

INTERVIEW WITH SR. MARIA VICTORIA P. STA. ANA, FMA, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF LAURA VICUÑA FOUNDATION



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon in collaboration with Sr. Martha Séide and Sr. Runita Borja April 2021

EXCERPTS:

- “Catholic education goes beyond the pedagogy of instilling minimum learning competencies for active and responsible citizenship. It has a transformative value-added dimension in that it forms people to adopt and practice life-giving and culture-enhancing knowledge, attitudes, skills and practice.”
- “LVF believes in the power and beauty that lie within every child and youth. Even if abusive conditions may seem to have marred children’s lives, these conditions can be managed with psycho-social and spiritual interventions ..., leading to the emergence of the original nature of each person.”

Could you please explain your current responsibilities and how you are engaged in supporting the education and development of girls?

As Managing Director of the Laura Vicuña Foundation (LVF) of the Salesian Sisters of St. John Bosco since its inception in 1990, I have forged strong ties with distinguished professionals in the field of business, commercial banking, law, religious congregations and NGOs, yet I am strongly grounded in the journey of healing and recovery of abused and trafficked girls.

At LVF, we give Hope a Home. Hope is the name we give every child who is brought to our Center for Healing and Recovery. As a hands-on 24/7 nurturing mother of 20 to 30 sexually abused and exploited girls at a time, I have accompanied these deeply scarred girls transition, from childhood to adolescence to young adults and help them heal from their trauma with psycho-social spiritual interventions then guide them to blossom into women who can fully function in building their families and society.

My main responsibility is the development of the Laura Vicuña Foundation’s holistic multi-staged center and community based program called the Journey of Hope.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? This interview is with Sr. Maria Victoria P. Sta. Ana, FMA, Managing Director of the Laura Vicuña Foundation. She talks about the work of the Foundation, and how it relates to the vision of education proposed by Pope Francis under the Global Compact for education.

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It is a continuing innovation of action-oriented programs and services that would help these disadvantaged children have values re-orientation, advocacy-formations, go back to school or learn skills at the Laura Vicuna Foundation-Technology Centers. Then the children and youth are eventually linked to industries for jobs or livelihood initiatives or to networks of support where they can continue their education and development as productive Christian citizens of the country.

To advocate strongly on building a culture of social protection for children and youth, I innovated the Child Protection Clinic on Wheels, which brings preventive, social and protective services against child abuse, exploitation and trafficking closer to high-risk urban poor communities. It currently aids nearly 2,000 children on average. We have also expanded our reach to 16,000 children per year with our Social Workers and Youth leaders championing child protection advocacies in public schools and highly vulnerable communities, either face to face or virtual during this Pandemic.

What do you believe are the current strengths of Catholic education and in particular the strengths of the activities you are involved in?

Catholic education centers its formation on the whole person and builds on the dignity of persons made in the image and likeness of God. It is anchored on a set of values which are inspired by the Word of God and His Kingdom of love, fraternity, justice and peace.

Catholic education is strong in its universal practice of spreading the Gospel values in many settings appropriate to the culture and milieu of people. Its curriculum can be adopted by families, communities, schools, and other settings which lend themselves to a teaching-learning situation. Catholic education goes beyond the pedagogy of instilling minimum learning competencies for active and responsible citizenship. It has a transformative value-added dimension in that it forms people to adopt and practice life-giving and culture-enhancing knowledge, attitudes, skills and practice.

The strength of Laura Vicuna's non-formal and Gospel-centered education is its ability to plant and nourish the seed of hope among girls who have suffered abuse and exploitation. Girls who are served by Laura Vicuna Foundation reclaim their dignity as God's children, and are empowered with a holistic education to realize a better future through jobs, continuing education, and entrepreneurial activities.

Education support under LVF is holistic and is founded on love. Integrated in all education streams for girls are opportunities to nurture the spirit and the body, strengthening a lived and lively faith life through participation in the sacraments, the Holy Eucharist, Good

Day talks, annual recollections, Salesian Youth Movement formation, Solidarity Initiatives and Life' Direction Encounters. LVF also involves parents in parent formation activities, and continuing education in matters of faith and morals.

In which areas could Catholic education be improved and how, especially again with regards to the activities that you are personally engaged in?

Catholic education methods should be able to engage the youth in meaningful dialogue with their peers. Interactive mode of learning is more effective than the conventional style of teaching. Catholic education should be able to harness the wisdom of the elderly and deliver this to the young in ways that foster creative engagements to bridge intergenerational gaps, whenever possible and through the use of technology. Elicit from them to re-imagine new evangelization to work together for the future of a civilization of love. We should help our children and youth to journey from the "I" towards the "WE", valuing and giving life for the common good, service, solidarity, care for the common home and social responsibility.

