

The great challenges to the human family that affect the Lasallian mission

Patrick Lynch fsc



"Without a vision the people perish" Proverbs

If Michelangelo had fallen short of producing a lasting treasure his creative genius would have gone unacknowledged and millions of people would have been robbed of his art. Leadership is more of an art than a set of things to do. It is tied up with vision, skill and passion. Its visibility is ultimately expressed in practice, with things being achieved, as Michelangelo's masterpieces attest.

The planet's population is fundamentally interconnected with its problems, hopes and challenges intertwined. **Leadership is the catalyst that is required to ensure we work together.**

As we set sail into the new millennium, it is probably not co-incidental that our world is in the process of undergoing one of those periodic shifts in its history where dramatic structural change takes place.

The globalisation of so many aspects of our lives is profound. Our nations and schools face challenges resulting from a range of socio-political, cultural and technological developments.

It is sobering to step back and look at some of the emerging challenges active in today's world.

- Six billion people co-existing on our planet with a further two billion expected by 2025
- Climate change, which is likely to result in the dislocation of significant concentrations of coastal populations and the inundation of micro Asia/Pacific nations like Kiribati and the Maldives Islands
- Escalating constraints on fresh water resources, which by 2025 will see upwards of forty per cent of the world's population facing

fundamental problems in gaining access to this essential life resource

- The emergence of a worrying tribalism and inward looking nationalistic orientations from sub groups within the boundaries of a significant number of current sovereign States, all of which have the capacity to destabilize these States

- The growing gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' which currently sees 1.2 billion people existing on less than \$US 1.00 a day

- A rapidly ageing population in many O.E.C.D. countries, which will see more than thirty per cent of some national populations over the age of 65yrs.

- Asian and African countries where fifty per cent of the population is under 20yrs, of age which puts pressure on education systems and employment prospects for these young people

- The genetic engineering revolution, which will be as profound in its effects on the way we live as the discovery of fire and the invention of the wheel

- Providing enough food to feed the world's populations, viewed more from an economic and distribution perspective than the planet's capacity to produce the food

- Global trade and economic systems which override sovereign national economic entities. The power of free trading blocs such as the Asia Pacific Economic Council (A.P.E.C.) and the European Union

- The information, communication, technology

How well do our Catholic schools actually deliver on the values we profess to stand for and how do these values relate to the major global challenges of the 21st century? These are the questions Patrick Lynch puts to us in his paper.

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revolution, which is transforming people's lives in all parts of the world and exacerbating the digital divide

- More intense international and internal migration patterns as people seek to improve their lives by flocking into urban centres and crossing international borders
- The H.I.V. scourge, which is rampaging through many African and Asian countries.

As leaders of our youth we can be daunted by the magnitude of these problems, or we can work to shape and control our future getting in where the action is, contributing to decision making processes



and seeking to influence outcomes. **Our civilisation's health is dependent on getting sound human values into the foreground, guided by the stimulating warmth of supportive Christian values.** If our Catholic brand of Christianity means anything, we must make an impact. If not, we will be like a cork on the high seas drifting along without any particular control over what is occurring in our society.

It is vital that as members of the world community, we not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of these challenges, nor become fatalistic about what they may lead to.

How we react to these huge issues depends on our belief systems, attitudes, values, confidence and how much energy and vision they have.

In this United Nations Decade of A Culture of Peace

when emphasis is being given to family/personal values, no doubt your desire is that people will positively come to grips with the global forces, which engulf us, seize the moment and gain exhilaration from riding the revolutionary wave. There really is no other option. The Chinese proverb says it all: "When the winds of change swirl, some build windmills while others build walls." I am sure you are in the windmill category.

The Second Vatican Council called on Christians to read the signs of the times. Leadership is more of an art than a set of things to do. This is not an abstract challenge when one reflects on the forces active in today's world.

The words of the prophet Isaiah, which Jesus made his own, provide a fog lamp to enable us to see the way ahead. "The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind, new sight; to set the downtrodden free and to proclaim the Lord's year of favour." **This is not about another world or another time, it is something we are urged to make happen now.** It will happen through His followers, you and me, who are commissioned to bring this Good News to the world.

This is where our schools come into the picture. They are a sensitive meeting point for the problems that besiege this restless start to the third millennium.

"You defend a country by armies, but you defend a civilization by schools," says Dr. Jonathon Saks the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. In our schools we induct our young people in our faith, our community and our international world.

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Hope is the foundation for all that we do. **If we don't have a vision for the future then our future is threatened to be a repeat of the past.** The future will belong to those who are best able to create,

share, absorb and make use of knowledge. This is the challenge we all face, even though it may seem daunting. Effectively a shared vision is not an idea, but a force in peoples' hearts which answers the question, what do we want to create?

