

LASALLIAN EYES & EARS

THE BELL TOWER INTERVIEW: BROTHER JOHN JOHNSTON

Since completing his second seven-year term in the top executive position of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 2000, Brother John Johnston has been on the go almost as much as he was while serving as Superior General of the Christian Brothers.

From 2001 to 2003, Brother John served as Director of Education for the United States. In the past year and a half he has given programs in more than ten countries. A native Memphian, he has traveled the world both as Superior General of the Order and in recent years as a “senior consultant” and ambassador for the Lasallian mission worldwide, presenting retreats, workshops, and lectures for Brothers and lay teachers. It’s been quite a journey for a man who attended the Little Flower School at St. Therese in Memphis and wound up as “CEO” of the Christian Brothers and traveling the world.

JOHN KERR caught up with Brother John at the Brothers’ residence at CBU...

You spent 14 years (1986-2000) as Superior General. Much has changed and is changing in our world. What were your biggest challenges? What did you enjoy most about the job?

I think the biggest challenge in my ten years as Vicar and 14 as Superior General was moving with and giving guidance to the new way we Brothers understand and exercise our mission. Until approximately 1950 the Brothers themselves lived the Lasallian mission,



Pope John Paul II greets Brother John following the election of his successor as Superior General, Brother Alvaro Rodriguez (center).



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helped by a handful of lay teachers who *helped* the Brothers run *their* schools. Lay teachers increased numerically in the next decade, but they were still perceived as *helpers*. Then the Second Vatican Council, 1962-65, declared that all lay people baptized in the church are called to ministry—which means far more than *helping* priests and religious.

Following Vatican II, things changed rapidly. An unexpected ramification was the decline in the number of new members and the withdrawal of many Brothers. Schools with a small number of lay teachers helping the Brothers became schools with many lay teachers helping a small number of Brothers.

The old model no longer made sense. After several years we started speaking of “Lasallian schools” rather than “Brother’s schools.” In “Lasallian schools,” all collaborate. Lay teachers are no longer perceived as *helping* the Brothers. Rather they assume responsibility with the Brothers for the Lasallian character of the schools.

In order for this model to work, we have to create educational programs to enable teachers and staff to understand our “story” and heritage. Moreover, we have to create structures to enable lay people to participate in decision-making for mission on local, national, and international levels. These structures are gradually coming into play: councils of laymen and women along with the Brothers. It’s a real paradigm shift.

To a striking degree this development has been grass roots. Teachers and staff have expressed their desire to maintain schools as Lasallians, even when

there are few or no Brothers. We Brothers never anticipated this development. One of the biggest and most pleasant challenges I had as Superior General was moving with this movement, articulating it, giving it direction, tweaking it here and there—and answering objections to it.

It was the most satisfying part of my work. I’m happy with what we’ve done but we’ve got much more to do. We’ve reached a certain number of people through our formation programs at all levels. But we have to find ways to reach entire faculty and staff members. That’s the real challenge we have now. We need to create more formation programs for personnel on the level of individual campuses.

We have found that people get on board quickly. They like organizing themselves around a particular heritage, the “Lasallian” heritage. We throw the word “Lasallian” around a lot today, but it has to be more than a word or a slogan. We have to know what we mean by “Lasallian” and let that meaning shape us.

The Brothers are known worldwide for their educational mission. In your remarks to the Brothers’ General Assembly in 2000 you talked about “the Lasallian charism.” What is the Lasallian charism?

Yes, I said that it is the Lasallian charism that binds us all—Brothers and lay—into an international family. The charism is the gift that St. John Baptist de La Salle received from the Holy Spirit for the service of young people. De La Salle and the early Brothers lived this charism and their followers have transmitted it from generation to generation during the past 300 years.

Charism is a Greek word for “gift.” We find it in the New Testament, but it’s only in recent years, let’s say the last 45-50 years, that the word has been used to help understand religious congregations such as ours. Expressed succinctly, the Lasallian charism is a gift from God for educating youth, poor youth first and foremost.

As I said earlier the Brothers lived the charism themselves for many years, with minimal help from others, and put it at the service of youth all over the world. Today, however, we are learning from experience that people can live this charism not only as

Brothers but as married or single women or men, or as priests and religious of other congregations. We recognize that men and women who are not Catholic or even Christian are living many aspects of the charism in ways consistent with their beliefs.