Content could also be delivered through technology, with accompanying training of social media communicators. Catholic educators should also be active advocates of responsible message delivery through social media. It should be better contextualized, and strive to reach the excluded and marginalized sectors of society, ensuring cultural respect for indigenous communities and other sectors. There are reports of more abuses committed at home during this pandemic. Catholic educators should be able to create ways of responsibly exposing these and join networks of advocates and program implementers to prevent these increasing abusive tendencies especially in home settings.

In LVF activities, we use peer-assisted learning especially in our Child Protection Program advocacies. For those studying online in public schools where there is no religious education, LVF can provide add-on teaching learning activities to inculcate the teaching and practice of Catholic values through Follow Your Dreams Advocacies. Youth formators could also be trained to attend to the concerns of their peers on a day to day basis. LVF can be supported to reach out to educators working in the field of non-formal education to help develop and integrate the teaching and application of Catholic content in a holistic manner. This Catholic content should include respect for all of creation, and promote the principles of Laudato Si, reject throw-away culture, violence and abuse of children and women.

Have you come up recently with interesting innovative initiatives in Catholic education, especially for girls? If so, what are they and why are those initiatives innovative?

LVF believes in the power and beauty that lie within every child and youth. Even if abusive conditions may seem to have marred children's lives, these conditions can be managed with psycho-social and spiritual interventions in a multi-disciplinary approach, leading to the emergence of the original nature of each person, created in the image of his/her loving Creator.

LVF's positive approach in bringing about the transformation of each child who comes its way is manifested in the way survivors of abuse and exploitation come to terms with their once dark past, and are able to positively view their new lives, often offering their services to other children who are also experiencing trauma and negativity. Many survivors of harrowing, exploitative conditions become advocates of children's rights themselves and serve as an inspiration to many other children. There are countless stories of victory over pain and sorrow to mark LVF's journeying with children.

LVF has also demonstrated its creative utilization of peer approaches, once more affirming its orientation towards building a community of champions among those who have once been victims themselves of abusive conditions. Positive messaging and portrayal of children in LVF's Advocacies: FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS; I AM GREAT (Girls Reject Exploitation, Abuse and Trafficking)- I AM BRAVE (Boys Reject Abuse, Violence and Exploitation); VLOGS and Child Protection Clinic Online Learning Hub for Children Rights and Responsibilities-all serve to be self-fulfilling realities for survivors and at-risk children.

As children continue to journey toward a future filled with hope, they too, are able to unleash positive traits that other children see and experience, thus countering the once negative images of exploitation to which they were subjected. Children who are helped to break free from negativity and who experience acceptance and unconditional love become themselves apostles of transformation in the lives of their peers.

How do you understand the call from Pope Francis for a new Global Compact on Catholic education? How do you think you and the FMA sisters could contribute to the Pope's vision?

The FMA preach and practice an educative spirit founded on love in its work with the young. Love recognizes the seed of hope in each young person, and like a gardener, patiently waits for the seed to sprout and bear the fruits of dignity, hope, joy and peace in the knowledge that each is created in the image and likeness of God. Don Bosco's educative approach emerges from and is oriented

towards creating a loving relationship with the Father, others and creation. The FMA believes that its current educative methods align and support Pope Francis' call for a new Global Compact on Catholic Education which will create a humanity of fraternity, peace and justice.

FMA's education fulfills the Pope's wish for a transformative education that builds individuals and communities who are empowered to bring out their potentials and serve humanity. Our Superior General, Mo. Yvonne Reungoat, FMA highlights that the educational mission asks us to build an effective educational network with the Salesian Family in the Church and in society to become agents of the culture of life, promoters of a humanity renewed in the spirit of the Gospel and in fidelity to the charism.

Given this pandemic, the FMA is called to devise creative ways of continuing its transformative and responsible education system for the young, and taking on social responsibility and causes which pose risks and barriers to the youth's development as responsible Christian citizens. There could be strengthened networking among civil society groups working on education and promotion of rights among children and the youth to agree on contributing to a more socially relevant society that takes care of the lost, the least and the forgotten members of society.

What events, projects, or activities could be suggested to strengthen a common identity for Catholic education at a global level? What are your ideas?

It would be best to prepare a compendium of Catholic education practice in different settings at a global level, highlighting good practices with positive impact that are able to inspire learners and education stakeholders. The study could show commonalities and trends in Catholic education and perhaps indicate what improved features could be integrated in response to Pope Francis' call for a global compact on Catholic education. A global symposium or webinar could be organized around the key findings and recommendations of the study. Some of the good practices could be featured too.

There could also be organized a web-based portal where Catholic education stakeholders can share insights, practice, challenges and suggestions based on certain themes such as inclusivity, education to address youth challenges, navigating virtual methods in Catholic education, engagement of youth, Great respect for persons which will purify profit orientation, create spaces of care, compassion solidarity, justice and the politics of love, capacity building of formators and teachers, non-formal education. This portal could also include experts in certain fields of Catholic education who can share

knowledge and current trends that bring sustainable change.

