

Women in the Lasallian Family: Moving Forward Together as Leaven for Transformation¹

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Introduction

For two weeks in April 2023, women, laymen, and Brothers from every Lasallian Region in the Institute,³ together with speakers on women's role in our history, spirituality, ministries, and mission, gathered in Rome. This first Lasallian International Center (CIL) formation program to be focused on Lasallian women was created with careful consideration and scaffolding, resulting in clear critical thinking, thoughtful dialogue, and creative synergies across our global Lasallian Family.

Participants of both sexes, lay and Brother alike, opened themselves to the broad spectrum of female experience in devotion and service to the mission we all share. Beginning and continuing throughout our time together, rich spiritual, prayer, and retreat elements centered on the connection between the metaphor of leaven and our service, work, and ministry as Lasallian women. Our time together began with the spiritual point of departure by each of us physically adding leaven to flour, symbolic of individual contributions to our global mission that together and by association affect growth and transformation. Daily prayer continued to weave our comprehension and connection to leaven, flour, kneading, resting, and baking bread as an apt and illuminating metaphor both for our time together and our collective future.

First Week

Brother Armin Luistro, superior general, launched our CIL gathering in his keynote address. Lifting up inspirational Lasallian women he had just learned about or encountered in the Lasallian District of Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, and Papua New Guinea, he highlighted the commitment, devotion, and courage each reflected in living the mission. Brother Armin also recounted his own experience in the Philippines following Super Typhoon Haiyan.⁴ In surveying the devastation of a school in the Samar Region, he encountered the female principal who, though lacking shoes and disheveled in the storm's aftermath, nonetheless had on lipstick. He commented on that fact and she told him that seeing her with lipstick would provide the children a sense of normality, and that indeed all was not lost. Brother, who at the time served as his country's secretary of education (2010-2016), was moved to begin a lipstick challenge to gather lipsticks for women following natural disasters. Women's sense of self, following disasters, was bolstered through this simple possession. Each of the women Brother Armin highlighted served

as icons of energy and focus reflecting strong and steadfast purpose as we began our work together.

Our second day focused on “Women in the Life of the Founder.” We began by looking at our history, to ascertain how this might affect and influence our future as Lasallian women. Mary Catherine Fox, professor emerita from Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, gave a new perspective on seventeenth-century women, wives, and champions prior to our Founder’s time. Following the Council of Trent and its call for clergy reform, Fox drew our attention to individual women in the seventeenth century. She traced the movement from cloistered women of prayer to women of action in education and social service. The work of these women provided a number of clear precursors to the work of John Baptist de La Salle. In his wisdom, the elements he chose to use and build upon in establishing the Christian schools, together with his unprecedented work in creating a lay community of male teachers, set our ministries in motion. Fox introduced us to the spiritual partnerships of Saints Francis de Sales and Jane Frances Chantal and Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. In his recent biography of De La Salle, Bernard Hours explicitly raises the partnership of Sister Louise Hours and De La Salle to the level of these previous spiritual partnerships.⁵ The work of De La Salle’s contemporaries, Blessed Nicolas Barré and Blessed Nicolas Roland, with women was also explored. We were introduced to the work of Venerable Mary Ward,⁶ who worked tirelessly in the face of strong opposition and persecution to establish an order of women working for God in the world. She served as a thought-provoking parallel to the experiences of our Founder. In closing, Fox quoted historian Elizabeth Rapley:

Among the impressions which the new charity schools made upon their society, none was more important than that which carried Roland’s friend and executor, Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, into his life’s work. In 1679 charity schools for boys, modeled upon the sisters’ schools, were opening in Rheims and in 1688 the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools took shape.

