

Am I a Lasallian Educator?: Lessons from Hmo. José Cervantes

By
Dr. Raina J. León

I am a graduate of a Lasallian high school, West Catholic High School of Philadelphia. While a student there, I knew what it was to be dedicated to service and learning. I was a part of so many organizations that I believe that, at one time, I might have held a record for involvement at the school. As all students at the high school, I did community service, generally in supporting youth programs. I was even a part of a youth philanthropy group, granting funds to area nonprofit agencies. Still, with four years of experience as a student at West Catholic, I do not believe I truly understood what it is to be Lasallian. Now, I am on the other side of education, guiding others on learning journeys while still growing and continuing to grapple with defining the Lasallian educator and myself in relation to that identity. This past summer, while at the International Association of Lasallian Universities (2012) conference in Rome, I deepened my developing understanding of these concepts most especially through the presentation by the recently departed Hmo. José Cervantes. I recorded the session and took notes while he led about 60 educators from around the world to consider Lasallian pedagogy and how it might be enacted at the university level. Over the months since that conference and especially since Hmo. José's passing, I have returned more and more often to the questions that he raised there. In this essay, I will share with you some of the most powerful quotations from that experience in the hope that you, too, might be touched by his legacy and vision.

"Only he who has faith in himself and in his students can be an educator"

I write this essay in my second year as a professor of education. While I have incredible faith in my students and a dedication to supporting them as they develop their own skills as educators, I often have self-doubts. Am I providing them with the resources and support that they need at the time when it is needed? Will my students value my insight and advice? As a young, woman of color, how much will be discounted because of my multiple identities? Have I shown them the commitment to this vocation that I expect of them as future educators? I struggle to have faith in the quality of my instruction and facilitation of discussion of my students.

The quality that makes me an educator is not an inherited faith that has gone unquestioned; it has been and continues to be challenged and yet persists in growth. As a teacher educator, I believe in modeling best education practices in the field. My students see my lesson plans for each session. They see my process as I refine my lessons each semester. They participate in my refining of rubrics for graded assignments. Each semester, I try to improve upon at least one area of my instruction, including my ability to step aside and let my students be the leaders they already are.

"If you do not know people, you cannot help them."

Teaching is not a one-sided event. Performing for my students my play on instruction as "the sage on the stage" is not working with them in the spirit of gaining an enriched education. This requires me as teacher-student with my student-teachers to build an inclusive community. We need to know and be open about our strengths and our weaknesses, using the former to scaffold the latter. We have to tell stories and really listen to them. Years ago, I remember saying to a friend that a person is not real to me until I have seen them cry. These days I would not say that I need tears to feel closeness and caring, but I do need stories. They open the heart, creating pathways of commonalities, schema upon which to build new frames for knowledge. I believe that the Lasallian educator cares enough about others to seek to know. To Hmo. José's quotation I would add that if your students do not know you, you do not

have a classroom community in which they can learn and you can grow. Lasallian educators share parts of themselves to develop authentic, appropriate and enriching relationships with students.

De La Salle invites the teacher to walk a personal journey, going beyond necessity to fulfill his/her duty as a mission.

There is no recipe for how to become a Lasallian educator. At IALU, Hmo. José noted that, the Lasallian teacher “is a professional; lives his educational mission with a salvific intentionality; is a mature, calm, quiet person who speaks little and wisely; is the ‘guardian angel’ of his students and a minister and ambassador of Jesus Christ; dispenses His mysteries; lives the ‘Jacob’s Ladder’; knows, loves and imitates De La Salle; lives her spirituality and participates in her charism (define); considers herself the heir and follow of the inspiration and the mission of the founder; works in association and with a sense of community; challenges his/her pupils; lives the spirit of the institution (that of faith and zeal); and is consistent as a model and reference for the students.” How does one develop all of these characteristics? Even with these defined traits, there is more that is unnamed about the Lasallian educator. What of the sacrifice inherent in giving in oneself to others? What of engaging students in dialogue on equal terms and subverting power hierarchies so that students can be leaders in their own education, speakers of their own stories? What of the zeal to speak for the welfare of students that goes beyond educating them and into political and social advocacy? My personal journey challenges me to explore these questions in expanding my educational practice.

Lasallian pedagogy is an expression of a charism.

What exists universally is a common source of inspiration, a common visible charism.

As long as you are alive, you have a charism; I exist, because I have a charism.

Throughout Hmo. José’s presentation, he explored “charism”. It was a word that I have heard tossed around in many Lasallian circles. Charism, gift of God, is, as I would define it, is that you are meant to do. It is your way of being and acting within the world.

Despite my doubts, I am an educator. I was one long before I made the decision to become an English teacher to teach multicultural, contemporary literature and thereby have an impact on fostering conversations between cultures, supporting the development of empathetic, global citizens, and challenging systems of oppression. That decision started me on the educational journey that led me here.

The role of the teacher educator is sacred. This is my vocation; this is the home of my zeal. Each day I try to become a better educator for the benefit of my students and theirs. I know I am one of the many who guide those who will shape the future by educating our children, as ALL children are OUR children. The world of peace and justice I hope to see may come through those children after learning lessons from teachers that I or other teacher educators have taught. This charism is sacred, special, and not to be treated lightly. Perhaps St. John Baptist De La Salle and Hmo. José Cervantes would agree. I hope so as I strive to become the Lasallian educator each envisioned in different times and places and yet with the same clarity. I know, too, that I have been transformed.

