

[Ten Lasallian Operative Commitments]

Applied to Teacher Formation

From George Van Grieken, *Touching the Heart of Students: Characteristics of Lasallian Schools* (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Publications, 1999), pp. 165-171.

The true measure of an effectively sustained Lasallian school is the degree to which its teachers function within common Lasallian commitments. Explicit and implicit means of introducing, fostering, and enhancing those commitments serve the final and proximate ends of the Lasallian school. Even a brief description of how each of these aspects might be realized for each commitment will make it clear that fulfilling all the commitments of a Lasallian school is by no means either simple or without effort.

The following examples are geared more toward those who are part of the general administration of the school. Other examples could be pursued that focus on the teachers, students, or further specific components of school life. Going through the process of applying the commitments to one's own particular school situation will begin to bring them to life.

Applying the ten commitments to the issue of teacher formation, these would be some of the consequences:

• Centered in and Nurtured by the Life of Faith

To Introduce – *Explicit*: provide good resources (all kinds) on De La Salle and on Christian life. *Implicit*: treat all religious activities with seriousness and enough time.
To Foster – *Explicit*: have an annual faculty retreat, focusing on the life of faith for a teacher. *Implicit*: have school-wide assemblies to listen to captivating people of faith.
To Enhance – *Explicit*: request volunteers to lead the prayer at faculty gatherings. *Implicit*: listen to one another's stories of faith.

• Trusting Providence in Discerning God's Will

To Introduce – *Explicit*: include providential perspectives at faculty meetings and personal evaluation conferences. *Implicit*: accept the need for 'personal days' or 'family days'.
To Foster – *Explicit*: articulate the providential aspects of school situations, events, and circumstances. *Implicit*: maintain a calm demeanor in the face of school crises.
To Enhance – *Explicit*: include an end-of-year faculty discussion on the past and the future of the school. *Implicit*: view challenges as opportunities for finding God's guidance.

• With Creativity and Fortitude

To Introduce – *Explicit*: include one yearly unprecedented, creative, and well-prepared program or approach. *Implicit*: budget funds for student or faculty-led creative or challenging projects.
To Foster – *Explicit*: establish clear, fair, innovative and timely school procedures for both students and teachers. *Implicit*: brainstorm solutions at faculty meetings to

address persistent situations. To Enhance – *Explicit*: encourage qualified teachers to try out new programs or teaching methods. *Implicit*: foster alternative student education ventures (field trips, enhancement weeks, and so on).

• **Through the Agency of the Holy Spirit**

To Introduce – *Explicit*: begin each quarter or semester with a faculty prayer service on teaching, the students, and the school. *Implicit*: solicit candid input from new teachers about school life. To Foster – *Explicit*: address a particular student’s needs at faculty meetings, agreeing on specific common goals. *Implicit*: give students a voice in evaluating and developing school policy.

To Enhance – *Explicit*: address serious challenges as a group after invoking the Spirit’s help in prayer. *Implicit*: develop effective methodologies for discerning individual vocations.

• **Incarnating Christian Paradigms and Dynamics**

To Introduce – *Explicit*: begin the first interview of a new teacher with a prayer. *Implicit*: provide opportunities and resources for discussing and learning about Christianity.

To Foster – *Explicit*: utilize Lasallian prayer forms and foster increased awareness of theology, morality, and so on. *Implicit*: provide guidelines, examples, and structures for class prayer.

To Enhance – *Explicit*: make school-wide Eucharistic services fully participative on many levels. *Implicit*: provide a prayer and a Christian life resource area for the school community.

• **With Practical Orientation**

To Introduce – *Explicit*: provide new teachers with a ‘how-to’ guide to the school, including tips on teaching. *Implicit*: welcome and facilitate feedback regarding school structures.

To Foster – *Explicit*: include classes geared for those ending their formal education after graduation. *Implicit*: support the use of guest speakers, practicums, and field trips.

To Enhance – *Explicit*: require a practical component in the planning of each course or learning unit. *Implicit*: organize regular school-wide assemblies on practical topics.

