

# Spirit of Gratitude: Spirit of Opportunity!

Some decades ago the psychologist Albert Ellis wrote that we live our lives according to the way we talk to ourselves. Or as Dr. William Glasser observes, the way we *choose* to perceive reality has something fundamental to do with how we live our relationship with that reality.

I was principal of our boarding school. I was also in charge of a dormitory of some 30 young men ages 13 to 18. Among the rules we had for the boys was one that was a "Catch 22." Resident students who had clothing to wash had to bring it to the laundry building in the morning before school. It was washed by a wonderful grandmother figure I had hired. They had to pick it up after school before 4:00 p.m. when the laundress left for the day. The problem: Those participating in sports often went directly to dress for sports right after school and were not finished with practice till five o'clock or sometime after five! If a student did not have a buddy pick up his clothes, the clothes remained locked in the laundry building until the next morning. As principal, I had the passkey that opened this building.

Initially when students came to me to say that they had not picked up their clothes and that they needed them and had none for the next morning other than those in the laundry, I was annoyed and gave them the #101 lecture on responsibility! I was annoyed at having to walk across the campus to open the laundry building for them and since I could not give a passkey to a student, that's what I would have to do.

And so it went: "irresponsibility" sermons, annoyance and giving with a grudge — until one day I gave it some prayerful thought.

On the surface the rule seemed reasonable. They could enlist another student if they needed help; after all, they should be able to depend on a buddy and should give things forethought. We were teaching them responsibility or at least that's what we said to ourselves — and we believed it with fierce self-righteousness.

But in the penetrating light of self-effacing prayer things looked differently. Besides the built-in "Catch 22" there were a couple of other things that became clear. My focus was on ME and what this was costing ME. In reality it seemed that this situation had more to do with seeing my own responsibility than with the student looking at his!

In those days we expressed our Christian Brother vows in different language. Taking our lead from the official language of our Bull of Approbation and the Rule of 1947 we had made a vow to "teach the poor *gratuitously*." In the practice of those days when we were all in schools that charged tuition, we satisfied that vow by the practice of not taking anything from students or their parents. It was all a bit murky, but we lived with its ambiguity. In conferences superiors and formation people explained the vow away since the reality was that we could not run schools without the income from tuition. And we rationalized a lot about who was "poor".

But that aside, there was a "spirit of gratitude" that we were taught that ranked (without official status) with the Spirit of

Faith and that qualified our Spirit of Zeal. It meant things like putting the student at the center of everything... rules, curriculum, choices... the school itself. Students were also the center of our prayers and our concerns. *They* were the locus of our finding the God who was always present!

So I began talking differently to myself. Until we could get the rule about the laundry straightened out, I decided to look differently upon being asked to help a student retrieve his clothing after the laundry was closed, I would take it as an opportunity to spend time with that student. Often they were not boys who lived in my dormitory. Often they were students I had little contact with. Walking with them to and from the laundry building was an opportunity to ask how things were going, to ask about family, studies, sports, and life in general and in particular. My zeal had found a new outlet because of my spirit of "gratuity".

Caring (touching hearts) as in "young people in our *care*" is a serious thing. It calls for intentionality on our part. It is not exclusive. It is inclusive. As a member of

the Lasallian, family it is "open to all". As a member of the Lasallian family, it is given freely. It is gratuitous and we do not count the cost for we are icons of a God who loves without condition, a God whose Son stretched out his arms on the cross to encompass the world and did not count the cost. We are the gratuitous sisters and brothers of St. John Baptist de La Salle and the gratuitous God whose glory he consecrated himself to procure ... in the lives of young people who were in need. Beautiful!



### ***For Your Reflection:***

1. Rules are intended to guide. As a teacher I know that without healthy boundaries young people often become ill. How do my rules demonstrate the spirit of gratuity that is part of my being Lasallian?
2. What part does gratuity play in the interior prayer that daily forms me? When I stand before the presence of God in the young people who are entrusted to my care, how do I express authentically the gratuity that my vocation as a sister or brother of St. John Baptist de La Salle demands of me?
3. Where in my life am I responding to the call to be like my gratuitous God?