What is it about Lasallian schools, and even in broader sense Catholic schools, that continues to resonate with not only Catholic, but also non-Catholic students?

We define our institutions as Catholic and Lasallian. We take seriously that claim and its implications. But, as Bishop Steib and Dr. McDonald are fond of saying, “we teach not because the students are Catholic, but because *we* are Catholic. *We* means the institution. It certainly does not mean that all the teachers and support personnel are Catholic. We place our educational services at the disposal of all, regardless of religion. We take religious freedom seriously. We’re not engaged in proselytizing. We’re not twisting people’s arms. We accept people as they are. At the same time we strive to create an atmosphere in our schools where administrators, teachers, support personnel, and students are free to live their faith publicly and with pride.

More than that, we provide opportunities for the students to grow in knowledge and understanding of religious faith. Worldwide, we have students of all the great religious traditions. It might come as a surprise to many, but as far as I know, no other religious congregation has the number of Muslims in their schools that we do.

Our Memphis institutions have always had a high number of students of other faiths. Back in the 1930s the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* published an editorial praising CBU (then CBC) as a “temple of tolerance.” I think that description is still heard here. It is an affirmation of what we consciously try to do.

You have also stressed the importance of Lasallian campuses promoting social justice and service. What should colleges and universities do to ensure that that component of a student’s education is not lost?

Solidarity with the poor is integral to the Lasallian charism. It’s not something accidental, it is essential.



The Brothers came into existence to respond to the needs of youth who were economically poor, youth whose needs were not being met.

Today we educate many young people who are poor economically, but we also educate youth who are better off. In the light of our “charism,” however, we can justify our institutions as “Lasallian” only if the students who graduate every year have realized four expectations: 1) they have received a solid education in accord with their particular gifts; 2) they have learned what it means to be and to live as sons and daughters of God; 3) they have learned to be brothers and sisters among themselves; 4) they have learned to *be brothers and sisters to and for others*.

In other words we expect the young people who walk off the stage at graduation each year to be young people who have a commitment to respond to the needs of others and to work for a more just society at every level. This fourth expectation—along with the other three, of course—must be met for an institution to merit the name “Lasallian.”

How do we accomplish this objective? We need courses, workshops, and seminars to help our students know and understand the world they live in. In addition, however, I think the students need opportunities for service and structured time to reflect together on that service. In short the commitment to educate young people to solidarity with the poor has to be intentional.

As Superior General, you traveled around the world. What

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impression from those travels has had the deepest impact?

Traveling the world has changed my life. I am different because of my contact with so many people of other nationalities, ethnic heritages, languages, religions, political and economic situations. I don't think the way I did 30 years ago. I know that I see things differently from people who have not had the extraordinary experience I have been blessed to have.

Today I read newspapers and journals, watch television news, and listen to radio news with Lasallian eyes and ears. I spontaneously think of our presence in countries that are at the center of attention. Today, for example, I am thinking of our Lasallians in Togo, an African country in danger of falling into civil war. The contact with the world has made me aware of realities I never knew existed—or if I did, didn't care about.

It seems that over the years, the Christian Brothers colleges and universities in the United States might not have received the recognition that some other Catholic orders have, e.g. Jesuits. Why do you think that is?

Well, the Jesuits have 28 universities in the United States, while we have seven. Their charism is also different. I think Jesuits see the education of the intellectually elite to leadership as a major dimension of their charism. That's great, but it's not our charism. We welcome students of a variety of abilities, and try to respond to their needs. Moreover, while we have master's and doctoral programs, we place a major emphasis on undergraduate education and on providing undergrads with quality teaching.

Maybe that's why we're not as "famous." But that doesn't bother me. The important thing is to be authentic, to be the people we have to be to accomplish the goals and objectives expressed in our mission statement. We have to be a *university* that is both *Catholic* and *Lasallian*. I think the CBU educational community has to be acutely aware of needs in the Memphis and the Mid-South area—although our focus should not be limited to this geographical area. Such awareness has helped shape both our day and evening programs. Of course, we are always trying to do better, searching for new, creative, and effective ways to respond to the needs of the local community.