• **Devoted to Accessible and Comprehensive Education**

To Introduce – *Explicit*: include principles from the Lasallian tradition in education during orientation programs. *Implicit*: provide creative student scholarships and keep the education of students (and teachers) as a top priority.

To Foster – *Explicit*: encourage interdepartmental cooperation, and programs focusing on the marginalized. *Implicit*: provide appealing assemblies for educational awards and contests.

To Enhance – *Explicit*: eliminate tracked classes in favor of in-class strategies for advanced learning. *Implicit*: ensure that classrooms and class resources are in top condition.

• **Committed to the Poor**

To Introduce – *Explicit*: distribute statistics on the economic and cultural breakdown of the student body. *Implicit*: participate and support student and faculty involvement in local charity efforts. To Foster – *Explicit*: solicit contributions for a specific student's participation in retreats, club trips, and similar ventures. *Implicit*: encourage faculty gatherings that maintain a simplicity of style. To Enhance – *Explicit*: provide an annual faculty-selected, faculty-sponsored full scholarship for a needy student. *Implicit*: establish cooperative projects with poor elementary schools in the area.

• **Working in Association**

To Introduce – *Explicit*: provide regular social events for faculty and staff, including their families. *Implicit*: include faculty room bulletin board space for each school subject and area.

To Foster – *Explicit*: provide structures for interdepartmental discussions at faculty meetings. *Implicit*: allow each teacher to attend a local conference in his or her subject area.

To Enhance – *Explicit*: invite coaches to attend and critique the classes of teachers and vice versa. *Implicit*: make the faculty lounge a hospitable place to relax, read, and converse.

• **A Lay Vocation**

To Introduce – *Explicit*: invite teachers to describe and pursue their role in the church as lay members. *Implicit*: encourage involvement in parish and charitable church work.

To Foster – *Explicit*: provide access to church resources, Catholic publications, and exemplary lay persons. *Implicit*: have non-sacramental school liturgies led by faculty members or coaches.

To Enhance – *Explicit*: invite faculty members to initiate schoolwide charitable projects tied to church efforts. *Implicit*: allow teachers to take time off for church projects or programs.

Cautions

Two cautions about these ten commitments are in order. First, the richness of this model is its flexibility. One should not look at it as a definitive statement. The arrangement of these basic operative commitments represents one perspective of Lasallian components of pedagogical spirituality, authentic and viable to be sure, but nevertheless the view from a particular position in the Lasallian universe. Further relationships and alternate distributions of its elements may come to light as reflection, discussion, and common application within the real experiences of the schools rearrange or complement its present scope. Such a developmental process would follow the precedent established in the production of the *Conduct*, as well as resonate with several Lasallian commitments, and so would be true to the tradition inherited from De La Salle.

Second, one cannot expect a model such as this to particularize the specific practices that will realize these commitments unconditionally. The difficulty in describing distinctive aspects of an essentially comprehensive and dynamic reality is

that, on the one hand, such descriptions on the popular level are often anecdotal, couched in stories or poignant moments, while, on the other hand, on the scholarly level they are expected to be universally applicable, couched in statements that include a wide spectrum of situations.

The difficulty of keeping these two levels of expression in balance reflects the essentially mysterious and tacit nature of the reality such expressions are striving to describe. One author, Herbert McCabe, has pointed to a similar phenomenon in reference to appreciating one of Shakespeare's plays. He writes that depths of meaning are not found

... in a play when you watched it for the first time; you have to learn to understand it, and you cannot take short cuts to the depth... [A]s we understand a mystery it enlarges our capacity for understanding... [W]hen it comes to reaching down to the deeper meanings, there is no substitute for watching or taking part in the play itself. The mystery reveals itself in the actual enactment of the play. It is very hard to put the meaning of Macbeth into any other words and that is why literary critics are always harder to read than plays; it all seems so much more complicated. This is not because critics are trying to make things difficult nor is it that the deep meaning is itself something complicated. It is something simple; the difficulty lies in bringing it up from its depth. When you try to bring deep simplicities to the surface you have to be complicated about them. If you are not, then you will simply have substituted slogans ... for the truth. [Herbert McCabe, 'A Long Sermon for Holy Week', *New Blackfriars*, 67 (1986), p. 56].]

