

The Lasallian Heritage Series

The Need for Lasallian Schools

Volume 1 ☆ Number 2

The need for this Institute is very great because the artisans and the poor, being usually little instructed and being occupied all day in gaining a livelihood for themselves and their families, cannot give their children the instruction which they need and an honest and Christian education. It was therefore deemed necessary that other persons replace their mother and father to instruct these children as much as is necessary in the mysteries of religion and the principles of a Christian life. It was in order to give this advantage to the children of artisans and of the poor, that the Christian Schools were established.

- Common Rule of 1705, articles 4 and 5

A 17th Century Perspective of the Need

When La Salle instituted his schools in the latter part of the 17th century, the purpose for which he instituted the gratuitous schools was explicitly to suit the needs of the children of the artisans and of the poor. Who were the artisans? Who were the poor?

The artisans were the working class of France, the backbone of pre-industrial France that enjoyed a storied history from the beginning of the Middle Ages and still possessed vigor and discipline even up to Louis XIV's reign. However, during this part of the 17th century the very beginnings of the industrial revolution began to uproot centuries of tradition, culminating in the abolition of the guilds during the French Revolution.

As members of the artisan class one had to move through the various stages of proficiency starting with apprenticeship, to the salaried, and finally the level of Master. Long hours, typically, 16 to 18 during the summer and 11 hours in the winter marked the typical day of the artisan, who worked 190 days a year. This figure was calculated by subtracting the 52 Sundays of the year, 38 religious and/or secular holidays as well as 50 days of bad weather or of frost for certain trades.

The promotion of an artisan through the ranks was neither automatic nor easy. However, heredity and family influence played important roles in the progression of one's trade. In the case of others, attaining the proficiency of master or even salaried proved to be long and difficult and was often nearly impossible to achieve.

This structure of the Guild relied on its link with a certain economic system, still of the medieval type, in a

society that was Christian, unitarian and non-pluralistic.

There existed, besides, another type of wage-earning class: the workers who were given a job although they did not belong to the guild of the same trade, as "odd men," to distinguish themselves from the "tradesman." In general, these were immigrants or people recruited in the countryside when a shortage of manpower occurred in town.

The Lasallian schools, rooted in an urban environment, as a result of a deliberate choice, opened themselves to these categories of persons, that is to say the artisans. It is not easy to define workers who attended Lasallian schools, because the definition varied according to the category they belonged to (apprentice, salaried, Master), on the condition of the market, or the economic crises

brought about by wars and famine.

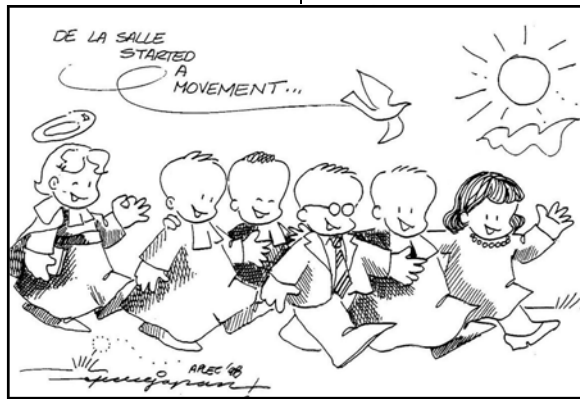
The town certainly held the best prospects for employment in most of the trades, but suffered backward surges owing to the precarious economy. The master himself is not always guaranteed a totally independent job or assured of a sound economic future, for circumstance may compel him to work for others as an em-

ployee or to become a salaried worker himself.

Apprenticeship began between the ages of eight and thirteen. This makes it easier to understand the Lasallian school curriculum which, according to Yves Poutet, was completed normally at the age of twelve. It states in *The Conduct of Schools* that it is with the sons of tradesmen that they were dealing. The following shows their genuine attendance at school: "Parents often pull their children out of school to start working. They must be told that to make them earn a little bit of money, they make them lose a much greater advantage; for that reason, one must stress with them the importance for a tradesman to be able to read and write, since, however limited his intelligence, if he knows how to read and write, he is able to do anything. The same problem is tackled in a very different manner in the case of the children of the poor."

The Artisans and the early Brothers

Of course, La Salle had to confront the corporative structure of his time, not only in connection with the social origin of many of the children of artisans, but even more with those organizations which constituted the in-



Designed by Br. Joseph Juliano, FSC

frastructures of society. He did not have only the corporations during the court cases in which he had to face the Master Writers or those of the Small Schools about registrations, but also the very idea of corporation as a social structure concerned with schools. However, religious life opposed the idea of profitability in trade, which lay at the root of the corporate system.

The corporate solution gave the individual more freedom in his work than the vow of obedience, by means of which the Brothers bound themselves to obey a social body to “hold schools by association.”

