

## Inaugural Address October 28, 2009

Cardinal McCarrick, Bishop Walsh, Mr. O'Malley and members of the board of trustees, Brother Thomas, Brother Dennis Malloy and the Brothers of the Christian Schools, visiting presidents and delegates, distinguished guests, alumni, faculty, administration and staff, friends, family, and, of course, our wonderful students...

I stand before you today in a spirit of profound gratitude: gratitude for the great work we have been called to do here at Manhattan College; gratitude for the many good wishes, promises of prayers, and congratulations that I have received from far and wide; gratitude, especially, for the presence of all of you here today—and for the spirit of *faith* and *hope* that your presence represents.

Mr. O'Malley and members of the Board of Trustees: I thank you for your trust in me. Your dedication to and support of your beloved Manhattan College is a large part of what inspired me to join this community.

Brother Dennis Malloy, Provincial of the District of Eastern North America, Brother Timothy Murphy, Director of the Manhattan Brothers Community, and all of the members of the Institute of Saint John Baptist De La Salle present here today: I thank you for the generosity of spirit that you have shown in the midst of a historical transition in the life of this great institution. Your strong support has borne powerful witness to the faith of your community in the One who calls us, religious and lay, to our work in the world. You have welcomed me into that work with open arms. You have responded to this transition not as an instance of the “dying of the light,” but as the passing of a torch. You have read this sign of the times as the beginning of a new chapter written by an author who continually surprises us and challenges us, greeting us age after age and generation upon generation with the words: “Behold! I make all things new!” In doing so, your actions have expressed eloquently the prayer that John Baptist de La Salle uttered so many times in the midst of challenges, the words that have provided us with the theme of our inaugural celebrations all this week: “*Domine, opus tuum.*” Lord, the Work is Yours.

The list of those whom I would *like* to thank is long—colleagues, friends, and family who have taken the time to be here today, and the many people who have worked so long and hard on the various activities in this weeklong celebration of Lasallian education. That list unfortunately is *much too long* to do it anything like the justice it deserves. So, aside from a brief nod here to the multi-talented, inexhaustible, and ever-patient Veronica Boland and Lydia Gray, co-chairs of the planning committee, I shall have to save my full expression of thanks for another time and place.

But, before I start, I do want to take a moment to thank my family—my wife Angela, and our three sons Charles, Patrick, and Will—for their constant love and support. Much of what I have to say this afternoon will finally be variations on the theme of love, and I would know nothing on that theme without them.

I also want to acknowledge a special debt to Professor Rodeheffer, whose friendship has for many years been a great blessing. Long before I had any inkling that I would be working at a

Lasallian institution, she was for me a living witness to the goodness of Lasallian education. Her work, which I learned about originally through the Lilly Fellows Program, has been an inspiration to a generation of faculty members and administrators who take the religious identity of their institutions seriously. I am grateful for her participation in these ceremonies, and proud to claim her now as my sister in Lasallian education!

And, finally, I want to acknowledge and thank someone to whom the entire Manhattan community owes an enormous debt of gratitude. Brother Thomas Scanlan, Manhattan's 18th president, has been called by many a "second founder" of the College. It is a title that he richly deserves, as I think that there is no doubt that, without his leadership, we would not be here today looking forward with such hope and confidence towards our future. At last week's meeting of the Board of Trustees, the College acknowledged his great legacy formally, granting him by unanimous vote the title "President Emeritus."

On a personal level, I want to acknowledge publicly not only Brother Thomas's strong support during the transition, but also his many personal kindnesses, which have smoothed that transition immeasurably. President Emeritus Scanlan: on behalf of a grateful community, I salute you for your faithful work of twenty-two years in service to Manhattan College and wish you continued success and blessings in your new work as Auxiliary Visitor for the Christian Brother's District of Eastern North America.

*Domine, opus tuum. Lord, the Work is Yours.*

I first learned of the importance of these words to Lasallian education through a wonderful book that is given out here at Manhattan to all new faculty, staff, and administrators: Brother Luke Salm's *The Work is Yours: the Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*. Brother Luke, whose death we mourned in August and whose life and work we're celebrating as part of inauguration week, was a giant in the world of Lasallian studies. The first non-cleric to receive a doctorate in sacred theology from the Catholic University of America, Brother Luke served at Manhattan for over fifty years, playing a pivotal and forward-looking role in the professionalization of the college's faculty and academic operations, and serving in his later years as archivist for the New York District archives. The exhibition based on his work that opened Monday in O'Malley library documents his painstaking and inspired work in the great renewal of the Institute in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council.