At last, school teaching by itself, without the benefit of the priesthood, became a fit religious vocation for men. But it should be remembered that they followed a path that women had already trodden.⁷

From this initial historical vantage point, Fox covered the women in the Founder’s own life:

- Perette Lespagnol, grandmother
- Nicolle Moët de Brouillet, mother
- Marie de La Salle, sister
- Rose Marie de La Salle, Rosette, sister
- Madame Maillefer, benefactor
- Mother Françoise Duval, who introduced Adrien Nyel and De La Salle
- Sister Louise Hours, spiritual guide
- Mothers of the early students

Diana Loera Rodríguez, associate director of the International Association of La Salle Universities (IALU), continued our day by introducing contemporary elements of Lasallian

women. She briefly presented the many Lasallian documents released in recent years that explicitly note women and encouraged us to review and reflect on the documents and their relationship to our experience.

Throughout the day, time was made available for journal reflection and small group dialogue centering on the characteristics of women who had significantly influenced us.

In closing, Fox and Loera Rodríguez noted the wide diversity of our lived reality and the binaries⁸ that present a creative tension for our mission today giving us challenges and opportunities as, moving forward, we work to serve those on the margins.

Continuing our comprehension of the state of women in the Lasallian Family today, Susan Hines⁹ and Elizabeth Seebach¹⁰ presented the findings and results of the “Lasallian Women’s Needs Assessment Survey Report.”¹¹ The assessment survey, conceived by Heather Ruple Gilson, co-secretary of association for mission,¹² was created and executed to gain insight into the realities of Lasallian women today in the following areas:

- contribution
- formation and professional development
- accompaniment
- representation
- cultural aspects
- work/life balance

This global CIL gathering afforded Hines and Seebach the unique opportunity to involve participants in physical groupings representing regional and ministry responses to survey elements. Thus, the data quite literally jumped off the page and into the room! Participants walked through survey findings noting through sticker votes the elements most germane to be addressed in their Region.

Moving deeper into our understanding of our moment in time, Sister Joelle Ferry¹³ gave us a clear and thorough presentation titled “Women in the Bible and the Early Church.” Laying the foundation for her remarks, Ferry identified womens’ roles in the early Church, stating that to move forward it is important to return to our origins. Evidence from Saint Paul’s letters to the Romans and Timothy referencing home churches, deaconesses, leaders, and women of high rank in roles of authority and responsibility was brought to bear on the Synodal discussions occurring today.¹⁴ Noting that “from all continents comes an appeal for Catholic women to be valued first and foremost as baptized and equal members,” Ferry stated there is a universal call for rethinking women’s opportunities in the church, noting that the relationship between men and women is what is most important.¹⁵ It is in these relationships that the possibility to improve situations and structures exists. Ferry emphasized that our baptism is the basis for our equality. The genesis for discernment is from our baptism, which is “the true identity of the Christian.” She noted that “our service (as women) is appreciated but our voice is ignored.” In the Synod process, the “invisibility of women in liturgy” is seen in calls for women to be admitted to preaching and to the permanent diaconate. There is striking global congruence in reading the signs of the times, but also obvious retrenchment and weak arguments in opposition. As the Synod progresses, we

were left with much to ponder regarding how both women and nature have “been treated as instruments.”

Agnes M. Brazal¹⁶ ignited our thinking on feminine spirituality in her presentation, “Feminist/Feminine Spirituality.” In highlighting the intersection of feminine/feminist and Lasallian spirituality, Brazal assisted our comprehension of the need to

revalue the body, sexuality and emotions. . . . Feminist spirituality intersects with Lasallian spirituality in the latter’s focus on Incarnation, solidarity with the poor and the vulnerable, inclusivity and zeal for the integral salvation of all. These can be further enhanced or expanded using the feminist lens and concerns.

Her work underscored “attempts to deconstruct dualisms” and the need to “expand our image and language for God to honor and do justice to the diversity of experiences and identities.” By drawing on female anatomy, menstruation, pregnancy, and cycles, Brazal brought a new perspective and holistic view to spirituality.