What are some of the priorities in terms of training and capacity building for school principals, teachers, alumni, parents, or other groups to strengthen Catholic education in your country or area?

It might be best to conduct first a training needs analysis for various stakeholders in the Catholic education to ascertain their capacity building needs. But I think some of the priorities can include: navigating challenges in addressing education needs of learners in a virtual setting; measuring the outcomes of Catholic education based on non-academic parameters; strengthening non-formal education content and methods, contextualizing Catholic education teaching; organizing youth and parent educators who can be channels of imparting Catholic education; Catholic education for the marginalized, including cultural communities; integrating Pope Francis' encyclicals in Catholic education content and method.

Pope Francis has said the pact is "to ensure that everyone has access to a quality education with the dignity of the human person and our common vocation to fraternity... there should be no room for the terrible pandemic of the throw-away culture." Non Formal Education should be recognized for its value and contribution and should not be treated as second class than Formal Education.

Non Formal Education develops personal, social and hands on professional skills which benefits the marginalized. This is the change of mentality that should start from the top hierarchy of the Catholic Education so that it can influence the governments to have the same perspective, recognition moreover award certificates to these marginalized learners for greater chances for employability and improving their quality of life.

Could you please share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

The sight of children tending the "carabaos" and toiling in sugarcane fields when they should be studying disturbed me a lot when I was in the Elementary Grade School. I would question then my father why this is so and he would tell me to study, serve and work for justice. No wonder I was prepared by God to be a social worker and a Salesian Sister of St. John Bosco.

When I professed as a Salesian Sister in 1989, our Provincial Superior, Sr. Anna Maria Mattiussi asked me to help her set up the Laura Vicuna Foundation, Inc. I was then the only registered social worker in the Congregation while other Sisters were teachers. In 1990, LVF was born as an NGO to address the needs of the street children, the sexually abused, exploited, the child laborers and the

trafficked. I worked on the ground and even at the policy level as evidenced with the four National Conferences which Laura Vicuna Foundation, Inc. organized for Child Protection and Youth Empowerment from 2005 to 2019.

In 2013 the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) of the Philippines cited me as the 2013 Outstanding Professional of the Year in the field of Social Work. It is the highest award given to a Professional in the Philippines. PRC acknowledged the strong stance of our Foundation against child labor, for the empowerment of young people, and for advocacy of women's rights. They appreciated the networking skills, coupled with hard work and determination, that we demonstrated in order to improve the services of the Laura Vicuna Foundation for 25 years, thus enabling it to serve a large number of disadvantaged women and children despite its small size. I also sat at that time as a Board Member for Asia of the Talitha Kum, the International Network of Consecrated Persons against Trafficking in Persons.

It would be difficult to capture in words the 32 years that I have spent my life for God accompanying the girls in their journey of Hope. It has been an adventure replete with lessons so full of color, meaning, and life. There is something mysterious and real, beautiful and true in who they are becoming. Surely God's great mercy and love has moved each one to make HOPE their HOME.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about.

I am very passionate in investing in relationships and in maintaining healthy and active links with networks and partners to complement and to enhance our resource base for effective service delivery to at disadvantaged children and for the vitality of our organization sustainability. Diversity is not a threat but networking synergizes all efforts towards reduction or elimination of the abuses and exploitation of children. There is not one organization which can address the problem of children in need of special protection given their growing complex problems, multifarious needs and emerging challenges.

The Asia Pacific NGO Awards, Celebrating Success, Rewarding Excellence, 2005 Casebook states "The Laura Vicuna Foundation serves as a model for the vast majority of NGOs in Asia that are small but capable of contributing to society through their diverse and determined resource mobilization".

When LVF bagged the 2012 UK STARS Protection Impact Award, we (six Representatives of the NGO winners from Asia, Africa and Middle East) were invited to dine for breakfast with Mr. Amir Al Dabbagh, the Founder and Chair of STARS Foundation at the Ritz Hotel. At the end of our breakfast meeting and before the awarding rites at the Kensington Palace, Mr Dabbagh told us that

other than our innovative programs which made us win, he recommended that the five NGO winners ought to have a societal impact and follow what Sr. Marivic Sta. Ana of the Laura Vicuna Foundation of the Philippines did in holding National Conferences. LVF then in 2013 had already convened three National Conferences on Children of the Canes involving all the key players of the sugarcane sector for a socially responsible sugar industry.

Beyond all these, at the end of the day the great joy that a spiritual mother can hold is when I walked to the aisle, a woman survivor who grew up with us at Laura Vicuna Foundation, as her father and mother, now giving her away to the groom and his parents as they seal their love in the Sacrament of Matrimony. Thus, this vocational accompaniment comes into full circle.



Photo: Youth helping youth and other events at LVF.