

The Lasallian Understanding of Gratitude

Gerard Rummery, FSC¹

A foundation principle of the first Lasallian schools in Rheims was that they had to be gratuitous, that is open to all who wished to come, without any obligation to pay for the education received. The reasoning underlying this principle is expressed in various ways in the first version of the Brothers' *Rule*: parents of the *children of artisans and the poor* failed to send their children to school² because they were unable to pay the teachers. The definitive formulation of the *Rule* of the Brothers in 1717 is explicit in its opening statement: "The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is a Society in which profession is made to teach schools gratuitously."³ And repeated in a later article, we find: "The Brothers will keep schools gratuitously everywhere and this is essential for their Institute."⁴

The fact that the Lasallian schools in Paris were gratuitous and open to all threatened the monopoly of the guild of Writing Masters who claimed that pupils whose parents could afford to pay and who would otherwise have come to them were being received in the Brothers' schools. The suggested compromise – that the Brothers could receive only those pupils whose names were listed and displayed publicly as poor – was rejected by De La Salle because of the humiliation thus inflicted on such pupils and their parents.

How Did Gratuitous Schools Manage to Run?

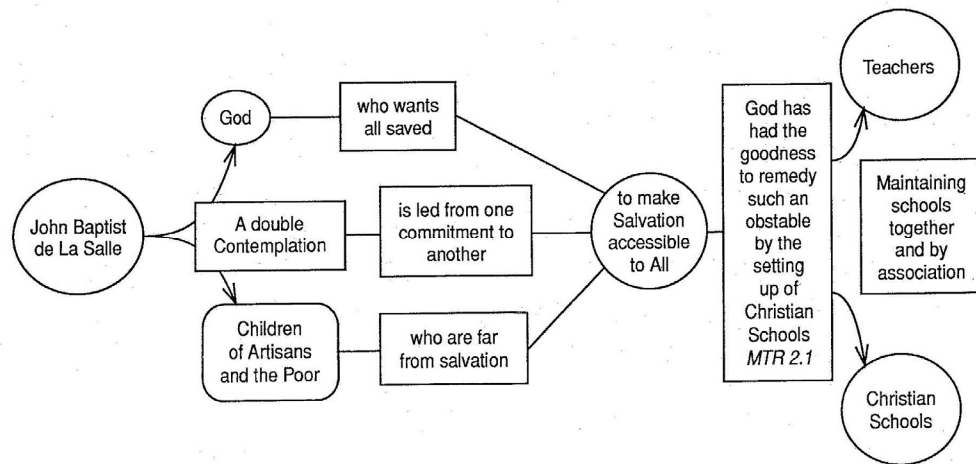
We may well wonder how these gratuitous schools managed to exist. De La Salle required that people or groups interested in having a Lasallian school opened would establish some kind of foundation that would guarantee the support of at least three teachers at a minimum of 200 *livres*⁵ per year, the salary paid to a parish priest of a poor parish [in seventeenth-century France]. We know that, in practice, De La Salle would sometimes send an extra Brother without requiring a further stipend just in case a teacher had to be replaced in class.

The history of the Brothers throughout their expansion in France and in other countries throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is largely a struggle to maintain this principle of gratuity in changing cultural and economic circumstances. In the Australian context, for example, in the negotiations for taking over a boarding school in Armidale, New South Wales, the first foundation in Australia, the Institute required that the principle of gratuity be safeguarded by the Brothers taking charge, at the same time, of the cathedral parish school as a completely gratuitous school.

