

The Towering Tree of Education

SGI President Ikeda gave the following speech at the joint graduation ceremony of the 23rd class of Soka University and 11th class of Soka Women's College, at the Soka University Auditorium in Hachioji, Tokyo, March 18.

With deep honor and humility I accept an honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters (International Education) bestowed by De La Salle University. De La Salle is one of the Republic of the Philippines' most distinguished seats of learning — an academic institute earnestly committed to producing people of character and excellence in their fields to light the way for all Asia in the coming century.

As the recipient of this honor, by rights I should have traveled to the Philippines for its conferral. Instead, President Andrew Gonzalez and a number of senior faculty of De La Salle graciously traveled to Japan to present it to me, coinciding with today's joint graduation ceremony of Soka University and Soka Women's College.

President Gonzalez, distinguished faculty members: Allow me to express once again my deepest, most sincere appreciation for this generous gesture.

President Gonzalez is well known in the Philippines for his active leadership in society. He is also an internationally regarded scholar. I cannot tell you how happy I am to share with my dear Soka students this great honor, presented to me by such an esteemed individual as President Gonzalez.

I sincerely congratulate all who graduate today: Soka University's 23rd class, Soka Women's College's 11th class, correspondence students, masters and doctoral students, and foreign students. Allow me to extend my heartfelt felicitations to your families as well.

I am especially grateful to the faculty, to all those involved in the teaching and instruction of our students. In addition, I thank Dr. Alfred Balitzer, professor of political science at California's Claremont McKenna College and honorary president of Soka University of America, and all our honored guests who have taken time from their busy schedules to be with us today.

The Sacred Endeavor of Education

I feel that this award carries with it a great responsibility. The Philippine university is named after the great pioneer of modern education Saint John Baptiste Abbé de La Salle (1651–1719), the French Catholic priest who devoted his life to the education of the poor. In my youth, I resolved to make education my last, most important work. La Salle has been a long-standing inspiration in my endeavors.

He lived at the height of the Bourbon dynasty in France. The reigning monarch Louis XIV had built a sumptuous palace at Versailles to symbolize the power and glory of the French monarchy, while the people of France suffered terribly from the scourges of war and famine. In that turbulent age, La Salle stood up courageously to enable the people to establish a palace of education in their hearts.

In his late 20s, La Salle began to assist in establishing a number of charity schools to provide free instruction to poor children. A noble by birth, he gave up his title and wealth, as well as the chance for advancement within the clergy. He channeled all his youthful energy and passion into the sacred endeavor of education.

His approach to education was always based on what was best for his students. He produced textbooks, not in Latin, as most works of classical scholarship were written, but

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in the colloquial French that his students spoke and understood. He also abolished corporal punishment.

With these and other innovations, he revolutionized elementary education. He founded colleges to train lay teachers to provide instruction to the rural poor — the first full-fledged teacher-training institutions in the world. In addition, he made indelible contributions to vocational education and specialized technical training with the establishment of technical and agricultural colleges.

The Pattern of Obstruction and Oppression

Students flocked to La Salle's "people's schools." As their reputations spread, requests poured in from towns all over France for La Salle to establish charity schools.

La Salle's goal was to cultivate and nourish the people's minds and liberate them from within. He wanted to awaken the people, to make them wise and strong. It was a challenge to the most fundamental principle of the status quo, which was to keep the people ignorant and thus subservient. This challenge resulted, of course, in furious attacks by those in power on La Salle and his commendable efforts.

The schools he opened in Paris suffered repeated attacks and were finally closed by the authorities. Moreover, high-ranking clergy who should have protected him were instead wracked by envy and hate and did their best to obstruct his efforts. Even people in educational circles attacked him, threatened by his policies. And some of his followers deserted him. He was under siege from all sides, inundated by a constant stream of slander. False charges were even brought against him in the courts. Base, malicious onslaughts relentlessly assailed him.

The pattern of obstruction and oppression by the powers that be, ever eager to quash any seeds of change that threaten the status quo, is remarkably similar, in East, West, past or present. The same forces are at work even today — the same pattern — in response to my efforts.

Finally, La Salle and his community of teachers were driven from Paris. But there was an outcry. By whom? By the parents of La Salle's students and many other ordinary people who loved and respected this great educator. "We need La Salle's schools!" they cried. "No other schools will do!" Their protest was successful — the Paris schools were reopened amid much rejoicing. It was a beautiful drama that we can still appreciate many centuries later.

At a crucial moment, the strength and courage of ordinary people save the day. The famous, the well-connected, almost always have too much to lose. They abandon the cause to protect themselves.

True Glory?