Brother Luke's research into the life of De La Salle was of a piece with the powerful theological movements that underpinned the council, the spirit of "aggiornamento" through which the church sought to look forward while simultaneously re-grounding itself in a reinvigorated sense of its past. The work of rediscovering the "charism" of the founder was undertaken not merely for historical reasons, but as a means to inspire a fresh approach to the challenges of the modern secular world. As Brother William Mann said so movingly at his funeral Mass, Brother Luke was

A man for the ages ... who attempted to help the Brothers around the world to re-vision and re-capture ... the passion of the Lasallian origins ... so that "our world so secular and broken" might glimpse Christ alive in us and, hopefully, "fall in love with God again."

The De La Salle who emerges from the pages of Brother Luke's book, the man whose "passion" he seeks to capture and whose example he presents as both resource and challenge for us, was led only gradually to embrace the work for which he would eventually be canonized.

The man who was to become the patron saint of teachers could have lived, had he chosen to do so, a very comfortable life among the cultivated, clever and rich in his native France. Born into privileged circumstances, he was an exquisitely educated priest well on his way to a brilliant career in the church when he was called to pour out his talents and his life in service to communities that today would be called "underserved"—the children of artisans and the "working poor," who in that place and time would have otherwise been denied a quality education. It was not an easy course for him, nor one in which he always felt supported and sustained. Amy Surak, the archivist who curated the exhibition of Br. Luke's work, tells me that the working title for the manuscript that would become "The Work Is Yours" was originally "When I Was Hungry," emphasizing the origins of the Lasallian charism in compassionate response to injustice, exemplified in the conditions of the poor. Much to the dismay of his family and of those who believed that the work he adopted was beneath his dignity and station, De La Salle set himself on a course that would involve successive divestments of the trappings of his station and privilege.

In the end, he became a poor man among the poor, living in the midst of the same uncertainties that constituted their daily lot, and devoting himself utterly to the work to which he was called. That work, at its root, was ministering in love to his teachers and their students, touching the minds and hearts of those students so that they might be led to a better, more abundant, more productive, and more purposeful life.

The phrase that Brother Luke would eventually adopt as his title was a favorite of De La Salle and pervaded his prayers. Taken from the prophet Habakkuk, it is a rich and layered phrase. Depending on the context of what was happening in his life, or whether the focus was his own salvation or the survival of the Institute, the meaning can bend in many directions. It can be a simple prayer of thanks: "my success is owed to you, Lord." Or a cry on the verge of desperation: "I'm utterly at a loss here in my failure, Lord, so you need to take over." It can even be a description emerging from an insight into the wonder of creation: "what work you are capable of, Lord! How deep your designs, how beautiful and diverse your works!"

At its root, however, and when applied to the Institute, the phrase is a prayer of dedication and consecration, made in acknowledgment of De La Salle's profound faith in a God who seeks collaboration with his creatures. The God that De La Salle prayed to was no distant, abstracted rules-keeper, indifferent to human striving, but rather a God who is constantly active here and now in the world, seeking through the spirit constantly to engage human beings as co-workers in the vast, all-encompassing, and multi-generational work of salvation. In that context, the phrase represents a leap of faith and an expression of hope that the work that De La Salle and his brothers were doing day in and day out, with all of its mixed successes and failures, its joys and frustrations, was finally part of that great work, a work to which they were called by the pressing needs of their time.

And there indeed were failures. One of the great contributions of Brother Luke's work is its portrayal of the "saint" not as someone who lived life assured of his own sanctity, but who struggled, as all of us do, in the midst of uncertainty and who experienced—many times—the anguish of thinking his work might in the end amount to nothing. "The work is yours," again, has as one of its meanings something like, "I'm at an impasse here, Lord; show me the way!"

