

# **Spirit of Community: Convocation Remarks**

**Lasallian Heritage Days 2024**

**Saint Mary's College of California**

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**Brother William Mann, FSC**

## **1. Introduction**

**What a delight it is to be back on this campus! Over the past 40 years, I have spent so much time here visiting with the Brothers, teaching for more than two decades in the summer Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies, and serving for three terms on the Board of Trustees. So many happy and blessed memories.**

**I truly appreciate the focus you've chosen for Lasallian Heritage Days 2024 – spirit of community – and feel honored to be part of this week's celebrations. In these times, both around the country and on the world stage and in the face of the upheaval and challenges being experienced by so many of our institutions of higher education, the decision of Saint Mary's College to continue to dig deep into your *Catholic, Lasallian, Liberal Arts traditions* and to hold onto your heritage with both hands and a full heart encourages me and encourages, I have no doubt, all those who know and love this venerable institution.**

“The cornerstone that sustains the construction of [the Lasallian educational] mission has been and always will be the *community*.” As the recently published *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission* states: “To be Lasallian, by definition, is to *belong to a community* and to commit oneself within that same community to a common task.”<sup>i</sup>

## 2. Three Remarks about Community

Community is the context in which Lasallians believe “an unknown, lovely power” at the heart of all being [which some of us call God], invites us into its own loveliness.”<sup>ii</sup> Faith in this presence is at its heart what Lasallian spirituality is, and life in community is one of the principal ways<sup>iii</sup> in which this spirituality is manifested. With this backdrop, I have three observations to share.

### 2.1. *Community as Journey in Solidarity*

Grounded in our Lasallian tradition, ours is fundamentally “an educational path travelled in community.”<sup>iv</sup> Together and by association, we educate, we strengthen our members, we care for the weak, and we nurture their spirit.<sup>v</sup>

My favorite quotation about what it means to live in a community comes, from the *Catholic tradition*, in a Vatican document which proposes that “community is the place where the daily and patient passage from “me” to “us” takes place...”<sup>vi</sup> From “my plans” to “our plans.” From “my own vision” to “our common vision.”

Whoever thought that working in and belonging to a community [or, for that matter, working on a committee] was always going to be easy hasn't lived in community long enough. Using an expression coined a number of years ago by historian and social critic Christopher Lasch in referring to family life, community life – as much as we'd like it to be so – is no “haven in a heartless world.”<sup>vii</sup> Rather, it's the locus where those of us involved in networks of belonging do the hard work of “loving others as we love ourselves” (Mt 22:39), of “laying down our lives for our friends” (Jn 15:13), of forgiving our neighbor “not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Mt 18:22). It's the place where we learn how to be, in our Lasallian tradition, brothers and sisters to one another – not by birth but by choice – and older brothers and sisters – by vocation – to all those entrusted to our care.

## 2.2. *Community as Blessed Memory*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian and Lutheran pastor who pushed back, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, at Nazi totalitarianism and spoke out forcefully against the evil it spawned, “was executed by special order of Heinrich Himmler” shortly before the concentration camp at Flossenbug was liberated. *Life Together*, a book which “grew directly out of his own experience of the deep meaning of Christian community found in his life in an ‘underground’ seminary,” speaks lyrically of tangible fellowship in challenging circumstances and of the importance of nurturing and sustaining this fellowship which “gives life together its meaning and purpose.” Bonhoeffer contends that once “given the uplifting experience of genuine ... community,” it cannot be forgotten.<sup>viii</sup>

The Collegiate Seminar, which I understand is the heart of Saint Mary's core curriculum, is the foundation of how you – drawing on the *Liberal Arts tradition* – provide an uplifting experience of Lasallian community and how you attempt to give meaning and purpose – loveliness – to the lives of all those who study and learn here.

Nan Keohane, president emerita of Wellesley College and Duke University, has proposed the idea of “liberal education” as the preparation of a “back room of the mind.”<sup>ix</sup> Drawing on the writings of Michel de Montaigne, she imagines this kind of education as both the instilling of certain “habits of the mind” and the furnishing of a space in the back of the mind that’s tastefully appointed with “rich and fascinating intellectual furniture” and “filled with quotations from wise people and experimental thoughts and jokes and anecdotes.” This “beloved space” – both comfortable and comforting – is one that accompanies and sustains the student pilgrims educated here on their journeys through life.

### *2.3. Community as Precious Gem*

John Baptist de La Salle, the impetus and guiding force of the *Lasallian tradition*, wrote in his meditations that “union in a community is a precious gem,” that we should work to “preserve it with care if we want our community to survive,”<sup>x</sup> and that “a community lacking in charity is a kind of hell” where one grumbles, another gets angry, and a third complains.<sup>xi</sup>

As the French writer Victor Hugo opined, “primitive times are lyrical, ancient times epical, and modern times dramatic.”<sup>xii</sup> The past is often viewed more

positively than the present, and often enough we can be overly dramatic in our dealings and negotiations with one another in the here and now. Guided by the Catholic, Lasallian, Liberal Arts habits of charity, civility, and collegiality, let's be united in "helping to turn dramatic times into a lyrical song: a promise of hope."<sup>xiii</sup> Let's show the next generation – in a spirit of Lasallian community – what a loving and lovely world can look like.

