

The Lasallian Heritage Series

The Need for Lasallian Schools, part II

The First of Five Commitments Related to the Spirit of Faith

Centered in and Nurtured by Faith

Perhaps more often than not, we tend to overlook the most obvious things. We notice what it means to live in the United States when we travel outside of the country; we notice our cultural and social position when we are placed in a radically different one; and we appreciate our deeper commitments to things when we find those commitments tested at inconvenient times. In the world of Lasallian education, the most obvious - an most easily overlooked - piece of the picture is the fact of faith; profound, deep, all-encompassing, vibrant faith.

What else but faith drove the young De La Salle to heed the words of Scripture, the needs of society, and the momentum of circumstances to take up the thankless, demanding, messy business of organizing marginally competent teachers for schools as poor and forgotten as the families they served? What else but faith led him for 40 years to spend his time, energies, intellect, and personal charisma with individuals that the society of his time considered, at best, a workforce for the privileged class.

When you consider the prevalent societal notions in

“Be convinced that you will contribute to the good of the Church ... only insofar as you have the fullness of faith and are guided by the spirit of faith.”

- De La Salle, *Meditations 139.2*

17th century France, even given the vast charitable projects undertaken by many people, De La Salle stands out as someone who held the demands of faith higher than the demands of society. Where society insisted on class distinctions, De La Salle broke those distinctions by his admissions policies and class seating arrangements.

Where society established strong educational limitations based on status, privilege, and connections, De La Salle kept his teachers tightly focused on the needs of the students. Where society provided education for the poor in order to keep them under control and prepare them to enter society's workforce, De La Salle provided an education as a means of liberating the poor, providing them with some measure of control over their own future in society. Where society saw things through its own lens, De La Salle had only the open eyes of faith.

Such a pervasive faith cannot be sustained unless it is combined with a vigorous life of prayer; not only the on-your-knees profoundly devotional kind of prayer, but also the at-your-side profoundly relational kind of prayer.

De La Salle wrote thousands of individual monthly letters to his followers, giving advice, urging them on, and

sharing in their specific responsibilities. A realistic lived-out faith was always, and is always, job one.

In a contemporary environment filled with tremendous societal pressures, uncompromising scientific paradigms, largely therapeutic models, and technological televisual culture that permits transcendence only if it is couched in the miraculous, the innocuous, or the pharmacological, can we still bring true “salvation” to the young, especially the poor, by providing an education that is centered in and nurtured by the life of faith? The untamed particularity of personhood that forces us to see the depths of mystery in one another tells us again and again that only not only can it be done, it must be done. But it is a task that can succeed only if it is itself centered in and nurtured by the life of faith.

De La Salle's first concern in all that he did, whether for himself, for the teachers, or for the Christian School,

“The main purpose of faith is to lead us to practice what we believe ... Be convinced that the main conversion is that of the heart and without it the conversion of the mind is quite sterile.”

- De La Salle, *Meditations 175.2*

was the life of faith, the reality of God's saving presence in Jesus Christ. There was simply nothing else that finally merited his attention.

The Consequences:

- **Students** would gradually discern and appreciate God's living presence through curricular and co-curricular activities.
- **Teachers** would introduce the paradigm of God's saving grace to students by modeling and fostering the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for Christian maturity in today's society.
- The **Teacher-Student relationship** would live out God's compassionate concern for the total welfare of a particular student in a particular situation.



- The **activity of teaching** would usher students towards Christian maturity by demonstrating and pursuing that maturity.
- The **school** would initiate, demonstrate, and support a realistically rendered life of faith through its structures and organizational dynamics.

“More than in any other domain, education to freedom is required when there is a question of instruction in the faith. The Christian School should be the freest of institutions; it suggests without coercion the infinite possibilities of life according to Christ; it announce the good news of the Gospel to each insofar as as he [or she] is ready for it, and with absolute respect for the freedom of all.”

- Declaration, 46.4

A continuation of the rationale and consequences can be found in the following:

Van Grieken, FSC, George. *Touching the Hearts of Students: Characteristics of Lasallian Schools*. Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Publications, © 1999.

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Lasallian Spirituality vis-à-vis

The Conduct of the Schools

As mentioned above and in October's newsletter, De La Salle's spirituality revolved around these five areas:

- the Brother or Lasallian educator
- the student
- the teacher-student relationship

- the activity of teaching
- the school

Let us do a quick review!!

The Lasallian Educator

For De La Salle, the vocation of the teacher is both a great gift and a great responsibility. Just as Jesus Christ entrusted his Apostles with spreading the Gospel, Lasallian educators are sent by Jesus Christ and commissioned by the Church to do the same. “You must look upon yourselves as persons to whom the deposit of faith has been confided so that you may pass it on to them. This is the treasure God has placed in your hands, and of which he has constituted you the manager.”

The vocation of the Lasallian educator is one of hidden glory, without immediate reward or universal appeal.

Lasallian educators are to have a combination of dedication and goodness, courage and faith, a “very ardent zeal” matched with a “generous disposition,” and a combination of concern and vigilance.