The Concept of Gratitude

The word "gratuity" comes from the Latin word meaning "grace." In the Romance languages [Italian, Spanish and French], it retains a common meaning still expressed in the idea of "thanks"

for something *freely* given [*grazie, gracias, grâce*]. In his *Letter to the Romans*, Saint Paul says simply: “Everything is grace.”⁶



De La Salle’s overall vision for his gratuitous schools can be summed up in the diagram you see here. On one hand, De La Salle, in contradiction to the group called Jansenists who were very influential at the time, accepted and affirmed the belief expressed by Saint Paul in his *Letter to Timothy*, that “God wishes *everyone to be saved* and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”⁷ But De La Salle’s experience with the poor showed him that the *children of artisans and the poor* who could not go to school would not only be ignorant of the religious truths which he and his contemporaries believed were essential for coming to know God and to be saved, but also their lack of schooling made them unemployable in the society in which they are born. De La Salle’s vision was that the gratuitous Christian schools he was being led to found offered a solution to both these challenges.⁸ But, as De La Salle expresses again and again in his writings, for the school to be open to all it had to be gratuitous “because the teaching is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God.”⁹

From a theological viewpoint, both *grace* and *salvation* were gratuitous gifts of the loving God revealed through the mission of Jesus Christ. De La Salle’s writings consistently emphasize this sense of gratuity, as for example these words from the *First Letter to the Corinthians*, “the greatest cause of your consolation in this life is to announce the Gospel free of charge without having it cost anything to those who hear it.”¹⁰

It is easy to see, then, why the original gratuitous schools were open to all, without any distinctions being made. This was reinforced in the Brothers’ *Rule* and in many of De La Salle’s own writings by the insistence that the Brother was never “on any occasion whatsoever to receive presents from the pupils or their parents.”¹¹ This had nothing to do with the fact that the Brothers made a vow of poverty. Gratuity required that the Brother treat all his pupils equally, without favoring those who were better off, better looking, more attractive individually.¹² More than one historian has remarked that one of the practical social-changing effects of gratuity was that, in the very stratified class consciousness of seventeenth-century France, the Brothers’ schools made it possible for the better off and the poor pupil to sit next to one another.

What Can Gratuity Mean in a Lasallian School Today?

There are a number of ways in which gratuity remains an essential part of the Lasallian heritage because it presents some particular challenges to those who wish to be Lasallian educators.

First, the anthropological or human foundation of the Lasallian movement was that the first teachers defined themselves as members of a community, “brothers to one another” and “older brothers to the young people confided to their care.”¹³ Today we can easily extrapolate this to include women seeing themselves as “sisters” to one another and to their pupils. The strength of the Brothers in the first schools came from their strength as members of a community. We know that a united group is always stronger than the individuals that compose it. This was why, for example, the Communists of Eastern Europe – after subjecting the Brothers to forced labor and even to prison¹⁴ – never allowed them to live together or even to meet because they understood and rightly feared the strength of a community.

Second, the need for gratuity in relationships with fellow-educators and with the young to develop the sense of a community build on the same ideals. Human relationships being what they are, we will establish better relationships with some pupils than with others (and the same applied to our relationships with some fellow-educators); but we need to be able to recognize this and to be generous in our support of what is best for difficult pupils.

Third, there is an *effective* gratuity about relationship with pupils. Today’s educators, no less than the founding Brothers, need to show all their pupils that they are respected, treated equally without some being favored and others being downgraded. This can mean educators being willing to take time to listen to those who needed to be listened to so that all pupils know they are valued. For each of us, it may mean making sure we are “available” to all our pupils, even though some of the concerns with which we are confronted may appear to be trivial and a waste of time. We also have a duty in the staff room not to speak about our personal difficulties with individual pupils in such a way that their reputation with other teachers is damaged.

Fourth, there is also what Brother Jacques Goussin¹⁵ calls an “interior” or “spiritual gratuity” in the willingness of Lasallian educators to share more than their teaching subject so that pupils receive something of the idealism of their educators directly or indirectly. The original vow formula of the first Brothers stated that they were willing “to beg for alms and to live if necessary on bread alone”¹⁶ to maintain the schools.

Fifth, if De La Salle in his writings placed such emphasis on *touching and winning hearts*, it was never in view of educators making disciples for themselves, as shown, for example, in the novel and film, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.¹⁷ De La Salle points out in his meditations on his own patron, Saint John the Baptist, that teachers should help our students to become disciples of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ In a contemporary sense, this is not a matter of making disciples for ourselves, but of allowing them the freedom to move on.