The choice of this phrase to frame these inaugural events will be obvious, I hope. No one here needs to be reminded that we hold these celebrations in the midst of great uncertainty and with more than a little anxiety about the future. Our country is engaged in war on multiple fronts and the political situation in the Middle East looms over all of our hopes. Armed conflict, political corruption, and unjust systems here and around the globe pose severe threats to human dignity. Questions of the sustainability of our way of life haunt us and challenge us economically, technologically, and morally. Our nation's political discourse continues to descend into stridency and caricature threatening to drown out any reasonable conversation on issues of the common good. And of course we find ourselves in the midst of an economic downturn that has called into question many of our most prized assumptions about the stability of our standard of living.

Higher education, like all sectors of our society, has come under intense scrutiny as a result of these shaken assumptions, and has been confronted in the past year not simply with a challenge to its pocketbook, but, more fundamentally, with a challenge to its values.

Writing recently in the *New York Times Book Review*, Harvard president Drew Gilpin Faust reflected on the current climate in an essay aptly titled "The University's *Crisis of Purpose*." As students and their families ask harder and harder questions about the *value* of what we provide, Manhattan and other schools need to take a hard look at what they value. I believe that we should welcome that hard look, that we should encourage it—that we should undertake it ourselves. And I believe—believe with all my heart or else I would not be here—that, while we will **not** find ourselves perfect (far from it), we **will** find that at our core, at our heart, our tradition and values are strong. And I have confidence that that tradition and those values will continue to sustain us as they have sustained generations of Manhattan students through a century and a half of change.

The faith and hope of the Brothers in the goodness of "the work,"—expressed most fundamentally in a zeal for learning, compassion for students, and in a paramount concern for those students' intellectual, physical, moral and spiritual wellbeing—has sustained the Institute for more than three hundred years, through good times and bad.

It has sustained Manhattan College for more than 150 years, from its founding in Manhattanville through its move here, to Riverdale, from the years when the work was carried on almost exclusively by the Brothers themselves, to now, when lay collaborators, generously welcomed into the work, greatly outnumber the professed religious members of the community, from the days when the College was primarily a school for male, Catholic, Irish- and Italian-American commuters, to now, when half of our students are women, most of our students reside on campus, and our student body is increasingly diverse ethnically, religiously, and culturally.

Indeed, I think that our history and our grounding in our core values situates us *especially* well to continue to serve, as we have served in the past, as a precious resource to a new generation of students, the future leaders of our city, our church, our nation, and our world. Our work may be cut out for us, and it may be hard work. But we have a history of doing very hard work very well, and we have a tradition that allows us to understand our work as being of great value and great consequence.

The man who prayed constantly, Domine, opus tuum, was not someone who was afraid of change—or of hard work. In fact, I think that the history of Lasallian institutions suggests that the charism is distinctive for its responsiveness to opportunity and for its flexibility and adaptability: in a word, for its spirit of practical innovation. The foundation of the order was itself a direct, passionate, and compassionate response to a pressing need. And, time after time, the decisions of the brothers in developing their schools worldwide have been marked by a spirit of profound attentiveness to the needs of the communities in which they work. The founding of Manhattan College itself represented a response to a specific need for a school of a kind that did not then exist in the United States—one that would, as our first catalogue put it, combine the “advantages of a first-class College and Polytechnic Institute,” offering courses in what our Charter calls “the liberal *and useful* arts and sciences.”

And so, as we look forward to the next chapter in Manhattan’s history, we do so both with profound respect for a past that teaches us to embrace change as opportunity, and with faith that that opportunity is leading us toward ever greater contributions to the good of our students and the common good.

Today, as we hear the call from our political and economic leaders for universities to play an expanded role in ensuring our country’s stability and competitiveness in a new and rapidly shifting economy, Manhattan College clearly has a role to play.

*We have been, and must continue to be,* a place where the latest, cutting edge scientific knowledge and technical expertise is developed and passed on—a seedbed for the next generation of scientists and engineers. We have long been a leading supplier, among schools of our size, of students to Ph.D. programs in science and engineering, playing our role in providing the expertise from which the next generation of discoveries and new life-improving innovations will spring. And of course our strength in engineering is legend: as one of our alums is fond of saying, “New York City was built by Manhattan College Engineers.” (And continues to be built by them: tonight’s world series will begin not in the house that Ruth Built, but in a house built by MC engineers.) We must recommit ourselves to our long-standing strengths in all of those disciplines—for example, in environmental engineering—in which we have a rich legacy and great opportunities.