When La Salle began to build up the Community of Masters, he could have taken as a model the corporations, as the Writing Masters did, since his objective was of a professional order: the Christian education of children. On the contrary, from the start, he decided that his community would have nothing to do with corporations. Besides, communitarian and celibate life, gratuitous teaching which rejected any personal salary, the lack of interest in every form of earthly ambition, stimulated him to choose a communitarian form of religious life which differed considerably from a corporate association.

This does not mean that we should entirely exclude the influence of the corporations on Lasallian organization. The discipline enforced in his schools, the rigid syllabus and timetables of the school, the meticulous organization of the “lessons” and of the “orders within the classroom, the responsibilities or ‘duties’ shared out among the pupils reflected an attitude which also believed in the division of work of the statuses of the corporation.” (Yves Poutet)

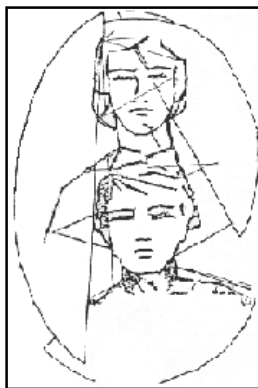
Jean-Baptiste Blain, La Salle’s biographer, speaks likewise of the choice of artisans as pupils, even though in his biography of the Saint, the social question is only of marginal interest. He was more keen on searching from spiritual attitudes and consequently on dwelling on the ascetic life which was a characteristic of the sanctity of the person.

the above was taken from Lasallian Themes, volume 1, pages 26, 28

De La Salle’ Vision and Practice Today

It need hardly be said that this not 17th century France and that De La Salle could not have foreseen the kinds of situations schools of today encounter on a daily basis. Mass media, technology, modern transportation, and a secular, pluralistic society are major factors that schools of today take for granted. Add to that compulsory education, liability lawsuits, and economic necessities, and it all adds up to a picture of the Lasallian school that is about as far removed from its namesake in the 17th century as a candle is from a light bulb. Yet the light remains.

To do justice to De La Salle’s charism in the contemporary world, one must do justice both to the nature of that charism and to the nature of the contemporary world, placing them in critical dialogue with each other. Having presented De La Salle’s own story and the vision and practice that resulted from it in the September issue, the challenging task of articulating what that vision and practice look like today remains. In today’s terms, we articulate this vision in terms of spirituality.



When one looks at Lasallian spirituality, one must look at it from two perspectives: (1) Lasallian spirituality is intimately associated with Lasallian pedagogy and (2) Christ’s life lies at the heart of Lasallian spirituality.

What is this reality?

(1) Lasallian spirituality has the school as its setting, the teacher as its focus, and the salvific potential of education as its inspiration. De La Salle emphasizes in his writings that the educator’s life with his or her students constitutes the center of his or her religious experience. For the Lasallian educator, the school is the privileged place where God is to be encountered. There is no separation between professional journey and spiritual journey. Both are aspects of a single vocation and commitment to education. Likewise,

Lasallian pedagogy is Lasallian precisely because of, not in spite of or along with, its spiritual dimensions. The life of faith ultimately shapes and motivates Lasallian pedagogy.

De La Salle’s spirituality is focused on the specific approach, implementation, and context of the activity of education. And the way he came to describe that spirit[uality] was in terms of faith and zeal, a single spirit consisting of two parts that are intimately related to one another. Both come to fruition in the ministry of teaching and the work of education.

(2) The life of Christ lying at the core of De La Salle’s commitments also lies at the core of Lasallian spirituality. Christ is to be found in the teacher: “you are ambassadors and ministers of Christ ... representing Christ himself. He wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your instructions as if he were giving them to them.” Lasallian educators have been chosen to be “cooperators in the salvation of souls,” precursors of Christ, even apostles. They make Jesus a reality in the lives of their students.

Christ is to be found in the student: “recognize Jesus [in] ... the children whom you have to instruct. Adore him in them.” Would it make a difference, do you think, if teachers treated their students as “living images of Jesus Christ” and “as children of God himself?” De La Salle calls each soul a living plant in the field of the church, the Body of Christ, a soul for which the educator is responsible.

Christ is to be found in the work of education: the task is “to help your disciples to save themselves ... you must lead them to unite all their actions to those of Jesus Christ.” The work of salvation, the proclamation of the Gospel, is truly encountered and practically enacted in the day-to-day activities, relationships, and realities that make up school life. The goal is nothing less than “to establish and maintain the reign of God in the hearts of your students.”

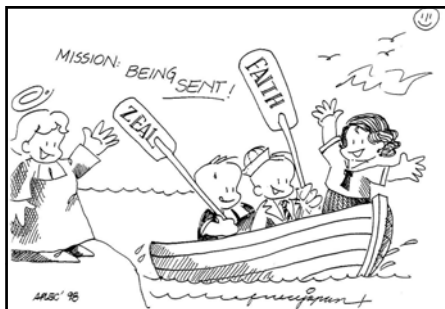
Christ is to be found in the prayer of education: “Constantly represent the needs of your disciples to Jesus Christ, explaining to him the difficulties you experience in guiding them.” Prayer obtains all that one needs for effective teaching, drawing “upon yourself the

light you must have to know how to form Jesus Christ in the hearts of the children entrusted to your guidance.”