Schools generally, and our Lasallian schools in particular, are called upon to be institutions of hope for students and their families, but particularly for the poor and marginalized, including those from broken families and those who are on the periphery of our community.

The debate today is no longer Catholic school or no Catholic school. **The fundamental task is the emergence of a Catholic school, which is responsive to the socio-economic, political, religious and cultural challenges of this postmodern world.** This is no easy task, yet it must be faced if we are to be faithful followers of John Baptist De La Salle.

We talk about the mission of the Church. Our schools are at the cutting edge of this mission. Every day our students are being seen on the streets of our towns and cities. They are a sign of who we are and what we stand for.

The challenge we all face is to convey to our students a sense of mission, hope and inspiration so as to bring our human values to the fore and to contribute to the uplifting of the world in order to make it a better place.

Our society is suffering from disenchantment and in some cases, despair. Perhaps the most serious crisis we face is the absence of a utopian horizon, which motivates and energizes people to commit themselves to create change in favour of the poor and dispossessed of our society and of the world.

The utopian idea is all part of Christianity. Without it we would not advance in the bringing about of the creation of a new earth, or as John saw in the Book of Revelations, "the new Jerusalem where there will be no more death, for the former things will have passed away". (Rev. 21, 1-8).

The question each of us has to ask ourselves is, "Am I the way without getting in the way?" It is too easy to be an obstacle to positive change. It is a bit like the late Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping's cat analogy, "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, providing it catches mice". **Creative programmes**

that go somewhere towards achieving practical solutions are called for.

During the darkest days of World War II, Winston Churchill, the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom said, "It is no good saying we did our best, when what we need is to succeed". Our Institute needs this sort of inspiration if we are going to be faithful to its educational mission.

Having skills and knowledge is essential in today's world. People who do not have a spiritual foundation in their lives, become withered spirits who lack enthusiasm, positiveness and drive. Providing resources to assist people to get onto their feet is always helpful. However, unless people have reasons for living and have hope in their lives, they are not going to ignite their spirits. To generate this spark one needs to reflect on these questions:

- Who am I?
- Where do I fit in?
- Where do I belong?
- What am I meant to do with my life?

At rock bottom, people will only help themselves and help their fellow humans when they have a vision of what is possible and know they might work towards achieving that vision. "Without a vision the people perish", says the Book of Proverbs.

We pride ourselves that our Lasallian schools are strong on values education and there is a lot of truth in this assertion. However, given the rising tide of emphasis on the fundamental importance of values and attitudes in the delivery of the school curriculum, **maybe we need to examine just how well we deliver on the values we stand for and how these values relate to the major global challenges of the 21st century.**

Are we sure, for instance, that all of our teachers can spell out and act on the values our schools stand for? Do all the students know the values and do the parent shareholders of the school also know? Maybe we would be somewhat surprised at the results if we did an audit or survey on the topic to see what

our teachers, students and parents know of these values and

whether or not they are acted out.

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The new technologies can enable our schools to offer "borderless education" and virtual classrooms. Catholic schools, if they are to be leaders in providing individual learning programmes for their students, will need to build stronger alliances with one another and also build them with overseas education providers and others in our community via the virtual education networks.

Along with these actions we will need to develop in our students a deep commitment to community at the international level. This includes the development of a sympathetic and compassionate imagination.

Knowledge management is the key to our growth and development. **If we do not inculcate in our young people the life long learning imperative, they will be tossed into the waste paper bin of history.** This is a big responsibility faced by everyone of our schools.

When push comes to shove we have our Lasallian schools because we believe schools are a good way to pass on our faith and our view of the world. There is plenty of evidence that our schools can become and are becoming powerhouses for evangelising and catechetical activities. We can continue to improve in this area providing we better organise ourselves and have clear strategic directions and goals.

Since schools are only part of the equation in the evangelisation processes, the other part, the parish, needs to be bold enough to continuously review what it is doing, to see whether or not it is dynamic enough and is a place which is welcoming and life-giving to its people in its pastoral care structures, liturgies and outreach programs.

Our Lasallian Schools operate on the premise that Christianity is a way of life and that students learn "by doing Christianity".

A country's growth and development is more than ever dependent on having inspiring, professionally oriented and dedicated teachers. **Quality teaching is the key to better education in the future.** In the Information Age the hope of each nation depends on high quality teachers working with our young people.

Massaging the status quo is not an option, if our Lasallian schools are going to positively add to the growth and development of our nations and the international community.

All this is enough to scare a dog off its chain - we can however, stare down the great challenges facing humanity, by trusting in God and by working boldly together. Lasallian schools can be cutting edge leaders in this great endeavour.