The Lasallian school similarly deals with 'deep simplicities,' more acquired through experience than through description, that have to be brought to the surface with some complexity – necessitating a certain amount of work on the part of the reader – so as to insure that they won't simply be slogans instead of the truth.

Each of the Lasallian school commitments does posit specific intentionalities that have real ramifications if taken seriously, but it would be presumptive to say, for example, that the Lasallian operative commitment to a lay orientation requires each school to have a social studies unit on the role of the laity in the church or insist that its teachers have read the documents of Vatican Council II. These may be the consequences that apply to a particular school in a particular situation, but one cannot say so here. The real work of practical implementation happens at the local level, where practices are located.

One *can* insist that the Lasallian tradition establishes the form, design, and character of specific practices. Indeed, that is what these ten commitments specifically propose. But just as one cannot say that a person will become authentically Christian by solely attending the Eucharistic celebration every day, although such a practice is one from which Christian identity no doubt benefits, so also one cannot say that a Lasallian school is so by having the faculty and staff read the biography of De La Salle, although such a practice may be one from which its Lasallian identity benefits. Therefore, particular practices that have been part of the Lasallian tradition are likely to be helpful in forming a school's identity (prayers such as 'Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God,' practices such as having teachers start class with a short 'reflection' on some Christian, moral, or personal disposition), but they will not by themselves introduce or encompass that identity. Such practices, if authentically appropriated, emerge from the heart of the

Lasallian tradition, but their establishment within a Lasallian school must be in harmony with a host of movements that make up the totality of authentic Lasallian identity.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the best answer to the question 'What does it mean to be a Lasallian school?' is 'A school that takes the Lasallian heritage seriously in everything that it does.' What that looks like can now be answered in the language of the operative commitments: 'A Lasallian school is a school that is attuned to God's living presence, trusts God's providence, operates with creativity and fortitude, cooperates with the movements of the Holy Spirit, incarnates Christian dynamics, strives to be practical, is devoted to accessible, comprehensive education, is committed to the poor, operates in association, and advances the role of the laity in the Church.' It is the kind of place where the miracle of touching the hearts of students occurs directly, deeply and daily, across the board and at all levels.

Without doubt, it is possible to have competent and caring schools that know nothing of the Lasallian heritage. There is also a sort of 'default' level of operation that almost any school, especially a Catholic one, can reach in due course. The bells ring, the students show up, the faculty gets paid, the board of trustees meets, the teams win their games, and so on. Few people would ask for more or look more deeply into what makes the whole thing work, and most people are perfectly happy if things went along that smoothly, without fuss.

In fact, if the truth be told, most parents of secondary school students are simply looking for a fairly secure environment for their sons and daughters where they will be well prepared for the college of their choice and receive a bit of moral training in the process. There are some parents who have themselves gone to Lasallian schools or have had other children attend them, and they have come to appreciate the 'something' that makes Lasallian schools more appealing than others. But these parents are in the minority.

Where a particular educational heritage makes a difference is in the particulars, particulars that coalesce into a certain 'feel' or 'palpable tradition' a school carries through the years. And the Lasallian commitments outlined in this book speak to those particulars. They point to the 'something' that takes the good education already happening and infuses it with catalysts, intentionalities, and priorities that are like the addition of spices to a good stew, giving a flavor only fully appreciated in the tasting or in hindsight. While some of the operative commitments may be more pronounced or more obvious than others in a particular school, in the dynamic, somewhat messy enterprise of education such distinctiveness is both expected and advantageous. Each school has its own character and each day brings with it new challenges and rewards. It is the thousand-and-one daily decisions that are made by those within the school that set its direction and provide its life. Insofar as Lasallian commitments form, inform, and transform those decisions, the school is being true to its Lasallian heritage, and individuals are able to bring to realization the miraculous touching of hearts.

Educators who are part of such an educational community, who live out the operative commitments of the Lasallian heritage and are able to touch the hearts of students will then say, 'You want to know what a Lasallian school is all about? Come and see!'