The Lasallian Operative Commitments

Bearing in mind the definition of *spirituality* that comes from De La Salle’s own spiritual experience (the dynamic integration of foundational convictions, basic operative commitments, and consistent practices), we can best describe that spirituality as a set of basic operative commitments that turn convictions into practice that integrate faith and zeal. As with all commitments, these ten Lasallian operative commitments express directions: they provide an operative structure by which fidelity may be measured. They are presented in the form of attributes, qualities that identify the specific commitments of Lasallian character. As such, they become operative when joined with particular activities. Remember that they are components of a *dynamic* reality.

The first five set of commitments are more directly related to the spirit of faith; they speak of inner dynamics of Lasallian pedagogical spirituality. The second set of five commitments is more directly related to the spirit of zeal; they speak of exterior dynamics of Lasallian pedagogical spirituality, ones that effectively color the mission flowing from Lasallian identity.



The Spirit of Faith

Centered in and nurtured by the life of faith. Christian faith provided the motivation for the context, the direction, and the support for the mission of Lasallian education.

Trusting Providence in discerning God’s will. God guides those engaged in the

Lasallian mission with absolute trustworthiness. The work is God’s; we are but God’s instruments.

With creativity and fortitude. When the invitation to the Lasallian mission is clear, God blesses and supports that which is done with imagination and determination, ingenuity, and endurance.

Through the agency of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Christ affects the work of salvation through prayerful persons open to God’s dynamic presence both within their souls and in expressing their Lasallian mission.

Incarnating Christian paradigms and dynamics. The Lasallian mission brings alive and makes present Gospel realities and the essential elements of Christian life within the world of education.

The Spirit of Zeal

With practical orientation. Lasallian education strives to be realistic in its approach, its ends, and its goals. Prayer is put to work; practicality counts.

Devoted to accessible and comprehensive education. Lasallian education must be accessible to all who desire it, and it must include all that constitutes a complete Christian education.

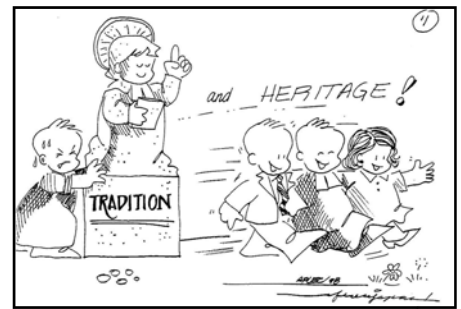
Committed to the poor. Lasallian education makes every effort to be of service to the poor, to make educational service of the poor an effective priority.

Working in association. Lasallian education is accomplished as a common dedication to the church-wide mission of education, one marked by cooperation, collaboration, and complementarity.

Expressing a lay vocation. Lasallian education is a lay vocation expressing, enlivening, and encouraging common baptismal realities as followers of Jesus Christ.

Rationale and Consequences

A first reading of these ten commitments will not cause most people to become very excited. After all, aren’t these commitments ones that are found in all sorts of other places? In fact, some of them are things what we should be doing as Christians whether we’re at a Lasallian school or not. Wouldn’t this list look pretty much the same if it referred to a school run by Dominicans, or Franciscans, or Jesuits, or Benedictines, or dedi-



cated lay people?

The short answer is no. The long answer is maybe. What must be remembered is that Christian life is not split into discrete units that have their own character. We’re dealing with a living reality here; a reality that has a *dynamic presence* at work in its midst, the Holy Spirit. Education within that reality will always be of a certain kind if it is to remain authentic to its source. Hence, Lasallian education must always be Christian education and, as such, will be the same as any other authentic Christian education. Where the difference lies is in the particulars. “God is in the details” said Mies van der Rohe, a German architect. This is as true here as it is in the blueprint of details - real people encountering the practicalities of real situations with real intentionalities.

Take jazz piano as an example. One pianist can take a tune and do an improvisation on it that immediately identifies his or her style. Another pianist can take the same tune and make it sound in a different way. Yet both pianists have only the 88 keys to chose from and only the one tune to work with. The difference lies in the particulars, not in the tune. Similarly, other Catholic schools, but the particulars for how that tune is played can vary rather significantly. There may be only so many commitments that those of us in education can choose from. Yet the ones chosen with these particulars emphases give the tune of Catholic Christian education a Lasallian personality.

the above cited from Touching the Hearts of Students: Characteristics of Lasallian Schools. George Van Grieken, FSC

A continuation of the Rationale and Consequences of the Need for Lasallian schools will continue in the November issue.