A Practical Gratuity

The importance of the concept of “gratuity” cannot be exaggerated. Even if schools and other Lasallian works today are no longer gratuitous in the way in which the first Lasallian schools were founded, nevertheless the unwritten history of Lasallian foundations throughout the world over three hundred years has developed through countless stories of opportunities provided gratuitously without any hope of reward.

It was my privilege in the 1980s to work with the staff of the Lasallian school in Multan, in Pakistan, where the majority of the staff were Muslim. It was because of the different religious groups in the staff that I had decided to build the workshop around the Lasallian concept of gratuity. It was some years later that I heard that, following the workshop, a Parthan woman who taught English, came to the Brother Principal and asked that in the future her salary be returned to the school. She explained that she owed her education and university entrance to the nuns who had taught her, while her husband owed his to the Brothers. The two had met and married while they were at the university in Britain. As a doctor, her husband worked for some years in Belgium; and they lived very comfortably.

Conscious, however, that they belonged to a very small minority of Pakistanis who had the benefit of a university education, they returned to Pakistan to give something back to their own country. She explained that she found the workshop on gratuity personally challenging, because, as a practicing Muslim, she recalled one of the *sultras* from the Koran which invited those who had more to share with those who had less. She wished, therefore, to arrange for her salary to pass directly into the fund for needy students, many of whom were poor Christians.

When the principal pointed out that she could arrange this for herself, she replied: “No, I wish that when I cross the threshold of this school each day, I am teaching for the love of Allah, blest be his name.” She continued to do this for many years, and her example led the principal of the primary school to do the same.

You have received freely, give freely: that is the challenge of gratuity!

Endnotes

1. Gerard Rummery, FSC, holds a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Lancaster University. He served two periods on the staff of the International Lasallian Center (CIL) in Rome and was twice elected to the General Council of the De La Salle Christian Brothers (1986-1993 and 1993-2000). He remains a presenter and researcher with Lasallian Education Services in Australia.

2. Cf. *Rule and Foundational Documents* by John Baptist de La Salle (Lasallian Publications, 2002), pages 13-15 (chapter one) and 36-40 (chapter seven).

3. Cf. *Rule and Foundational Documents* by John Baptist de La Salle (Lasallian Publications, 2002), article #1.1.

4. Cf. *Rule and Foundational Documents* by John Baptist de La Salle (Lasallian Publications, 2002), article #7.1.

5. The word *livres* refers to an old French monetary unit that was replaced, at the time of the French Revolution, by *francs*.

6. *Romans* 4:16.

7. *I Timothy* 2:4.

8. For example, see Meditation #163.3 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Lasallian Publications, 1994).

9. Meditation #194.1 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Lasallian Publications, 1994).

10. Meditation #207.2, citing *I Corinthians* 9:18, in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Lasallian Publications, 1994).

11. *Rule and Foundational Documents* by John Baptist de La Salle (Lasallian Publications, 2002), article #7.11.

12. Cf. Meditation #206.1 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Lasallian Publications, 1994).

13. *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle* (Book Two) by Jean-Baptiste Blain and edited by Luke Salm (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2000), page 186.

14. Cf. *Brothers to One Another: The De La Salle Brothers behind the Iron Curtain* by Gerard Rummery (Melbourne: Lasallian Education Resources, 2011).

15. Cf. *The Mission of Human and Christian Education: The Journey of John Baptist de La Salle* by Jacques Goussin (Melbourne: Lasallian Education Services, 2003).

16. Cf. “Formula of Vows” of 1694 in *Rule and Foundational Documents* by John Baptist de La Salle (Lasallian Publications, 2002), page 204.

17. A 1969 movie directed by Ronald Neame and based on Muriel Spark’s novel by the same name.

18. Cf. Meditations #138.3 and #162.2 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Lasallian Publications, 1994).