The Lasallian educators' way of life should be a model for their students “because they ought to find in you the virtues they should practice.” In the *Collection of Short Treatises*, these virtues are specified under the heading of “The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher” as seriousness, silence, humility, prudence, wisdom, patience, reserve, meekness, zeal, vigilance, piety, and generosity. More on these virtues will be covered in the January newsletter.

The content of Christian instruction comes from God and proceeds through the teacher to the students by virtue of God's action within the teacher. The task of the teacher begins with the acquisition of that which is necessary for an effective ministry.

The process of Christian instruction depends as much on example as on any other component. The teacher must model what is being taught. The foundation of Christian instruction is the Lasallian educator's active prayer life. De La Salle tells his teachers to turn to God before, during and after the exercise of one's ministry. “You must constantly represent the needs of your disciples to Je-

sus Christ, explaining to him the difficulties you experience in guiding them.” Prayer “gives a holy power” to one's words, making the Lasallian educator able to effectively penetrate the depths of their students' hearts. The more prayer is practiced, “the more God will help you find the skill to touch their hearts.”



The Student

Throughout his meditations, De La Salle rarely used the term student; most often he uses the term *disciple*, referring directly to the mission or vocation of the Lasallian educator to make these students disciples of Jesus Christ; it also informed the relationship between teacher and pupil. By describing them as disciples, De La Salle not only established an essentially religious component in the relationship between teacher and pupil but also introduced an element of responsibility that gave students a central place in the educational enterprise.

Disciples are not taught in the ordinary sense. The concern is not simply for the passing on of knowledge. Rather, the students are an extension of the teacher, taking on the teacher's convictions, commitments, and practices - in a word, taking on the teacher's spirituality. A teacher with disciples has a personal interest in them since they represent all that the teacher imparts to them.

The relationship between the student and the teacher that De La Salle advocated is based on a strong sense of moral obligation for the welfare of souls. There is no compromising or hedging on this issue. "It is God himself who ... gives you responsibility to provide for all their spiritual needs. To do this should be your constant effort."

The teacher-student relationship requires a gravity and seriousness that reflects the nature of what is involved, and this must be communicated to the students by example. Lasallian educators provide an example to their students of self-control and reserve: "What they observe in you makes such an impression on them that it alone suffices to make them behave properly." In their earnest demeanor, such teachers provide all the preaching that should be necessary.

When De La Salle and the early teachers decided to call themselves "Brothers," they were describing their relationship to one another in community. But they also used this term explicitly to indicate the kind of relationship that would become the norm with students. Lasallian educators found themselves looked upon as older brothers [and sisters] of their students, benevolent ones to be sure.



The Activity of Teaching: The Practice

The large groups of pupils that occupied the Christian Schools, from the schools' inception necessitated a method of instruction radically different from the commonly used individualized tutorial method. Coping with classes up to a hundred boys would be sheer chaos without a system of organization that

addressed each of their individual academic situations. A large supply of trained teachers was not available for smaller classes. De La Salle's detailed pedagogical plan made maximum use of a trained teacher among the largest number of students in order to provide the specific educational requirements of generally available elementary education

The major teaching components that illustrate De La Salle's more universal educational convictions include his use of the simultaneous method and his inclusion of various elements of individualized attention. The book De La Salle devised to address these issues was called *The Conduct of Schools*.

In the history of the foundation of the Institute we note that the majority of texts by De La Salle date from 1700. It seems that, after 20 years of research and experimentation, the Instituteur and the first Brothers felt the need to formulate their common experiences. Thus it was about 1705 when *The Rule*, *The Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, and *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* appeared almost simultaneously that, therefore, an important moment in the self-awareness of the Institute and its consolidation.

To read *The Conduct* today requires a complete intellectual displacement. We must continually keep in mind that it was written for primary teachers, concerned with education and pedagogy. The diversification of the scholastic and educational commitment of the Brothers, the cooperation of the Brothers and lay teachers in the same tasks, the geographic expansion of the Institute to varied cultures and educational systems, all emphasize the "strangeness" of *The Conduct* to our 21st century mentality.

We must, consequently take an overall view of a text which is characterized by an obvious concern for precision and detail. But under the rather formidable surface of singular relevance to our own time. It is these educative insights



which give sense and coherence to the "ministry" of the Brothers and Lasallian educators which are so well synthesized in *The Meditations for the Time for Retreat*.

What is The Conduct of the Christian Schools?

• **Part of the pedagogical movement of De La Salle's time**

The Conduct was written to help the Brothers in their daily task of instructing children. Other texts and studies of De La Salle show how anxious he was that his schools should be successful. That preoccupation is evident in *The Conduct* and dictates the choice of methods of work and the system of organization.

• **A professional guide**

Why Such a Guide?

- Because teaching is a noble task.
- Because the Brother must not separate "his employment from his state of life."
- Because the Brothers must be effective in their work.

To understand the importance and necessity of the directions given in *The Conduct*, we must put ourselves in the context in which it was written. Essentially it was at a time when popular education France had just begun. Brothers and schoolmasters had to be pioneers in many respects. They had to organize their classes so as to reconcile collective teaching with the needs of the individual pupil. They had to introduce the teaching of reading in French instead of Latin ...