*We have been, and must continue to be,* a place where the business world finds smart, hardworking, and trustworthy young men and women who are trained by teachers who themselves are contributing to the creation of new best practices and techniques. Manhattan alums constitute a veritable Who’s Who of the New York business world, from the financial industry to telecommunications, from insurance to construction to marketing. Their work

has not only sustained the industries in which they work: it has transformed them by setting a standard of innovative and ethical leadership of which we can be, and are, proud. We must continue, with the help of our alums, to provide that kind of leadership to the world of business.

*We have been, and must continue to be*, a place where the art and science of teaching is passed on to a new generation of teachers, teachers who will continue De La Salle's powerful witness to the nobility of teaching as a career and a vocation. At the heart of the LaSallian charism is dedication to teaching. We have long been known and must continue to be known for particular excellence in education, and for a particular emphasis on teaching that speaks both to the hearts and the minds of students. There is nothing more important to our future as a city and a nation than the education of the next generation, and Manhattan has an important—even a leading—role to play in that work.

*We have been, and must continue to be*, an institution that dedicates itself to the Lasallian concern for the disenfranchised and marginalized of the world. We must commit ourselves to this in both word and in deed: In word, by making sure that our research and our curricula include serious exploration of the realities of our world and of the conditions that create and reinforce inequality, and that our teaching and research embrace the question of how best to rectify or ameliorate those conditions. In deed, by keeping Manhattan College accessible to students from families of modest means. De La Salle found his calling in the cry of the poor. The College was founded to a large extent for the sons of those whom circumstances had forced to seek a better life through immigration. And I am proud that Manhattan continues to be among the most ethnically and economically diverse schools of its kind—just about one third of our incoming freshman class is composed of “first generation” college students.

We must never turn our back on this aspect of our vocation. We must rededicate ourselves to being the archway through which a new generation of intellectually hungry, motivated, and idealistic young men and women will pass as they seek to follow the star of their own vocations.

Underpinning it all, *we have been and must continue to be* a place where young people find themselves inspired with the desire to undertake a lifelong quest for meaning. In her recent essay, President Drew Faust of Harvard puts the issue well: colleges and universities, she says, if they are to fulfill a purpose beyond what could be accomplished in a well-designed trade school, must offer a “depth and breadth of vision absent from the inevitably myopic present. Human beings need meaning, understanding, and perspective as well as jobs.”

This is, I would argue, an area in which Manhattan College is in a *particularly* strong position to lead—and, indeed, has been a leader in the past. As a Catholic college with a history of very strong faculty and curricula in the Arts, Manhattan has never compromised this quest for “depth and breadth of vision.” In grounding everything we do in a rich tradition of liberal-arts learning, encompassing history, languages, social sciences, literature, art, and the

sciences as forms of human knowing, Manhattan has long striven and continues to strive to provide the “historical long view” as antidote for the “myopic present.”

The presence of these core disciplines at the heart of the College, by exposing students to critical thinking and to imaginative and multi-cultural perspectives, provides them with much needed antidotes to bigotry and prejudice, and the means to resist the temptations of group-think. In requiring that students study these disciplines, and that they think critically about religion—their own and others—we insist that our students think long and hard about the human in relation to the transcendent, challenging them to hone the tools they need to continue to explore—and explore well—through the course of a lifetime, the eternal questions that their life’s journey will inevitably wring from them.

In our context here today, some of those questions that we want them to ask might be framed thus: “what am I working for,” “for whom do I work,” “what or who is calling me to this work?” “How can I know that the work I’m doing is right, just . . . good?”

In the end, and when all is said and done, we must all remember that our keynote phrase, *Domine, opus tuum*, Lord, the work is yours, is in essence a prayer. It is not a confident statement justifying ourselves; not the bigot’s defense of destructive actions; not the frozen dogma of the fundamentalist, of whatever religion, telling us that “God wills” whatever he or she desires to do. No, in the tradition for which we give thanks and to which we rededicate ourselves here today, “The Work is Yours” is for us what it was for the founder: a leap of faith in the face of uncertainty. Today, I invite the Manhattan College community to join me in that prayer—a prayer uttered in hope, sustained by faith, and grounded, at last, in love.