We also need to be very up front about our religious dimension, understood as I mentioned earlier. We do not define ourselves in the way some other religious institutions of higher education in the United States define themselves, institutions such as Bob Jones or Brigham Young. But we are no less serious about the religious dimension. We want CBU to be a

place where young people can come to know, love, live, and express freely their religious beliefs and love and respect those of other faiths.

What changes would you like NOT to see in the next 20 years?

I don't want to see CBU or any other Lasallian university community forget who they are and why they exist. Father Malloy, outgoing president of Notre Dame, has said that many religious colleges and universities in the U.S. have become secular institutions, not so much by plan but by default.

What we're going to continue to see, barring a miraculous turnaround, is an ongoing reduction in the number of Brothers in many schools and colleges in the United States. We've got to be honest about that. It's just plain denial to ignore that reality. We do have a number of Brothers still teaching at CBU, but they are not getting any younger!

We must prepare for a future that we hope will include Brothers, but also for a future without Brothers should that become necessary. For this purpose board members, administrators, and the entire CBU educational community must give high priority to fostering the Lasallian dimension.

The increased and important role of laymen and women has been cited as not only a proper but critical change in Lasallian education. Pope John Paul II and more than likely the new Pope will not be moving far a field regarding the role of women in the Church. Is that a concern?

The problem, of course, is ordained ministry—and the authority in the Church that goes with it. A number of women believe that denial of access to ordained priesthood is discriminatory. Given the unambiguous position John Paul II took, I don't think any Pope in the near future, especially Pope Benedict, will reconsider the question. It would probably take nothing less than another Vatican Council to reopen the topic.

But let's remember that we are talking about ordained ministry. I'm not an ordained minister. Nevertheless, I think that I have an important role in the Church, not just because I am a Brother, but because I am a baptized Catholic. I think that women also have an extremely important role and in fact are increasingly exercising that role in new and creative ways. John Paul II tried to emphasize the very significant contribution women can make. He may not have been as successful at that as he wanted, since he was so firm and uncompromising on the issue of ordaining women.

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Throughout most of our history, we Brothers taught boys only. A relatively small number of lay men helped us. It was only 45 years or so ago that we began accepting female students and female teachers. Today 37,000 teachers in Lasallian schools are female, and 35,000 are male. That is a striking change.

In the U.S. there are more men than women, probably because many of our older schools, such as CBHS, are all-male. In administrative positions women lag behind. The president of the College of Santa Fe, a Lasallian institution, is a woman, and there are some women principals. Nevertheless, the number of women in top leadership roles needs to increase. I don't sense any opposition in principle, but I do think the matter merits examination.

You lived in physical proximity to the Vatican and had a working relationship with Vatican officials over many years. What do you see as important challenges for Pope Benedict XVI?

We call the Pope the Vicar of Christ, one who takes the place of Christ. I think, therefore, that the Pope has to take his cue, so to speak, from Jesus in the Gospel. Jesus said he came to proclaim and to promote the Reign of God—that is, the kind of world God wants. Jesus taught, drove our devils, healed the sick, defended the poor, took the side of women and of children... John Paul II described the Reign of God as an international communion of persons living as sons

Brother John (right foreground) served as assistant secretary of the Steering Committee of the Synod of Bishops on Consecrated Life in 1994. Pope John Paul II is at the center of the dais; Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, is in the first row of the assembly (lower left).

and daughters of God and as brothers and sisters among themselves. He said the Church has the mission of building the Kingdom of God.

The Vicar of Christ, therefore, has to lead the Church in this mission. Moreover, the Church as a communion of persons must be a sign of the Reign of God, manifesting fidelity to God's will and charity among its members. Members of the Church must be committed to the culture of life from conception to death that John Paul II so often described and that Benedict XVI has said he will continue to pursue.

Unfortunately, we have a divided Church, with people of opposing views judging one another self-righteously and harshly. I think the message of John Paul II and Benedict XVI challenges all of us. But the message has to be heard integrally, not just partially.

I have heard people claiming that this new Pope is on "their side"—meaning his clear views, for example, on abortion or on the limits of liturgical change. But Pope Benedict also has positions on the dangers of globalization and unbridled capitalism; on support of the poor locally, nationally, and internationally; on the death penalty, on war, on violence in general...

I hope that the Pope can pull us together as an international communion of persons and inspire us to commit ourselves to building the Reign of God. ■