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BOOK REVIEW

Edmund Chia

Francis Loh, Cecelia Ng, and Anthony Rogers: *The Xavierian Journey. The Story of a Lasallian School in Penang, Malaysia, 1787–2019*, Southbound, Penang 2019. ISBN 978-983-9054-64-4. xviii + 173.

The Xavierian Journey is, as the subtitle of the book indicates, the story of a Lasallian school (St. Xavier's Institution) in the city of Penang in Malaysia. It comprehensively chronicles the original foundation, roots, growth, and restructuring of the school, from the precolonial era up until the contemporary times. It was written to honor the contributions of the many La Salle Brothers, lay teachers, and students who served the school for more than two centuries. The authors were themselves students of the school in the 1960s and currently serve as members of the school's Board of Governors and Managers. They are social and political scientists by training and have been actively engaged in projects and activities for the benefit of both country and church.

This is obviously a book that will be of interest mainly to those who had studied or taught at St. Xavier's Institution. It recounts the school's history, programs, events and people only an insider can appreciate. For instance, there is a chapter that names and describes significant persons who served in the school, from the La Salle Brothers to priests and bishops, as well as teachers, prefects, the Board of Governors, Parent-Teacher Associations, lab assistants and office clerks. A chapter is dedicated to students who later went on to make significant contributions to the nation, as artists and musicians, politicians and lawyers, journalists and social activists, sports(wo)men and business(wo)men, and academicians and researchers. There is also a chapter discussing the numerous student clubs and societies that the school was famous for, from the music and debating societies to the uniformed units such as the Scouts, Red Crescent, Marching Band, and Army Cadet Corps.

For readers who have had no association with the school, this book offers a glimpse into the mission history of a religious congregation and how its members traversed the journey towards establishing educational missions in Malaysia. Specifically, it interrogates why and how the De La Salle Brothers made their way from Europe to Asia, witnesses to how the mission expanded to different parts of Malaysia and Asia, and discusses the challenges that confronted them during the Japanese occupation and since the nation's independence with the nationalization of education policies.

Distinguished for being one of the oldest schools in Malaysia, St. Xavier's Institution traces its roots all the way back to the so-called "foundation" of Penang by Captain Francis Light in 1786. Light invited a French bishop to Penang who went on to establish a school, calling it St. Francis Xavier Free School, named after the great Jesuit missionary St. Francis Xavier. The school was supported primarily by the Eurasian Catholic community, some of whom had moved to Penang after fleeing political persecution in other parts of Asia.

Upon the invitation of a French MEP priest, the La Salle Brothers arrived in Singapore, where they established St. Joseph's Institution, and from there, some made their way to Penang and took over what would become St. Xavier's Institution in 1852. Under the management of the Brothers, the student body extended beyond the Eurasian Catholic community to include orphans, whom the Brothers looked after, and boarding students, some coming from other cities and towns. Word got around that the Brothers were not just providing excellent education but also nurturing an ethos that motivated the young to care for family and community. By using English as the medium of instruction, the Brothers were also preparing students for prestigious work with the British colonial government. With time, the Brothers' Mission expanded to other cities in Malaysia, as well as to neighboring countries such as India, Burma, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Hong Kong and the Philippines.

The Second World War was a painful time for the entire country. When the Japanese soldiers bombed Penang in 1941, the British military left hurriedly, leaving the people defenseless. The Lasallian schools ceased to function and many Brothers were interned by the Japanese in prisons around the country. Upon the surrender of the Japanese in 1945, the Brothers regrouped and returned to their schools and began rebuilding those that had been damaged. They began by building *attap* (palm leaves) houses to shelter the classes and eventually raised sufficient funds to erect proper buildings.

Following the country's independence from the British in 1957, there emerged a great demand for education which saw a tremendous expansion as well as restructuring of the schooling system. The Lasallian schools throughout the country were absorbed into the National Education System. While this meant the teachers' salary was paid by the government, it came at the expense of control over the running of the school, including the hiring and firing of teachers and the intake of students. The thrust of the post-independence government was towards the strengthening of the

Malaysian identity and so all schools (including Lasallian schools) were forced to transition to using the Malay language as the medium of instruction.

By the 1960s and 1970s the Malaysian government had taken a more active role in the education of the young so that the mission of the Brothers in the field was no longer unique or as much appreciated as it was during the colonial era. This was also around the time when the La Salle Brothers were declining in numbers, with many leaving and fewer entering religious life. On top of that, there were also fewer Catholics embracing the teaching profession so that it became a challenge to ensure that the Brothers' schools were appropriately staffed to maintain its Lasallian identity. St. Xavier's Institution was no exception and, in fact, ceased having a Brother Director to helm the school since 2009 (as there were no more Brothers qualified to hold the position).

The experience of the La Salle Brothers is by no means unique; it is the same with all other missionary congregations in Malaysia as well as around the world. It was a global phenomenon, a kind of revolution inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council which transformed the Church in its understanding of Christian mission and which saw the emergence of the enhanced and critical role of the lay missionary and vocation. In light of this it would be apt to conclude this review by reproducing a paragraph from the *The Xavierian Journey*:

We are witnessing the passing of an era in the history of the Lasallian Mission in Malaysia, what with the loss of autonomy, the decline in the availability of Brothers and the handful of Brothers still involved in the teaching ministry. Lest the Lasallian schools become completely mainstreamed and the Lasallian Mission comes to an end, the Brothers have a responsibility to consolidate the Lasallian identity of these schools, preparing them for a handover to Lay Associates who share the Lasallian ethos and spirit (p. 150).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

EDMUND CHIA spent the last two decades teaching at the Catholic Theological Union (Chicago) and the Australian Catholic University (Melbourne). Before that he headed the interreligious dialogue office of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. His publications include *World Christianity Encounters World Religions*, *Asian Christianity and Theology* and *Confucianism and Christianity*.