but also a strategy for having a strong educational system which can have an impact on the Continent.

We cannot continue to live on past glories. I think that the future of the Lasallian mission in Latin America will be determined by our ability to nourish educational practices with the new knowledge, and to propose new projects for the development of the Region. Today, Lasallian research should focus more on the present and the future than on the past; we need more people to understand present-day historical dynamics, because our mission “to provide Christian education to the children and young people” of today depends also on the ability to generate productive projects to ensure people will have greater possibilities in life, in which education will make possible the inclusion and participation in the society built on knowledge, of vulnerable groups and of those excluded by these new dynamics; and in which the work of our institutions and our graduates is socially responsible, because this education took place in institutions which were clear about their intentions, their stated aims and what they offered, and which staked everything on being politically and socially responsible.

In the case of Lasallian higher education, this is an issue and a decision which cannot be postponed. I do not doubt that every Lasallian establishment is very keen on contributing to the local area. However, Lasallian universities, located as they are in a world with shared problems, cannot act on the basis of an inward-looking notion that they are unique and self-sufficient: that would make them autistic. There has to be coordination with State policies, with business and the State, with other university institutions, and with the whole Lasallian educational continuum. The way to be meaningful is to share possibilities and opportunities, and tend to create joint projects which can have a greater impact on our people. A common research agenda cannot be put off, and it should focus on matters relating less to Lasallian archeology than to proactivity; on matters which are more politically prospective than historically descriptive, and whose aim is to respond to the most urgent challenges that face us. It is time for us to reflect together about such topics as: an ensured food supply, independent source of energy, environmental sustainability, provision of rural education, education in democracy and citizenship, education and teaching methodology in a society based on knowledge and, of course, Christian humanism and catechesis in a world which has a different way of looking at religion and the religious. Well, these are challenges, but what an exciting mission our world is, which calls on us, which is demanding and which is challenging.

On which forms of present-day marginalisation should we concentrate our efforts in order to be faithful to the founding spirit of our commitment to the poor? How can we make our educational presence meaningful among children and young people looking for meaning and avid for signs? How can we be part of the dynamics of history and make ourselves present educationally in a society based on knowledge? This Congress will allow us to draw some conclusions and perhaps make some commitments. Will we be able to conclude by saying two or three things, some viable projects with targets and indicators to make follow-up and evaluation possible? Will we be able to avoid politically correct language and ethereal considerations in order to think how to take up a meaningful position in the present-day educational context of the ALC, which ranges from taking off to being inequitable?

4.3. Gambling on what remains: a call to hope

Hope can exist on the basis of accepting reality and on searching for a proactive attitude in order to subvert it. Nothing expresses better the death of hope than fatalism which leads to immobilism and entrenchment in religious language and symbols inconsistent with present-day dynamics which entrap in an unthinking religion; or nostalgia and yearning for the return of past times. These are times when we have to gamble on what remains or, perhaps, “burn our boats”: there is no turning back. In a situation characterised by the undermining and the exhausted credibility of the Church as an institution; by forces which are applying strong pressure to return to the past; by an Institute - I mean the Brothers - characterised by an increasing process of ageing and little perseverance on the part of young people; by a mission which calls for creativity and a project; by groups of Lasallians who nourish their lives through the charism of Christian education for the poor; by a Latin America and a Caribbean which seem to be on the way to overcome many problems, while at the same time characterised by inequity and injustice; in such a situation, it is necessary to allow hope to flourish and to nourish it fervently. As De La Salle said about faith, “It is not easy to imagine the good a generous person can do in the Church. The reason for this is that in generosity much faith is shown, since one abandons oneself to God’s Providence like a man who puts out to sea without a sail or oars”²³. Or in the words of a present-day person, Vlacav Havel, who knows more than most about the constant struggle to realise one’s hopes in the midst of adversity’ “Hope is not a conviction that something will turn out right, but the certainty that it has meaning, and it does not matter how it turns out”²⁴.

Will we waste this opportunity in Brazil to consider the future? We are listening to projects, propositions and achievements; do they make our hearts beat faster so that we will commit our whole lives to implement them? Are they enough to give a meaning to our lives and a reason to hope?

I ask you to ask yourselves a number of questions as you reflect in

²³ De La Salle, Meditations.

²⁴ <http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sunrise/41-91-2/gl-hav4.htm> (Summer Meditations).

the course of these days, thinking of horizons, anticipating the future, conscious of reality, adjusting utopias, dreaming about other commitments like ours to the educational mission:

- What dreams do we want to realise?
- What horizons do we want to reach?
- What paths do we want to follow?
- What risks are we prepared to take?

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<http://www.lasalliana.com> – E-mail: fpajer@lasalle.org