At the close of our first week together, time was devoted to retreat, reflection, and rest to ensure that we could process all that we had heard and absorbed. A myriad of retreat experiences were prepared, allowing participants to select from and participate in three experiences of their own choice: spiritual dance, Lectio Divina, sanctuary meditation, collage crafting, individual prayer, yoga, mandala making, and a video presentation of “Bread Making Companions” sent by Marilou Ibita.¹⁷ All noted the essential nature and benefits of this time before moving into our second week together.

At appointed moments during the first week, we were invited by language groups to visit the Institute’s Archives, where Brother Hilaire Raharilalao, who serves in the Lasallian Resource and Research Service, had gathered documents of special interest to our Founder’s relationships with women. Brother Hilaire explained the documents and introduced us to all the elements contained in our Institute archives. The chance to see a letter in the Founder’s own hand and bearing his signature inspired us all.

Second Week

We began our second week with a presentation by Laura Ballerini and Angela Matulli of La Salle Foundation.¹⁸ We became familiar with the many and varied works of our Institute across the globe. The uniting theme of “removing obstacles and bringing children to school” is at the heart of every effort, whether that involves building means of procuring clean water, providing dormitories for students to eliminate long commutes, or their use as workers, immediate response to natural/human disasters, such as the recent earthquake in Turkey,¹⁹ or working with students displaced by war as in the Ukraine. Ballerini stated, “Even in emergencies, our commitment remains access to education.” La Salle Foundation, as an NGO (non-government organization) averages ninety projects a year, over thirty of which are in “fragile countries.” From the Fratelli Project for children who fled to Lebanon from war in Syria to water projects in Paraguay and other projects in Sudan, Vietnam, and Peru, the needs are great.

In co-founding Lasallian Women of Hope, Maryann Donohue Lynch²⁰ and Jane Wambui Gacicio²¹ described their work in RELAF, instituting means for girls to continue their education during menstrual cycles by providing sanitary products. Additionally, beautiful cloth carriers were sewn and made available to girls to ensure discretion in carrying necessary sanitary products. These carriers, just like the lipsticks Brother Armin gathered, are a small and visible means that serve to respect women's dignity. Lasallian Women of Hope offers micro-grants for projects and initiatives that support women and girls accessing Lasallian education across the globe.

Estesa Xaris (Teeza) Que Legaspi's presentation,²² "Act Like a Girl," raised our awareness of gender stereotypes and opened our eyes to how gender inequality and bias are perpetuated in everyday language and life. Teeza discussed her center's work in the linkages of gender and development, inclusion, accommodation, mental health, and well-being.

Following from the day of the realities of women and girls in the world today, the presentation by Sister Lesley Sandiga, FMA, on "Lasallian Leadership" introduced us to ourselves, our leadership styles, strengths, and weaknesses and gave us tools to be more effective. With great energy, she began by encouraging us "to get lost from time to time, in new people, in other places, in new journeys." The importance of risk was emphasized to "achieve team cohesion, interests, belonging and the ability to assume challenges with charismatic creativity." This is "appreciative leadership."²³ Understanding our own and our peers' potential to create significant change, to be "creators of our own reality," and "energize our Lasallian association and shared mission" was the heart of her vivacious, strong, and often humorous presentation. None of us were on the sidelines; all of us were involved, active, and enlightened participants!

The week also included a panel, chaired by Rose Laetitia Dala,²⁴ an inaugural member of CIAMEL and a member of the planning team for our CIL gathering.²⁵ The panel included women in leadership roles representing schools, universities, and positions at the District and Regional level as well as our Guadalupana Sisters.²⁶ The women shared their insights and wisdom about lessons learned, challenges encountered, and advice they would give. The panel proved to be inspirational as well as a source of ignition for participant project ideas moving forward.

Brother Paco Chiva, co-secretary of association for mission, gave a lively presentation entitled "Lasallian Women and the Journey of Association." He visually presented the Church's hierarchical leadership model juxtaposed to the inclusive model of leadership that captivated us all. He began by noting stereotypes of men and women that have prevailed throughout history. His review of the significant mention and function of women in Scripture added strong evidence for the necessity of an inclusive style of leadership.