### 3. Conclusion

Three practices have, over the centuries, helped the members of the community of the Lasallian educational network live our identity authentically and keep moving forward successfully in solidarity.<sup>xiv</sup> The first has been the practice of presence, a commitment to remain personally – and not just physically or metaphorically – present both to the transcendent and to those around us. The second has been the practice of fraternity (of being siblings all), an attitude that embraces our shared humanity even when the externals of appearance and behavior make that difficult. The third has been the practice of interiority, a habit of quiet and deep listening to the heart – which Augustine calls "the place where I am whoever I am"<sup>xv</sup> – that allows for self-discovery and promotes awareness of a benevolent "higher power" and a sense of purpose and inter-connectivity. This practice of interiority "liberates us from undue ties, worries, and superficial concerns. It ... enables us to devote our energies to what is essential."<sup>xvi</sup>

My sincere hope is that Saint Mary's College continues to embrace and celebrate the "spirit of community" and that Lasallian identity continues, in this time of "great upheaval,"<sup>xvii</sup> to provide the foundation of a differentiating

**character that demonstrates your distinctiveness, value, and relevance today. “Be convinced,” as John Baptist de La Salle told us, “that provided you are willing, [this inclusive community of yours and all its members] can do more with the help of God’s grace than you imagine.”<sup>xviii</sup>**

**Thank you most sincerely for the honor you’ve shown me today, and may God bless Saint Mary’s College!**

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<sup>i</sup> *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission: Challenges, Convictions, and Hopes* by Brothers of the Christian Schools (Rome, 2020), #3.2.

<sup>ii</sup> Adapted from wording of Philip Endean SJ in “Christian Spirituality in a Rapidly Changing World” by Cliff Knighten in *Crux: Taking the Catholic Pulse* (April 2, 2017).

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 2015), #63 to #77.

<sup>iv</sup> “Guiding Our Ministries So the Next Generation Will Know God” by Carlos Gómez-Restrepo FSC (DENA Spring Trustee Representatives Conference, 2024).

<sup>v</sup> *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission*, #3.2.

<sup>vi</sup> *Fraternal Life in Community* by Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (Vatican City, 1994). #39.

<sup>vii</sup> *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* by Christopher Lasch (Basic Books, 1979).

<sup>viii</sup> *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and translated by John W. Doberstein (Harper & Row, 1954), pages 7, 20, and 39.

<sup>ix</sup> “The Liberal Arts and Presidential Leadership” by Nannerl O. Keohane (Council of Independent Colleges Presidential Institute, 2012): “When I was at Wellesley and Duke, I occasionally used a memorable image at convocation as the new academic year began. With due credit, I borrowed it from Michel de Montaigne’s 16<sup>th</sup>-century essay, ‘Of Solitude.’ Montaigne lived an active life in many ways, with family, friends, political positions, much travel; but he was exceptionally well aware of the importance of occasional solitude. Montaigne’s favorite place for writing and reflection was the tower library on his estate in Southwestern France, to which he climbed by a series of narrow staircases reaching to the very top of his domain, with a view of the vineyards and grainfields, a ceiling carved with some of his favorite quotations, and lines of books and manuscripts around the shelves. If you visit his estate, you can still see that library and understand directly what his life was like.

“Inspired by that beloved space, Montaigne used the arresting image of the ‘back room of the mind.’ He thought of his own mind as a kind of tower library to which he could retreat even when he was far from home, filled with quotations from wise people and experimental thoughts and jokes and anecdotes, where he could keep company with himself. He suggested that we all have such back rooms in our minds, and that the most valuable and attractive people we know are those who have rich and fascinating intellectual furniture in those spaces rather than a void between their ears. When I used this image, I would counsel students to think of their college education as above all a way of furnishing the ‘back rooms of their minds.’ In this way, they

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would be much better conversationalists, so that their company would be sought out by others, rather than being regarded as a simpleton or a bore, and they would also be better prepared to relish solitude, whether they chose it or it was imposed on them.”

<sup>x</sup> *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arnandez FSC and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994), #91.2.

<sup>xi</sup> *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, #65.1

<sup>xii</sup> “For a Revolutionary Dramaturgy” by Victor Hugo (Paris, 1827), as quoted by Carlos Gómez-Restrepo FSC (DENA Spring Trustee Representatives Conference, 2024).

<sup>xiii</sup> Carlos Gómez-Restrepo FSC (DENA Spring Trustee Representatives Conference, 2024).

<sup>xiv</sup> Cf. “Nurturing Lasallian Spirituality Today: A Journey from Affectionately Grateful Former Students to Lasallian Associates” by William Mann FSC in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 10, no. 2 (2020), pages 25-32.

<sup>xv</sup> “My heart is the place where I am whoever I am,” *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, 10,3,4.

<sup>xvi</sup> “Lasallian Spirituality: Our Heritage” by Michel Sauvage FSC in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, edited by Robert C. Berger FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999), page 277.

<sup>xvii</sup> Cf. *The Great Upheaval: Higher Education’s Past, Present, and Uncertain Future* by Arthur Levine and Scott Van Pelt (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2021).

<sup>xviii</sup> “Reflections regarding the Use of Time” in *Collection of Various Short Treatises* by John Baptist de La Salle, translated by William J. Battersby FSC and edited by Daniel Burke FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1993), page 80.