What is true glory? True glory is found by plunging into the midst of the people, sharing their joys and sufferings, winning their trust. A Buddhist scripture says, "To be praised by fools — that is the greatest shame" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], p. 188). My beloved mentor, Josei Toda, the second president of the Soka Gakkai, used to say that being praised by a great sage is the highest honor to which one could ever aspire. In a broader sense, there is no life more noble than one praised by the people, the great repository of human wisdom and intelligence.

During one of my many discussions with Dr. Balitzer, who received an honorary doctorate from Soka University today, the subject of French historian Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) and his famous work *Democracy in America* came up. We concurred, as Tocqueville asserted, that truly talented people never ally themselves with the

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powers that be but work for the people in a private capacity.

Soka University is not a national university. It is private, founded by the people. I hope you will be proud of this. I also hope that you will take great pride in your mission as Soka University and Soka Women's College graduates — in being, as the founder of *soka* (value-creating) education, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, declared, a “select group of men and women of supreme good.”

‘Hasten Slowly!’

La Salle endured every imaginable obstruction and attack, but did not allow these petty problems to disturb or sway him from his purpose. He continued to move forward, one step at a time, steadily but surely realizing his ideals. Patience and endurance are the signs of true strength. One of the epithets of the Buddha is One Who Can Forbear.

La Salle was blessed with a following of young people dedicated to good and undaunted by the slanders and abuse heaped on them, their leader and their movement. La Salle wrote to them constantly, encouraging, supporting and advising them. He is said to have written more than 18,000 such letters.

La Salle's motto was “Hasten slowly!” (*Festina lente!*). With patient, dignified conviction, he planted the seeds of a humanistic education in young people's hearts one at a time. Madame Deng Yingchao, wife of Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, said in one of our meetings that she wished to plant, one at a time, the seeds of true ability in the rich soil of the people. This is the spirit of *soka* education.

The towering tree of education grows taller and taller over time. The seeds that La Salle planted more than three centuries ago are now blossoming the world over. De La Salle University is a magnificent symbol of this blossoming. And, as President Gonzalez said earlier, De La Salle University and Soka University are in full accord in their commitment to peace and complete opposition to violence in any form.

The Path of International Education

When Japanese military forces, cruel and arrogant, invaded the beautiful Philippines during World War II, they wreaked destruction on De La Salle University, taking the precious lives of several staff and students. A memorial to those victims now stands on the university's campus. We must never forget this tragic history.

The firm, invincible spirit of Mr. Makiguchi, who died in prison fiercely condemning Japanese militarism to the very end, is Soka University's founding spirit. Let Soka University build a human alliance that lasts for all eternity and transcends petty nationalist interests! I firmly believe that only determined progress along a path of genuine, practical international education can destroy the evils of power and stop the tide of violence that threatens us at every moment.

I will continue to do what I can to further consolidate such a humanistic network of peace and culture throughout Asia and the world. I hope you, the Soka schools graduates, will carry on my work and make important contributions to this undertaking as well.

Adversity Gives Birth to Greatness

Fifty years ago, when as a young man I first met Mr. Toda, I was extremely fond of the German author and poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). One remark of Goethe's in particular struck me: “One can bear most things in life, / Except for a monotonous run of prosperity.”¹ These are golden words. If our days are always tranquil and uneventful from the time we are young, we will soon tire of life — the boredom of

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such an existence becoming unbearable.

In other words, adversity gives birth to greatness. The greater challenges and difficulties we face, the greater opportunity we have to grow. A life without adversity, a life of ease and comfort, produces nothing and leaves us with nothing. This is one of the indisputable facts of life.

During your years at school here, we have together welcomed many, many friends from around the world. Among them, I will never forget former Soviet First Lady Raisa Gorbachev, a thinker and philosopher. She said that her entire life was crystallized in her university experience.

Soka University and Soka Women's College are the light sources that will illuminate the rest of your lives. I hope that you will always, through good times and bad, keep the Soka schools "never give up" spirit burning in your hearts. Please live out your precious lives with courage, dignity and, most of all, no regrets, shining brightly to the very end — like one of the glorious sunsets over Manila Bay in the Philippines.

The great hero of Philippine independence, Jose Rizal (1861–96), wrote:

Let us work then together and instead of useless lamentations, of disconsolate complaints, of accusations and excuses, let us apply the remedy, let us build, no matter if we begin with the simplest, for later we shall have time to erect new edifices on that foundation.²

With these brave, wise words, I close my remarks, my dear, dear young friends who celebrate your graduation today.

Maraming salamat po (Thank you very much).

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1. Translated from Japanese: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Kakugen fu ni" (Maxims) from *Gete Zenshu* (The Collected Works of Goethe) (Tokyo: Ushio Shuppan-sha, 1979), vol. 1, p. 277.
2. Quotations from *Rizal's Writings* (Manila: National Historical Institute, 1992), p. 96.