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Brother Ronald, Infusing Faith and Tradition at St Mary's College

By *Sophie Braccini*



Brother Ronald, President of Saint Mary's College, with Governor Schwarzenegger Picture Courtesy of St Mary's College

As a Christian Brother, Ronald Gallagher has devoted his life to the Lassalian tradition of education. The President of Saint Mary's College, he has lived a life full of the spiritual and academic mission that has taken him all over the world. His faith bestows the foundation for creating a long-term vision for the College, while his worldly experience provides the essential apparatus for building a world class academic institution. His values speak to us all in this wintertime, propitious to introspection and renewal of our faith, whatever name we give it.

Brother Ronald Gallagher was born the sixth child in a Catholic family of nine children. "Living with a large family prepared me to live with a community like the Brothers," says Brother Ronald, "we are not individuals, we're a community working together." In his formative years, Gallagher met with several Christian Brothers and became impressed with their mission of education.

The order has its origins in the schools founded in France by Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle. As a priest during the reign of Louis XIV, de La Salle saw the need to educate the poor and least fortunate members of society. To further this mission, he founded a new order, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, known in the United States as the Christian Brothers.

When Gallagher joined the Order, he had no idea of the many diverse experiences he would have as a teacher and an administrator. He taught comparative literature and foreign languages, and the Order soon had him on missions to different parts of the planet. In one of his charges, he went to

Bethlehem, the Palestinian city in the West Bank, where he ran the Lassalian College from 1993 to 1997. "When I met Brothers who had worked in Bethlehem, I could see they came back changed, devoted to education and excited about working in an environment where people are desperately in need of an education," said Gallagher, "the conditions are harsh, but it's the Holy Land, it was like going on an extended spiritual retreat."

Gallagher remembers how the environment promoted a depth of spiritual experience, "our prayers were very necessary, very real, and very deep," he recalls. The Bethlehem University embraces students of all faiths, with a majority of Muslims. In this fertile ground that includes sacred sites from the three Abrahamic religions, politics takes center stage and Gallagher interacted and negotiated with all the nations and organizations that are represented there. Now on more tranquil ground in Moraga, he says he misses the international interaction, but not the daily stress of fighting for survival.

In Moraga, Gallagher brings a perspective that inspires him to lead with serenity even in difficult economic times. The mission of Saint Mary's College, and the essential elements of social justice, infuses the teaching that students receive and is at the center of the College's strategic plan. "We want our St Mary's students to have an intellectual, personal, social, and spiritual education," he explains.

The strategic plan focuses as well on the efficiency of the College, because Gallagher knows that uncertain economic times lie ahead. "We have a record number of freshman this year," he says, "but it is simply because this generation is one of the largest ever. We know that more economically challenging times are ahead of us and we are planning accordingly."

That's may be why he becomes reticent when the issue of funding the Moraga Police Department is raised. "The way the Police Department is funded is the domain of the Town of Moraga," he said, "we have our own security personal on campus and the Town gets taxes from the students shopping and living in town."

According to Gallagher, the relationship between the "town and gown" is not as significant in Moraga as in other college towns. "Very few of our faculty live in Moraga," says the Brother, who resides on campus.

Another contentious issue between the town and the college has been the disruption caused by students who share housing downtown. At the time of the passage of the "Party Ordinance" the Town Council highlighted the positive and cooperative role played by College. "We talked to the students and discussed the importance of being responsible members of the community," remembers Gallagher.

The College continues to play a significant role in the life of Lamorinda as it is the largest employer in Moraga, provides facilities for numerous social events and intellectual, sports and cultural experiences.

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