Additionally, Brother Paco issued a strong call highlighting the need for Lasallian women's presentations and inclusion in formation activities both for lay and Brothers, quoting *The Pilgrim's Handbook* in stating,

Authentic Lasallian mission formation can never ignore the perspective or wisdom that women bring to the ministry of education. Lasallian formation must proactively develop

content and structures that enable women to take on important roles of leadership in both formation and ministry.²⁷

He emphasized our baptismal identity as the criteria for equality and inclusion.

Keane Palatino, international coordinator of Young Lasallians, and Brother Luis Bolivar, a member of the Institute's Secretariat of Formation, shared points of departure for participants to consider how best to accompany women on their journeys of belonging and commitment through both the Young Lasallians Movement and formation programs. They highlighted the critical need for presence and full participation of women in these areas.

A final highlight was the chance for each language group to share their hopes, dreams, challenges, and experience of the CIL gathering with members of the Institute's General Council Community. This allowed Brothers in Institute leadership to hear firsthand of the realities of women in mission today.

The clear community of this CIL was evident early, strengthened through prayer, socials, dialogue, small groups, and ultimately the identification and description of projects the women wish to undertake in their Districts.

Examples of projects resulting from our work together include, but are not limited to, the following:

- growing the work of Lasallian Women of Hope and female health education
- utilizing the Lasallian Women's Needs Assessment Survey to identify areas of focus, particularly for mentor and leadership training
- inculcating women's presence in the life of our Founder in formation programs
- networking with women across Regions and Districts
- advocating for women to attend formation programs
- undertaking additional research into needs of women in the Lasallian Family at a more local level

Conclusion

With unanimous appreciation and gratitude to Heather Ruple Gilson and Brother Paco Chiva, co-secretaries of association for mission, for their great work in creating and executing this first CIL gathering on Lasallian Women, our time culminated in a grand prayer celebration in the Sanctuary of the La Salle Casa Generalizia in front of the relics of our Founder; and this was followed by an aperitif and banquet with several Brothers of the Generalate Community. The friendships and connections made are a foundation for all that is to come. Each of us returned home energized, galvanized, and ignited for the work of creating our future.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle, pray for us! Live Jesus in our hearts forever!

¹ From April 7 to 28, 2023, some fifty women, laymen, and Brothers of every Lasallian Region in the Institute, together with speakers on women's role in Lasallian history, spirituality, and mission, gathered at the Centro Internationalize Lasalliano (CIL) in the La Salle Casa Generalizia in Rome to explore the topic of the important role of women in the Lasallian Family. This "white paper" attempts to reflect a summary of that experience.

² Mary Catherine Fox, who is a professor emerita of interdisciplinary studies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, earned her doctorate in higher education at the University of Minnesota. An affiliated member of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, she received the Brother John Johnston Award of the Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN) for distinguished service in 2021.

³ The Lasallian mission is present in some 80 countries worldwide, with 3,000 Brothers and 90,000 Partners serving more than 1,000,000 young people and adult students in 1,000 ministries. The five Regions of the Institute are: PARC Asia/Oceania (Pacific-Asia Regional Conference), RELEM Europe/Mediterranean (Région Lasallienne Européenne-Méditerranée), RELAF Africa-Madagascar (Région Lasallienne d'Afrique), RELAL Latin America (Región Latinoamericana Lasallista), and RELAN North America (La Région Lasallienne d'Amérique du Nord).

⁴ From November 3 to 11, 2013.

⁵ Bernard Hours, *Jean-Baptiste de La Salle: A Mystic in Action*, translated by Anna Fitzgerald (Washington, DC: Christian Brothers Conference, 2022), pages 458-475.

⁶ Mary Ward (1585-1645) was an English Catholic (recusant) whose belief that women should be actively involved in Church life, and drawing on the inspiration of the Jesuits as model, led to the founding of the Congregation of Jesus and of the Sisters of Loreto.

⁷ Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women & Church in Seventeenth-Century France*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), page 140.