The Conduct mentions the introduction of training in new subjects to better to prepare the pupils for social and professional life: for example, legal documents such as wills, contracts, etc. These few reminders explain the need for a complete and precise text on the organization of classes, methods of teaching, and the working tools of the teachers, etc.

• **A guide to be an effective minister**

- Good example to the students;
- acts of piety - prayers in common, recalling God's presence, morning reflection, recitation of the rosary;
- assistance at Mass in the parish church;

- daily catechism class;
- choice of edifying texts in the teaching of reading.

There was no ambiguity as to the Christian orientation of the Brothers' school. Here again, we encounter the general thinking of the time. In a country where Catholicism was the State religion it was essential that children be taught the mysteries of religion and the truths of the Catholic faith.

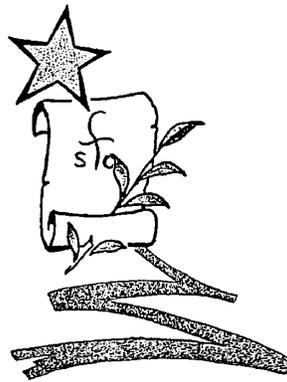
• The main educational lines of *The Conduct*

If we go beyond the letter of the text, the impression of uniformity and repetitiveness and the feeling of constraint it conveys to the modern mind, and if we try to place it in the context of the period, then we can discern in *The Conduct* the main education lines that guided De La Salle and the first Brothers in their schools. These orientations can surprise by their richness and their modernity. He are some of the more obvious ones:

- Priority of person: The text of *The Conduct* brings us back time and time again to the child, to his needs, his personality, his behavior, his character, his future, his surroundings, whether family, parochial or social. This attention to the children is all the more evident when it is a question of "poor" children, that is, of those whose families live in difficult conditions without help from anyone. For them the school plays an essential and effective role in supplying the deficiencies of the home. The priority given to children demands availability, attention, and presence on the part of the Brother or Lasallian educator and great flexibility in the organization of the school and the class. A revealing detail is the provision of a supernumerary teacher so that pupils are never without a teacher if the Brother is absent or ill.
- An all round education in:
 - scholastic formation - acquisition of the indispensable rudiments of reading, writing, arithmetic, and knowledge of legal documents required in ordinary life;
 - training in a trade;
 - doctrinal formation - through knowledge of the mysteries of re-

ligion and revealed truth;

- acquisition of good habits - it is not enough to have an abstract knowledge of the truths of religion. We must form good habits of conduct.
- In an atmosphere of close personal relationships:
 - Effective attention of the educator to each pupil through constant vigilance.
 - Reception of the pupil and parents at the time of enrollment so as to get to know the family.
 - Importance attached to mutual respect among the pupils and between the teachers and pupils.
 - Practical mutual help in lessons and work.
 - Personal relationship even in correction so that it may be understood, accepted, and, therefore, effective.
 - Retention of some pupils during lessons when their presence is beneficial to the group even though they are capable of promotion to higher academics.



All these provisions are aimed at creating and sustaining mutual affection among all pupils and teachers. The Brother and the Lasallian educator is asked to love all his or her pupils tenderly. The reciprocal affection of the pupils is the best indication of the good order and progress of a class. In this way, a "fraternal" school is created.

- A pupil-centered school where the teacher:
 - gives to each pupil, in each subject, work adapted to his age, his knowledge, his progress, and even to his character;
 - maintain great flexibility in school

structures and organizations so as to permit the admission of pupils in the course of the school year, change of lessons at appropriate times for the pupils;

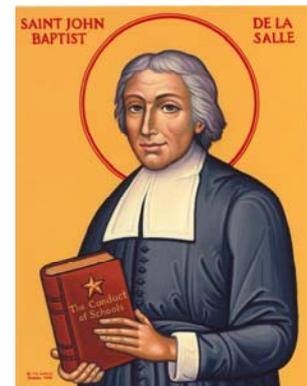
- form heterogeneous classes for pupils of different levels of attainment or "lessons." The latter term meant "learning units" in different subjects.

Conclusion

It is not a question of attempting an exaggerated exegesis of *The Conduct*. What is more important to us today, wherever we work, is to understand and follow the procedure which produced *The Conduct* at the beginning of the 18th century. This procedure may be summed up as:

- attention, awareness, and openness to the needs of the child;
- analysis of those needs;
- trying out concrete suggestions in answer to those needs;
- consultation in order to find out the best answers;
- rationalization and development of effective positive answers.

This is what the first Brothers did and what the preface of *The Conduct* quotes. If *The Meditations for the Time of Retreat* is the theological synthesis of the Brothers' ministry, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* is, if we may say so, the description of its daily application. By the method of its composition and application it illustrates perfectly the expression contained in the formula of vows of the Brothers since the beginning: the Brothers keep schools "together and by association."



Adapted from Brother Léon Lauraire, FSC *The Conduct of Schools*.