⁸ Richard Tristano, 2011.

⁹ Susan Hines, EdD, serves as the program director of the doctorate in education-leadership program at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Seebach, PhD, LP, served until December 2023 as a professor in the undergraduate psychology and social sciences department at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.

¹¹ Cf. Heather Ruple Gilson, MEd, Susan R. Hines, EdD, Elizabeth E. Seebach, PhD, LP, and Mary Catherine Fox, PhD, AFSC, "Lasallian Women's Needs Assessment Survey Report," *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 14, no. 1 (2023): 83-93.

¹² Heather Ruple Gilson, MEd.

¹³ Sister Joelle Ferry, a Xavière Sister and honorary professor of sacred scripture at the faculty of theology of the Institut Catholique de Paris.

¹⁴ The Synod on Synodality is a three-year synodal process (integrating the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops with synodal gatherings in local dioceses around the continents of the world) launched by Pope Francis by which the Church is collaboratively exploring and charting its path in the modern era while emphasizing such things as listening, participation, discernment, communion, and mission. It was formally opened at the Vatican on October 9 to 10, 2021; the Synod's elected and appointed delegates met in the Vatican from October 4 to 29, 2023; and the Synod will conclude in fall 2024.

¹⁵ *Working Document for the Continental Stage* (Vatican City: General Secretariat of the Synod, October 2022), no. 60 to no. 65.

¹⁶ Agnes M. Brazal, PhD, STL, STD, serves as professor of theology at De La Salle University in Manila.

¹⁷ Marilou Ibita, PhD, STD, serves as professor of theology and religious studies at De La Salle University in Manila.

¹⁸ La Salle Foundation in Rome is “a non-profit organization, committed to the realization of solidarity and development projects in the field of education throughout the world.” It is “the main fundraising tool of the La Salle Institute, which has 1,100 educational works, in 80 countries around the world, serving more than one million students.” Its website states that “our role is to support educational centers in the most fragile contexts working with the most vulnerable populations. Through schools we listen to the needs of the realities of those around us and respond with integrated and sustainable programs so that our centers become a driver of development for the whole community.”

¹⁹ “On 6 February 2023, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake occurred in southern Turkey near the northern border of Syria.”

²⁰ Maryann Donohue Lynch is the former associate executive director, office for mission and ministry, for the District of Eastern North America.

²¹ Jane Wambui Gacicio serves as the office administrator and Lasallian coordinator of Mwangaza College in Nakuru, Kenya.

²² Estesa Xaris (Teeza) Que Legaspi, PhD, serves as the director of the La Salle Center for inclusion, diversity, and well-being (LCIDWell) at De La Salle University in Manila.

²³ Cf. Miriam Subriana Vilanova, “Creativity to Flourish: Pathways toward Appreciative Leadership,” in *Handbook of Personal and Organizational Transformation* (2017), pages 1-34; and Stefan P. Cantore and David L. Cooperrider, “Positive Psychology and Appreciative Inquiry: The Contribution of the Literature to an Understanding of the Nature and Process of Change in Organizations,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of the Psychology of Leadership, Change, and Organizational Development*, edited by H. S. Leonard, R. Lewis, A. M. Freedman, and J. Passmore (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pages 267–287.

²⁴ Rose Laetitia Dala was an inaugural member of the International Council of Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission (CIAMEL) and is the director of the primary school of La Salle Bandenya in Burkina Faso.

²⁵ The planning team for the CIL 2023 gathering of Lasallian women, of which Rose Laetitia Dala was a member, worked both in person at the CIL in Rome and virtually by Zoom.

²⁶ The Guadalupana Sisters of La Salle live the Lasallian charism inherited by their founder, Venerable Brother Juan Fromental Cayroche, FSC. Following the example of their founder, they carry out the mission of “providing human and Christian education to children and the young, especially the poorest...”

²⁷ *Lasallian Formation for Mission: The Pilgrim’s Handbook* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2019), page 54.